

## RE-EMERGING CHINESE WORLDVIEWS? A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS OF THE REINCORPORATION OF HISTORICALLY ROOTED PERSPECTIVES WITHIN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE INTERNATIONAL THINKING

### RESSURGIMENTO DA VISÃO MUNDIAL CHINESA? UMA ANÁLISE CONCEITUAL DA REINCORPORAÇÃO DAS PERSPECTIVAS BASEADAS HISTORICAMENTE NO PENSAMENTO INTERNACIONAL CHINÊS CONTEMPORÂNEO

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**Abstract:** The article focuses upon the re-emergence of worldviews rooted in Imperial China, within contemporary Chinese international relations debates. A conceptual focus is applied in order to examine how worldviews, understood as historical perceptions of "the world", "world order" and China's global positioning, have become central parts of autochthonous Chinese international thinking. An initial review of the global outlook embedded in the historical East Asian Sino-Centric order, the tributary system and traditional Confucian philosophy is followed by an analysis of its re-materializations within debates related to regional hierarchy, the *Tianxia* (All Under Heaven) concept, and the construction of IR theory with Chinese characteristics. The article concludes by stressing the importance of adopting an open-minded approach to the incipient Chinese international theorizations. Due to diverging perceptions of the essential purpose of theory, some recent Chinese contributions may seem inconsistent or somehow diffuse through the lens of conventional IR thinking, but might nonetheless provide a vital conceptual platform for future innovation within the field.

**Keywords:** China. International Relations Theory. *Tianxia*. Confucianism. Relationality.

**Resumo:** O artigo aborda a re-emergência de visões do mundo enraizadas na China Imperial, dentro de debates chineses contemporâneos de relações internacionais. Um foco conceitual é aplicado para examinar como visões do mundo, entendidas como percepções históricas sobre "o mundo", "ordem mundial" e o posicionamento global da China, têm se tornado parte central do pensamento internacional chinês autóctone. Uma revisão inicial sobre as perspectivas globais embutidas na ordem leste asiática Sino-cêntrica, o sistema tributário, e filosofia Confuciana tradicional é seguida por uma análise da sua re-materialização dentro de debates relacionados à hierarquia regional, o conceito *Tianxia* (Tudo Sob o Céu), e a construção de uma teoria de RI com características chinesas. O artigo conclui enfatizando a importância de adotar uma abordagem de mente aberta para as teorizações internacionais incipientes chinesas. Devido a percepções divergentes sobre o propósito essencial de teoria, algumas recentes contribuições chinesas podem aparecer inconsistentes ou, de certo modo, difusas, vistas a partir do pensamento convencional de RI, no entanto, podem prover uma plataforma conceitual importante para inovação futura dentro da área.

**Palavras-chave:** China. Teoria das Relações Internacionais. *Tianxia*. Confucionismo. Relacionalidade.

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### Introduction

The great shift in China's global insertion during recent decades has been paralleled by equally profound transformations of the field of international studies within the country. The area has grown rapidly and has been characterized by a widespread adoption of foreign

theories of international relations. An increasing number of Chinese authors have also turned towards history as a source of knowledge, in order to create a distinctively national standpoint for analyzing the country's current global engagement. The central goal within the present article is to understand how worldviews with roots in the Chinese imperial past reappear within contemporary international thinking in China.

The object of analysis is therefore the Chinese worldview, understood as the varying conceptualizations of the "world", "world order" and "China's positioning" within this. The resurgence of traditional philosophy and understandings of the world becomes evident both when historical concepts and ideas are directly referred to by contemporary Chinese authors, but also in the way that it has come to provide a broader underlying ontological framework for understanding China within the world.

The intention in the following is therefore both to detect the presence of concepts grounded in classical Chinese thought within present international relations literature, as well as understanding the particular manner in which they are applied in order to frame the global landscape of today. The formation of a worldview is approached through examination of the Chinese cultural and ethical system, the country's foreign relations, as well as the political reflections and doctrines produced by its global engagement at a given point in time.

A focus upon conceptual generation is applied for this purpose. Evidence of the re-appearance of historically rooted perceptions of the global realm is sought through an initial revision of their historical presence as part of China's imperial past within governmental ethics and rites, the tributary system and Confucian philosophy. This exploration is followed by an analysis of the manifestations of such thinking within contemporary Chinese and regional IR visions and debates about China's role within the present international system. Emphasis within this part is directed towards the question of an East Asian hierarchical order, contemporary theorizations of the *Tianxia* concept, as well as the debate about the construction of an international relations theory with Chinese characteristics.

The article concludes that there is a strong tendency amongst contemporary Chinese IR thinkers to resort to the country's rich intellectual legacy, when making sense of international affairs. Yet, the particular adoptions of these cognitive frameworks in relation to the current global panorama vary markedly, and there is much debate relating both to the concordance between these re-interpretations and their historical source object, as well as the manner in which they are applied as explanatory frameworks for the world of today.

## 1. Autochthonous perspectives

The article departs from the fundamental premise that the international outlook, global perceptions and subsequent analytical reflection, are essentially inseparable from the geographical and cultural locus of their origin. It thereby follows as an irrefutable corollary that theory, concepts and general hypotheses within the area of international relations are permeated by this contextual heritage, and must be evaluated in light of these attributes. In line with a range of authors who problematize the attempts to ascribe a universal, context-independent explanatory potential to international theory, and who emphasize the significance of its local origin (ACHARYA & BUZAN, 2010; CERVO, 2008; JIANG, 2013; KANG, 2003; NOESSELT, 2012; RINGMAR, 2012; SARAIVA, 2009; TICKNER, 2013; WAEVER, 1998; ZHANG, 2007) the goal within the present is to direct focus towards understanding how local conditions have shaped the Chinese worldview and international theoretical interpretations.

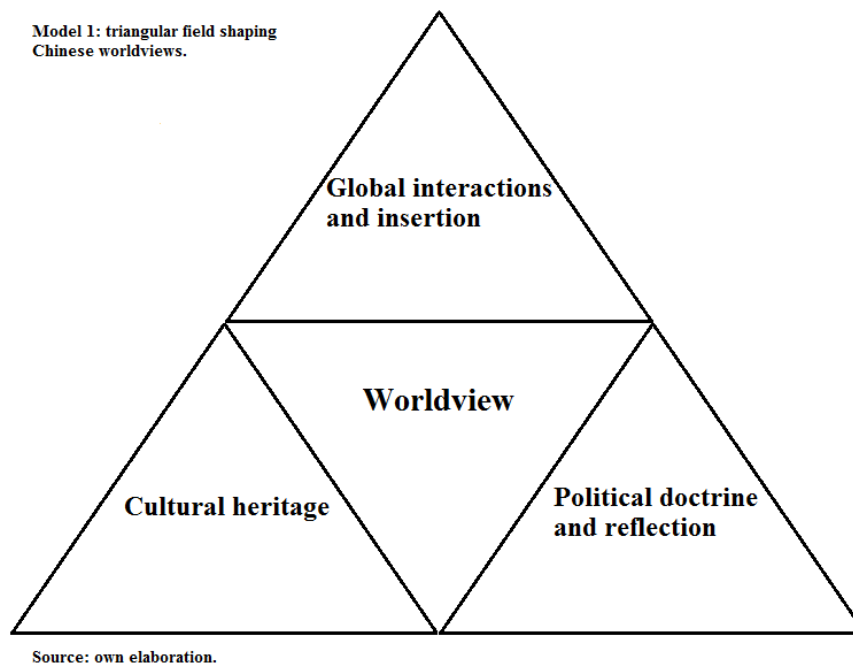
The importance of a focus upon the conceptual generation by national and regional historical experience is profoundly emphasized by Cervo (CERVO, 2008, p.24). In this study of the formation of the Chinese worldviews, such a conceptual focus gains particular relevance due to its multifaceted potential, which Cervo highlights as the capacity to organize empirical matter as a base for scientific understanding of historical, social and economic reality (CERVO, p.20).

As the objective is to examine how interpretative frameworks with roots in the past reappear within current Chinese international studies, historical concepts and their contemporary reworkings become natural stepping stones for such analysis. An essential aspect of the emphasis upon autochthonous conceptualization is to understand the object "on its own terms" and not through prior imposition of an analytical framework of international relations, with roots in a different historical context. A central ambition within Argentinian-Brazilian historiographical perspectives, is what Saraiva characterizes as "the overcoming of the theoreticist explanation of objects in favor of the narrative conceptual method" (SARAIVA, 2009, p.30). This approach constitutes a useful guideline in order to examine the historical basis of Chinese concepts related to perceptions of world order and international interaction; not only as a valuable historiographical task *per se*, but notably also with regards to approximating an understanding of how these ideas become manifest within contemporary thinking.

## 2. Worldview

The notion of worldview is an inherently diffuse concept, which is open to innumerable definitions. Consequentially, within this article the objective is not to extract a synthesized model of the general concept by approximating previous elaborations of it, which would do little to alter its open-ended nature. Such a strategy might furthermore imply the risk of conceptually stretching essentially different definitions of this conception. Rather, the intention is fixate the notion of worldview upon some general categories of meaning, which serve an exploratory purpose related to understanding Chinese international thinking.

For the present analysis, the idea of worldview will therefore have to encapsulate shifting perceptions related to world order, the configuration of the global system, the nature of interstate relations and their ideational underpinnings; all of which is molded by historical experience. The Chinese worldviews are thereby presumed to be shaped within the field of tension created in the triangular space between: 1) the domestic impacts of external transformations and a shifting Chinese mode of global insertion; 2) the subsequent political responses, doctrines and reflection; 3) the fundamental ideational, ethical and cosmological perceptions in relation to which these upheavals are in a process of constant negotiation. These three internally interacting poles thereby serve as the constituent elements lying at the heart of the notion of worldview, in a continual process of alteration. Model 1 illustrates this relationship:



As a consequence of this elaboration of the notion of worldview, the subsequent analysis is directed towards the interplay between these constituent elements from which a particular

worldview is formed.

Until the 19th century, a multitude of different world systems existed, which all were characterized by deep layers of economic, political and cultural interactions between different gravitational centers and more peripheral regions (ANDORNINO, 2006, p.1). China functioned as such a gravitational centre, until during the past two centuries it was torn out of a position of absolute centrality. In a relatively short time, the country passed through a series of intensive systemic transformations with deep repercussions at the political, social and ideational level.

These tendencies have given birth to a range of conceptual clashes, fusions and transformations, which affected Chinese society and thinking in many different manners. The constituent elements of the triangular field within which a worldview is produced, thereby also undergo changes. This excludes the possibility of treating these categories in their contemporary formation, as essentially equal to any historical precedent, which would imply the risk of anachronisms. In order to avoid this, emphasis has been laid upon instances when Chinese authors explicitly resort to historically rooted concepts, with a strong focus upon the particular coupling that these scholars make with the global context of today. The notion of worldview is thereby treated as historically contingent, yet with elements of continuous nature. The central task therefore consists in identifying the re-emergence and re-invention of such thought components.

### **3. The 'Middle Kingdom' and 'All Under Heaven'**

The great river plains on which the Chinese civilization emerged, were encircled by natural borders in form of the sea to the south and east, the Himalaya to the west and dense jungle to the south. This geographical outlay gave birth to a self-perception as the centre of the world, the *zhongguo* (central state/middle kingdom) or *zhongtu* (central land) (SOLOMON, 1995, p.13; VISENTINI, 2012, p.22; ZEWEI, 2011, p.287). The Chinese civilization thereby also came to evolve in virtual isolation from neighboring peoples and, with a consciousness of cultural superiority, grounded in its clear technological and organizational edge (WATSON, 1992, p.85). This implied a Sino-centric worldview within which the Emperor's dominion not only was seen to comprise of the Chinese core lands, but also the peripheral areas beyond, without any clear demarcations to separate them (PINTO, 2000, p.54-55). Hence, there was no terminological equivalent for "international-ness", due to the conviction of the existence of one absolute empire, comprising of everything under heaven and on earth, thus, with potentially infinite boundaries (QIN, 2010, p.36).

Consequentially, the East Asian world has been characterized as a unipolar hegemonic structure (ADORNINO, 2006, p. 7). This concentration of power was paralleled by a perception of cultural superiority which not only explained the naturalness of Chinese predominance, but also stipulated a civilizational obligation for the Middle Kingdom (YEOPHANTONG, 2013, p. 337). The clear hierarchical order of East Asia, with the Chinese emperor as the undisputed centric figure, was also supplemented by a notion of responsibility towards the vassal states. This responsibility implied the obligation to treat them equally, though as inferiors in relation to Chinese imperial authority (ACHARYA, 2003, p. 154). With a mandate from heaven – *tian ming* (WATSON, 1992, p. 86) – the emperor was morally bound to the ethical precepts of *ren yi* (righteousness) and *ren zheng* (benevolent government) (YEOPHANTONG, 2013, p. 336). These prescriptions were furthermore supplemented by a belief in the essentially harmonious nature of the world and that contrary to being the normal state of affairs, conflict and disorder were the unfortunate occasional consequences of imprudence and unvirtuous conduct (RINGMAR, 2012, p.14).

The notion of *Tianxia* (all under heaven) is deeply intertwined with the Sino-centric worldview and the narrative of benevolent centralized order. The concept has roots stretching back to the Shang and Zhou Dynasties (1046-256 BC) and in subsequent periods the emphasis upon its differing geographical, political and cultural connotations has been shifting (XU, 2014, p.97-8). The "All under heaven" translation of *Tianxia* can both be interpreted as "the universe" or "the world". *Tianxia*, thus, refers to a principle of harmonious ordering of everything between heaven and the individual. Over time its meaning has shifted from being a predominantly political concept, towards standing as an ideal of morality (XU, 2014, p. 98). Yet, it also has a secondary significance as "hearts of all people" or "the general will of the people", from which the meaning of a sovereign's universalist responsibility towards his subjects can be deduced (ZHAO, 2006, p. 30). Upholding the cosmic order and the sustainment of *Tianxia Datong* (the great harmony under heaven) through persuasive and benevolent means, was not just essential to the domestic legitimacy of the ruler, but also for maintaining good relations with other states (YEOPHANTONG, 2013, p. 337).

A central feature of the *Tianxia* system is its clear holist character and the denial of dichotomous thinking; all peoples and all places are presumed to necessarily be included, so that only the degree of closeness remains the question (WANG, 2012, p. 340; QIN, 2012, p.72). As consequence of the Sino-centrism of the *Tianxia* system, the relation to the state in the center becomes of primary importance. Even the geographical domain of a unit within the system is secondary, because space, in this perspective, also becomes relational. This changes

the meaning of the concept of sovereignty, which in a relational system loses its binary essence and becomes open to functional division between different states (RINGMAR, 2012, p.13). For example, Choson Korea could thereby both assume the role of tributary in relation to the Ming Emperor, and as a sovereign in relation to smaller states in the near vicinity (ADORNINO, 2006, p.10-11). *Tianxia* may thereby be considered as a fundamental principle which both determines how the world is perceived and how it is governed. Because it presents ontology, according to which the nature of the world is holistic and order is clearly centralized; the very notion of sovereignty surrenders its absolute character. This does not mean that sovereignty is absent within the *Tianxia* system, but rather that it becomes dependent upon the particular relation between the states in question.

#### **4. The Confucian heritage**

Confucian philosophy constituted an ethical-political foundation for Chinese governance and administration during several millennia. In order to reach the goal of a harmonious society, the adherence to a range of norms such as the principles of *ren* (benevolence) and *li* (propriety or proper ceremony) was required (YUXIN & BENQING, 2002, p. 62). *Li*, as the principle mandating ceremonial practices for interaction with foreign states, thereby came to structure these relations and was firmly embedded in the ritual practices of the tributary system. As a central element within Confucian political ideology, *De* (the virtuous conduct) also became essential in guiding the Emperors foreign policy decisions. Through this principle, the Emperor was attributed with the responsibility for upholding harmony, which implied practicing a pacification policy for the maintenance of regional stability, for which the tributary system was fundamental. (ZEWEI, 2011, p. 289)

The emphasis upon personal virtue was strongly embedded within the Confucian governmental tradition, and in principle even superseded legalist concerns, so that for a person within a position of responsibility, moral authority was valued more deeply than formal political authority. Management of politics was believed to be inseparably associated with *De* (virtuous conduct) (YEOPHANTONG, 2013, p. 336). These Confucian ideals are similarly expressed through the distinction made regarding the modes of governance between *wang dao* (the kingly way) which relies on morality and popular support, and *ba dao* (the way of rule by might) which refers to tyrannical governance (XINNING, 2001, p. 70; XUETONG 2001, p. 37).

Such Chinese concepts –the discussions about their potential utopianism apart – thus appear to imply a rather optimistic worldview, which through a Western optic might bring

about certain Kantian connotations. Yet, this morality was elevated into what Zewei refers to as a Chinese cultural imperialism, which also spanned over the imperative to proliferate these Confucian ideals and to construct a world order based upon such ethical prescripts (ZEWEI, 2011, p. 294). Particularly the notion of order, as it has been established within the traditional Confucian perspective, is stressed by Qin to be different from most Western social philosophical points of reference; distinct from the equal and hostile Hobbesian world, distinct from the equal and competitive Lockean world, and finally, also different from the equal and friendly Kantian world. Rather, the author emphasizes that the Confucian idealized order is based upon the notion of an unequal, but benign world. This is illustrated through the allegory of a harmonious family, in which the relationship between father and sons is benign, but differentiated in terms of status (SINEDINO, 2011, p. 17 and 39; QIN, 2010, p. 42).

Such perceptions of "benign order" were strongly embedded in the Tianxia worldview and thereby also in the tributary system. Consequentially, the Sino-centric world did not contain a diplomatic system of sovereign equality, but was based upon the ideal of the Celestial Empire and effectuated by the tributary system, until its demise from the middle of the 19th century (ZEWEI, 2011, p. 285).

Within the Sino-centric worldview, the Confucian heritage also came to provide the basis for the practice of pacification of the "barbarians" in the empire's vicinity, through the transmission of Confucian conduct and moral codes (PINTO, 2000, p. 56). Fairbank & Têng (1941) state that one of the essential convictions, with which the Chinese were left upon their contacts with the nomads to the north and the west, was that the developmental advantage of the Chinese civilization rested upon cultural foundations, strongly embodied by the Confucian ethical system, rather than ethnicity *per se* (FAIRBANK & TÊNG, 1941, p. 137).

Hence, there was nothing which in principle impeded that the peoples in the Chinese periphery could become part of Chinese civilization through the process of *lai-hua* (come in and be transformed), conditioned upon their recognition of the Emperor (FAIRBANK & TÊNG, 1941, p. 138). The Confucian principles of *zhi ge wei wu* (stopping weapon as force) and *buzhan er qu ren zhibing* (win a war without resorting to force) (XINNING, 2001, p. 70) thus became of great importance in order to maintain peace and stability through the use of cultural recourses. Adornino even characterizes this as a "soft-power approach *ante litteram*" to which he ascribes the historical persistence of the Sino-centric world-system (ANDORNINO, 2006, p. 13).

In spite of Mongol and Manchu conquests of China, these foreign invaders were incorporated and assimilated within Chinese culture and cosmology. So, despite the various



systemic breakdowns of the Sino-centric world order, systemic collapse only occurred when Western powers intervened, in relation to whom the Chinese could not effectively apply the strategy of absorption (ANDORNINO, 2006, p. 13). In this regard, Visentini even observes, about the late Ming and early Qing empires of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that they are more appropriately characterized as a Confucian civilization, than as a territorial European-styled nation state (VISENTINI, 2012, p. 31).

The role of the central state in the *Tianxia* system thus implies both legitimacy and responsibility. The legitimacy of its status is inherent in the notion of the mandate of heaven, which the emperor enjoys. Yet, in the same manner, the extended nature of authority within the Sino-centric systemic order also means that certain prescripts of benevolent governance, such as is embodied in the principles of *ren* and *wang dao*, must be upheld. The failure to comply with these prescripts may even justify the overthrow of the son of heaven.

## 5. The Tributary System

The tributary system, which constituted a Confucian world-order in East Asia, came into being after the Chinese unification by Qin Shi Huang, in 221 BC. The system lasted until the Chinese defeat in the Opium War of 1842, when it gradually deteriorated towards its definitive collapse in the end of the 19th century (FAIRBANK & TÊNG, 1941, p. 135). The tributary system constituted a materialization of a Confucian worldview, through which this governmental philosophy was projected onto the foreign sphere (WANG, 2013). The princes of peripheral countries would recognize the supreme status of the "son of heaven" through the presentation of tribute and by performance of the *kowtow* ritual, prostrating in front of the Emperor (ADORNINO, 2006, p. 11-2).

In effect of this ritual, foreign emissaries acknowledged the cultural superiority of China, and through the tribute they expressed their gratitude at the Emperor for upholding the cosmic order. Delivering tribute was often seen as a privilege and essentially as partaking in Chinese civilization (RINGMAR, 2012, p. 9). Qin (2010) similarly stresses how the inclusive holism of the traditional Chinese governmental philosophy admitted equal ontological status "in nature" to peripheral peoples. This was expressed through the Confucian view of "family" which is reflected in the perception of the extended state, dissolving the distinction between alter and ego. Nonetheless, their social status was regarded as inferior, and this differentiation in status was a fundamental ordering principle within the tributary system (QIN, 2010, p. 36-7).

Characterizing the essential features of the tributary system, Fairbank & Têng stress four

central points: 1) The system was a natural consequence of Chinese cultural preeminence; 2) it had a purpose of self-defense; 3) it was constituted by a strong commercial basis; 4) it provided a tool for conduction of foreign policy and diplomacy (FAIRBANK & TÊNG, 1941, p. 137). Though the tributary system served a great multiplicity of purposes, one essential feature was that it provided a means for foreign interaction, molded in accordance with Chinese terms. In this respect, the institution also provided a considerable measure of political security through the "Sinicizing" of the "barbarian" and the imposed acceptance of Chinese cultural superiority (FAIRBANK & TÊNG, 1941, p. 137). This clearly indicates that a certain degree of regional hierarchy was expressed through the tributary system, but scholarly disagreement still exists as to what measure it was the case.

The nature of the large amount of bilateral relationships in which the Chinese empire was the dominant part, also varied along with the way China engaged with its counterparts. While the nations in Burma, Laos and Vietnam were in what may be referred to as a vassal-like relationship, the rulers in present day, Thailand and Cambodia, were in a situation of intermediate dependence, while Indonesia and Malaysia enjoyed a higher degree of independence (PINTO, 2000, p. 54).

Zhang (2012) also establishes three categories of different hierarchical positions which followed from peripheral nations' relationship with China: 1) the "status hierarchy" refers to a more formal recognition of Sino-centrism through tribute missions, but apart from that, few commitments were imposed upon the tributary; 2) "Institutional hierarchy" implies the obligation to exclusively conduct all interactions with China through the tributary system; 3) the "rule hierarchy", apart from loyal obedience to the tributary system, furthermore imposed the necessity of adhering to Chinese demands presented outside the tributary regime. (ZHANG, 2014, p. 7) Yet, in spite of the clear hierarchical features of East Asia in the time of the tributary system, Zhang still emphasizes that each relationship between China and the tributary states implied both hierarchical and anarchic elements, varying over time (ZHANG, 2014, p. 16).

In this respect, it is worth mentioning that, although the undisputedly predominant position of the Chinese Emperor in certain periods would weaken, the tributary system would live on, more as a myth and aspirational ideal for the Chinese global engagement, than as an actual political reality (NOESSELT 2012, p. 19). Therefore, both Ming and Qing Emperors, albeit their perception of cultural superiority, in particular instances, would have to come to terms with foreign states on conditions that implied diplomatic parity (KIRBY, 1998, p. 16-7). The tributary system thus provides a clear institutional embodiment which merges the

essential Sino-centric self perception, the geopolitical realities born out of an undisputed Chinese regional dominance, as well as the ideational conceptions of order, based upon the Confucian worldview.

The tributary system can thereby also be seen a materialization of the *Tianxia* order, resting on a variety of political, military, ritual and cultural dimensions. This multifaceted embeddedness within society might explain its relatively uninterrupted continuity through millennia. Yet, in order to clearly understand the significance of the upheavals of the 19th and 20th century, it is vital to keep in mind how rapidly they overturned these basic societal pillars. In a short time, these externally imposed transformations came to completely refurbish an ample range of foundational elements of the previous order, which also led to a profound shift in the Chinese worldview.

## **6. A contemporary East Asian hierarchical order?**

The rapid re-emergence of China in recent decades has given rise to a great amount of reflection, with regards to the question of how aspects of China's historically rooted identity may become manifest in the country's contemporary global engagement. David Kang's 2003 article *Getting Asia Wrong: The Need for New Analytical Frameworks*, appears to constitute a more rare example of foreign scholars resorting to the past in order to explain China's contemporary international relations. In his article, Kang refutes the "China Threat" argument by emphasizing what he sees as a clear historical correlation between a strong China and regional stability. The author highlights how economic and military superiority along with cultural interchanges constituted the glue of a hierarchic, yet peaceful, historical Asian interstate system (KANG, 2003, p. 66-7).

Kang contrasts the Sino-centric hierarchical system with the formally equal, but informally hierarchical and close-to-perpetually instable European interstate system (KANG, 2003, p. 84). Furthermore, Kang stresses that, because the same processes that paved the way for the surge of the European nation states are not necessarily evident within a historically, politically and culturally different Asian context, countries in this region are thereby only "superficially Westphalian" (KANG, 2003, p. 84). This line of thinking may invoke some clear connotations to the historical position as the *Zhong Guo* (The Middle Kingdom), which presupposes the naturalness of Chinese dominance within the East Asian system.

The notion of *zhenxing zhonghua* (the Rejuvenation of China) is also treated by Yan Xuetong as a psychological factor that is strongly embedded within national political identity, and which is expressed through a quasi-deterministic confidence in the inevitable necessity of

China's re-emergence as a power center (XUETONG, 2001, p. 34). Xuetong emphasizes the difference between hegemony, tyranny and humane authority, stressing that China should aspire towards the latter (XUETONG, 2012).

A highly relevant question raised by both Kang and Xuetong's visions is whether their clear Sino-centrism also implies a similar favorable perception of the status differentiation, which was embodied in "benevolent, yet, unequal" relationships of the tributary system. Kang does not seem to touch directly upon this issue and his argument for the complying consent of China's neighbors appears to be largely based on observations at the systemic level, where the author detects a lack of balancing behavior. It may be sustained that Kang's thinking draws upon *Tianxia* as a worldview in two central respects, with regards to the way it denotes centrality and order, respectively. Centrality is related to the fundamental ontological understanding of the world as naturally organized around a core, from which it concentrically stretches outwards.

The aspect of *Tianxia* which is related to order has to do with the perception of the necessary concentration of legitimate authority at one predominant unit within the global system, as the guarantee for the peaceful and harmonious state of affairs. Centrality thereby constitutes a consciousness related to spatiality which serves as a precondition for the ideal of concentrated authority, expressed in the perception of benevolent hierarchical ordering.

The idea of a peaceful China-dominated regional past, and particularly Kang's belief in a congenitally hierarchical Asian order, has been criticized by the Indian IR scholar Amitav Acharya (2003). Acharya strongly questions the proposition that the Chinese dominance implied a state of interaction, in which means of moral and cultural recourse led to the pacific resolution of conflicts. Rather, Acharya stresses that the Chinese order was underpinned by a *realpolitik* within which the application of force occupied a central role (ACHARYA, 2003, p. 154). In a similar line of argument, Adornino also accentuates a tendency amongst Ming and Qing rulers to weigh military power higher than their value-based cohesion inducing potential (ADORNINO, 2006, p. 17).

Because historical precedent may both offer an account of an aggressive, as well as a pacific China, Acharya refutes the belief in a natural Asian acceptance of hierarchy, as an "essentialist and orientalist notion" (ACHARYA, 2003, p. 155). Though Acharya accepts that hierarchy does constitute a central element of the present order, it should not be ascribed with a natural propensity to define Asian relations (ACHARYA, 2003, p. 155). The shared Confucian legacy in East Asia – which China historically was responsible for disseminating – has also been pinpointed by Pinto (2000) as a strong factor within the contemporary economic

regional integration (PINTO, 2000, p. 31) and as something which spurs the “Asianization of Asia” (PINTO, 2000, p. 38). Acharya distances himself somewhat from these types of explanations of a Confucian socialization process with China as its gravitational center and emphasizes that the cultural diversity of contemporary Asia would inhibit the projection of such a Chinese ideational influence (ACHARYA, 2003, p. 156).

Within the debate between authors tending towards an "ordered hierarchy" perception of the Chinese role in Asia, and those more inclined to underscore the conflictual potential implied by China's increasing preponderance, Feng Zhang (2014) offers an account of "hierarchy under anarchy" which somehow bridges this division (ZHANG, 2014, p. 1). Zhang stresses how the relations of imperial China with its neighbors were not either of anarchic or hierarchic character, but rather contained both elements, which resulted in politics of a nature which varied between these poles (ZHANG, 2014, p. 16-7). Thereby, hierarchy and anarchy should not be perceived as mutually contradictive dichotomous concepts (ZHANG, 2014, p. 2), but rather be evaluated according to the degree to which they characterize a given international context – which does not exclude the possibility that they both be present at the same instance (ZHANG, 2014, p. 3).

This perception of anarchy versus order shares certain resemblances to some of the foundational texts within the English School. In *Power Politics* (2002), Martin Wight treats anarchy as an unavoidable condition within the international system, which nevertheless is partly constrained by the framework of international cooperation, institutions and law (WIGHT, 2002, p. 97). Bull offers a similar description of anarchy and conflict, as central elements within international politics, in a constant competition with the politics based upon order within international society: both are central aspects within the international realm and characterized by mutual coexistence (BULL, 2002, p. 63).

Though it is difficult to imagine an order which is completely horizontal and free of hierarchical elements, the concept of order within international society should not be equated with the notion of hierarchy. This raises an interesting question concerning China's future role within the regional order. An economically and organizationally strong China will necessarily be bound to have a somewhat proportional weight, within future formal and informal institutional and systemic arrangements. Nonetheless, there is a clear difference between a state which solely upholds and defines a system, and a state which participates as "the first amongst equals".

As Zhang (2014) underlines, the most fruitful results may be likely to come from a clear examination of this essential difference through the analysis of anarchical and

hierarchical elements as mutually present within the same historical context, though in varying degrees. In spite of the possible difficulties in establishing a clear threshold for drawing such a distinction between preponderance and domination, it nevertheless becomes of great importance in order to qualitatively differentiate between a possible new Sino-centric order and alternatives of a more horizontal nature.

### **7. A contemporary re-interpretation of Tianxia?**

The concept of *Tianxia* (all under heaven) has come to occupy a central place, within the contemporary debates about how a historically rooted Chinese worldview might become evident through the country's attempts to shape future regional and global order. *Tianxia*, in the form in which it appears in contemporary debates, is strongly characterized by a holist worldview, with a clear normative inclination towards the idea of a "harmonious whole" or *Datong* (Great Harmony). The concept bridges a range of dichotomies and thereby spans over both geographical/material as well as moral/metaphysical components (XU, 2014, p. 97). *Tianxia* implies a conceptual scope which moves beyond a state-centric focus and towards an emphasis upon "the world" in a broader sense. In accordance with this perception, the ideal institutionalized management of global affairs comes in the form of a power center, which draws its legitimacy from an ethical and moral value base (NOESSELT, 2012, p. 20).

Zhao, philosopher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, has attracted much attention through the establishment of the historical *Tianxia* concept as an ideal for the present global order, towards which China should aspire to influence the world (ZHAO, 2006, p. 29). Zhao emphasizes what he sees as a clear shortcoming of the present Western conceptions of the world, through their limited focus upon the unit level of the international system, viewed as either nation states or constellations and alliances of nation states. Differently, this Chinese author proposes a perceptual approach directed towards "the real integrality of the world" implying a different vision of "worldness".

Zhao underlines that "to see the world from its worldness is different from seeing it from part of it". (ZHAO, 2006, p. 31). The rejection of dualisms of Chinese traditional thinking (SINEDINO, 2011, p. 111) appears to be present within Zhao's interpretation of the Western global outlook, which he accentuates, is characterized by antagonisms and a praxis of emphasizing divisions. By contrast, Zhao underlines that the political philosophy inherent in the *Tianxia* principle stipulates the importance of cancelling antagonistic relationships and pacifying social conflict, by converting "the enemy into a friend" (ZHAO, 2006, p. 34).

Zhao's belief in the pacification potential of the "benevolent empire" brings forth some

clear connotations to the *Tianxia* system of old, within which the idea of a Chinese "civilizational mission" was an essential part. This was embodied by the cultural absorption of neighboring peoples and tribes, as with the previously mentioned principles of *lai-hua* and *zhi ge wei wu* – "come in and be transformed" and "stopping weapon as force", respectively. Zhao furthermore stresses that his elaboration of *Tianxia* is opposed to the sort of "oneness", which is created through the attempts to universalize only the self and certain attributes of it that are fact rooted within a very particular geographical and cultural context.

Zhao accentuates the strong embeddedness of Western political modernity within a Christian ideology, and points to a resulting tendency to distinguish between self and other and, in some cases, even to universalize "the others" as something which they themselves do not recognize (ZHAO, 2006, p. 34). In pointing towards the future, Zhao emphasizes how *Tianxia*, through its holistic scope, constitutes a worldview which goes beyond "internationality", and that it thereby offers a "world theory" rather than an international theory (ZHAO, 2006, p. 36).

Due to the great deal of attention which has been directed towards Zhao's elaboration of the *Tianxia* order, this has also been met with a considerable amount of critique. The Chinese IR scholar Xuetong stresses that Zhao Tingyang departs from an abstract philosophical standpoint and that his thinking about China's position in the world tends to assume a character of an intellectual exercise, more than it approximates a viable analytical proposition for treating the international relations of contemporary China.

Xuetong also stresses that Zhao seems to have gained more attention outside China than within the country (XUETONG, 2012). Engaging with the substance of Zhao's elaboration of the concept of *Tianxia*, William Callahan (2008) underlines that although Zhao is very critical towards absolute binaries, he falls in the trap of applying this very analytical approach in relation to the West, and thereby he constructs an excluded "Other" (CALLAHAN, 2008, p. 754).

Likewise, Callahan is skeptical towards the presumption of the consensus-shaping potential of Zhao's visions for an alternative international system, stressing how this may well be rejected by the outsiders, and thereby lack essential ethical legitimacy (CALLAHAN, 2008, p.756). In a similar vein to Xuetong, Callahan hints at the abstraction from history within Zhao's treatment of the *Tianxia* concept (CALLAHAN, 2008, p. 755). This nevertheless seems to be a conscious choice, as Zhao's main motivation has been to extract an ideational basis for contemporary conceptual re-elaboration of *Tianxia*, rather than any profound examination of its actual historical materialization.

As a political vision for contemporary China, the question may be raised with regards to Zhao's conceptualization of *Tianxia*, as to whether its value does indeed depend upon an accurate account of its historical rootedness. Its merit as an underlying guideline for Chinese international behavior may be compromised by certain inherent inconsistencies, but this does not necessarily disqualify its value as one amongst many relevant building blocks in a quickly growing Chinese intellectual edifice of autochthonous global perspectives.

In this regard, Noesselt underlines that Zhao's thoughts are indicative of some very significant developments within the Chinese epistemic communities, which often have drawn very little attention in contemporary IR discussions (NOESSELT, 2012, p. 20). Noesselt furthermore points to a link between *Tianxia* and the "harmonious world" foreign policy concept, presented by Hu Jintao in 2005, but at the same time also stresses the difference between these two perspectives, which is evident through the profound emphasis upon national sovereignty within the latter (NOESSELT, 2012, p. 20).

An important dimension of Zhao's reinterpretation of *Tianxia*, as well as the Harmonious World discourse, also seems to be related to their significance within the domestic sphere. At this level, they serve both as an appeal for internal unity through obedience to Confucian prescripts of ordered behavior and simultaneously also enforce the narrative of national restoration.

His revision of the repercussions of Zhao's thoughts regarding *Tianxia* has made Bijun Xu (2014) formulate what he perceives to be some general misreadings by critics. These are highlighted as: the tendency to view the *Tianxia* system as an inevitably Chinese dominated system (XU, 2014, p. 102), the conflation of the unequal status characterizing relations within the historical tributary system with those of the envisaged *Tianxia* system (XU, 2014, p. 104) and finally, the conception of the *Tianxia* system as an exclusively Confucian system, unreceptive to other lines of thought (XU, 2014, p. 105). Xu does present Zhao's thoughts in the light of their shortcomings, but nonetheless, as a vital novel contribution to the overhaul of deficiencies within the present international system (XU, 2014, p. 107). The discussions about the incipient formation of such IR perspective with "Chinese characteristics" are the object of attention in the final section.

## 8. Chinese Characteristics

The rapid re-emergence of China in recent decades has given rise to a great amount of internal reflection about the country's global role as a system-defining unit (CHEN & CHANG, 2013; HAIBIN, 2013; LIQUN, 2010; XIAOYU, 2012; YEOPHANTONG, 2013; ZHAO, 2013). In



this respect, much debate has also revolved around the question of how the particular Chinese historical experience may – or already has – given birth to an international relations theory with distinctive Chinese characteristics. In relation to this question, it becomes important to ask how theory should be defined and how a Chinese view upon this might be distinct from those common in the West. Song Xinning (2001) offers a description of the traditional Chinese perception of theory as "the systematic understanding of the laws of nature and human society". The author also adds that amongst senior Chinese academics, a clear differentiation is made between Western "bourgeoisie theory" and Marxist-Leninist variants (XINNING, 2001, p. 64).

The basic criteria for evaluation of theory in China are often seen in terms of ideological integrity and policy guiding potential, rather than explanatory capacity. Within the Chinese academic environment, theory is perceived as a worldview, with deeply embedded ideological elements, rather than necessarily as reflective of the world (NOESSELT, 2012, p. 12). It may be important to keep in mind that the difference between value-laden and value-neutral theory, in praxis may come down to the question of whether an idealized objectivity is accepted as a normative goal: if a theory in fact can be referred to as free of any underlying cultural, political and geographic attributes, constitutes a much more delicate question.

The national embeddedness of IR theory, reflected in the importance of the democratic peace theory for liberal institutionalism, or the concept of international society in the case of the English School, has even been compared to the significance which *Datong* (universal great harmony), holds in the case of Chinese IR (QIN, 2010, p. 40). This may raise the question of whether an awareness – and to some extent – an acceptance of the particular cultural, regional and moral "cargo" of theory, may indeed provide a more sound point of departure, than a sterile "objective" pretention?

Another central question regarding the autochthonous Chinese theory formation, is how "Chinese characteristics" should be defined. In some instances, Chinese characteristics have been stated to include the question of national interest, academic means of production and definition of standards, and the international projection of a particular Chinese developmental path. Other definitions of the ideal central elements of Chinese characteristics revolve around the formation of a peace seeking global consensus, adherence to the 'Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence', defined in the Treaty which concluded the 1954 Sino-Indian war (i.e. mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, a mutual pledge of non-interference in the internal political affairs of the other state, the pursuit of mutually beneficial cooperation, and the mutual aspiration towards

peaceful coexistence), and the application of Chinese ways of expression, language and thought (XINNING, 2001, p. 68).

Zhang emphasizes the importance of constructing a "culturally sensitive approach" to IR which positions the Chinese as the subjects of knowledge (ZHANG, 2007, p. 107) and above all, of a more critical re-examination of the underlying logic of mainstream problem-solving theory, which has come to constitute a great part of the knowledge-world of the present state of Chinese IR (ZHANG, 2007, p. 121-2). Yet, the inherent value of the construction of IR theory with Chinese characteristics is not undisputed within China. Particularly younger generations of scholars who have studied at Western IR institutions, tend to question the notion of Chinese characteristics, criticizing it as overly politicized, theoretically vague, and for lacking generality and universal applicability – thereby hindering dialogue with other IR perspectives (XINNING, 2001, p. 68-9).

In spite of applying elements of traditional Chinese thought within his works, Yan Xuetong (2012) is somehow skeptical towards the very possibility of constructing a unified theory with Chinese characteristics, due to the great amount of diversity and heterogeneity of Chinese historical conceptual heritage. Xuetong thus recognizes the value and utility of the Chinese philosophical legacy for the task of theory construction, but rejects that the goal should be an essentially Chinese variant, stressing the importance of a more universal interpretative potential (XUETONG, 2012).

A noteworthy recent contribution to the body of distinctively Chinese IR thinking can be found in the form Qin's (2012) theory of relationality. As has been treated in previous chapters, the theory has its roots within traditional Chinese dialectical thought, and non-conflictual synthesis between opposites. An essential element of this perspective is its focus upon process, which is defined as "relations in motion" and the dynamics defining the identity and intersubjective practices between actors, rather than treating individual units as discrete entities, within a static perception of structure (QIN, 2012, p. 80). Thereby, the basic unit of analysis in a relational social context shifts from actors to relations and the dynamics of change shift from choice/(self)interest to coordination/harmonization of relations (QIN, 2011).

Qin identifies shortcomings within North American IR theory when it comes to analyzing the relational complexities within international society and claims that an exaggerated focus upon structure has left them insensitive to the processes, whereby the self-perceptions of states are mutually shaped (QIN, 2012, p. 80-1). The heritage from the Sino-centric system seems to be clearly reflected within Qin's perspective: in Imperial China, the

units within the system were not defined according to any preconceived notion of their character, but rather according to their relational interactions with each other. The system was thereby relational and not atomistic (RINGMAR, 2012, p. 20). Qin thus also deeply stresses the cultural dimension, within what he refers to as 'relational governance'. According to Qin, this is concerned with interactive praxis and historically shaped behavior, instead of utilitarian oriented cost-benefit calculation. The author offers the following definition of his relational approach:

Relational governance is a process of negotiating socio-political arrangements that manage complex relationships in a community to produce order so that members behave in a reciprocal and cooperative fashion with mutual trust that evolves through a shared understanding of social norms and human morality. (QIN, 2012, p. 83)

The above standing approach thus implies a conception of the fundamental unit of analysis as relations and the role of government as that of a balanced management of these relations (QIN, 2012, p. 83).

It may thus be sustained, that for relational governance to unfold in the desired fashion, it will depend upon a very favorable social environment in order to materialize. Thereby, Qin's conceptualization of relational governance does share some clear aspects of what might appear as a utopian assumption with other contemporary Chinese IR visions. The often unpredictable and conflictual environment of the international realm is probably exactly what has given birth to many of the less optimistic Western perspectives. Yet, if all visions apart from those believed to reflect "the present state of affairs" are rejected, theory falls within the danger of perpetuating the naturalness of this order and of guiding political leaders to reproduce it. A defense of the inescapable logic of international competition and antagonisms might even serve as a means to uphold existing power relations, to the benefit of some actors with an interest in status quo. It is similarly important to keep in mind that Chinese international thinking has essentially different roots, and that the normative, prescriptive element is firmly embedded within the idea of theory. Is it then, wrong or right to consciously adopt a normative aim within theory, which is used in order to understand and navigate within the world? This might possibly also provide ground for productive reflection about the basic purpose and aim of existing "conventional" Western IR frameworks.

## **Conclusion**

The reflections about China as a re-emergent system-defining unit, often resort to the legacy of its imperial past. This appears to be part of an aspiration towards defining an ontological

framework for the interpretation of global affairs, which is reflective of the particular Chinese historical experience and mode of international insertion. Within the literature explored, there also seems to be a predominant tendency to reject claims of universal applicability and the value-neutral pretensions of some Western IR theory. There is nonetheless a great amount of discordance amongst Chinese scholars about the way that the concepts and philosophy of the past should be adapted to the world of today.

In this regard, the concept of *Tianxia* represents one of the most hotly debated objects of discussion. The attempts to establish *Tianxia* as an alternative ordering principle for international affairs by Zhao has been met with a considerable amount of criticism from various Chinese academics. This particularly seems to be due to the way Zhao operates with an idealized conception of the past, which is sought as a guiding tool for the present and thereby ignores the fundamental difference of the contemporary international context. Yet, *Tianxia* is still an inescapably significant concept within the historical basis of autochthonous Chinese global thinking. It is characterized by a high degree of complexity, derived from its changing meanings over time; sometimes understood as an idealized order, sometimes as a ontological perspective and sometimes as the harmony which underlies the relation between the ruler and the governed.

The emphasis upon holism and upon relationality constitute two pillars of historical Chinese thinking that are particularly relevant as potential contributions to the broader field of international studies. The holist perspective implies the rejection of a compartmentalized global outlook, which may provide material for an analytical approach with a natural propensity to de-emphasize antagonisms within the international realm. In a similar vein, a relational focus may also prove to be useful in order to overcome the strong unit-structure dichotomy which organizes much of Western social analysis, by placing interactional dynamics at the center of attention. In effect of the profoundly different cultural, geographic and political context of their formation, such thoughts might help non-Chinese IR scholars to overcome the sort of underlying perceptual barriers, which a strong embeddedness within any particular time and space, often produces. Autochthonous Chinese worldviews should therefore not be a priori written off, as utopian or inconsistent in relation to dominant edifices of international thinking, but rather be seen as essentially different conceptual platforms upon which new intellectual structures might arise.

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