Tianxia, All Under Heaven

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Tianxia: Can an Ancient Chinese Concept be the Future of Chinese Power?

Intro:

China's rising global influence is not only material, but also normative, especially under Xi Jinping's vision. One of the main drivers is Tianxia (天下, meaning "All Under Heaven "), an ancient Chinese political concept that originated in the Zhou Dynasty (1046 – 771 BCE).

This instalment of EPIS Basics examines the relevance of Tianxia and how this crucial concept has taken on a new role in contemporary Chinese foreign policy. First, this article traces the development of Tianxia. It then outlines its core theoretical tenets, before analysing how Xi Jinping has reinterpreted it in contemporary Chinese foreign policy.

Core Tenets:

Currently, Zhao Tingyang, a distinguished Chinese political philosopher, reframes Tianxia toward a more normative, non-confrontational model based on:

The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative can be interpreted through the lens of Tianxia logic. It places China at the centre, promoting inclusivity and development through international investments. It prioritises cooperation over confrontation, establishing a mutual benefit between the importer and the exporter. Essentially, it portrays China as a "moral leader" in Chinese discourse, following the logic of improvement through other countries' improvement.

Xi's Vision:

From regime security to the global establishment of moral Chinese leadership, these principles are condensed in Xi's foreign policy rhetoric, "*common destiny for humankind*". The slogan follows one of Zhao's concepts of Tianxia, in which humankind represents the people under the same "heaven". The slogan calls for a stronger UN based on noninterference and sovereign equality. It seeks to establish a joint governance by several parties

to fight hegemonism aspiring for the "*democratisation*" of the international system. In other words, a world order inspired by Xi's vision of Tianxia.

Conclusion:

Tianxia can thus provide an interesting lens to historic and contemporary Chinese foreign policy. Nevertheless, the utility of the term has also faced some scrutiny, not least by Cheung and Tsang in *The Political Thought of Xi Jinping*. Hence, only time will tell whether Xi really pursues a world order inspired by Tianxia.

Reading:

Zhao, T. (2019). *Redefining A Philosophy for World Governance*. Palgrave Pivot Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-5971-2

Word count: 500 (without the reading reference)

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