

Nothing new under heaven

What philosophers thought when China was the world and how it can help China now

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WHEN Henry Kissinger was paying his pioneering visits to China in the early 1970s, the country was in the grip of a campaign to criticise both Lin Biao, a recently dead and disgraced Communist leader, and Confucius. As was later remarked, it was as if the American press were vilifying Richard Nixon and Aristotle. But China's own past—the 5,000 years of history of which its leaders often like to remind foreign interlocutors—is a constant presence in its domestic politics and its view of the world.

Yet China's recent rise has taken place in a world organised along principles devised elsewhere, by foreign parvenus. Many Chinese chafe at the common Western notion that multiparty democracy is the form of government towards which all other systems evolve. But some scholars also resent another European invention: the nation-state, the basis of modern diplomacy. For years they have struggled to develop a distinctively Chinese theory of international relations. This is almost a matter of national pride, even chauvinism: "As a rapidly rising major power, it is unacceptable that China does not have its own theory," wrote Qiu Yanping, a senior Communist Party man, in an article in 2009.

So attempts to apply precepts devised by ancient Chinese philosophers to the modern world are in vogue. One popular revival is the notion of *tianxia*, or "all under heaven". This dates back to the golden age of classical Chinese philosophy—of Confucius, Mencius, Laozi and the rest—in the "warring states" period before China's unification in 221BC under the first Qin emperor. *Tianxia* is widely understood as a unified world dominated by one country (call it the "middle kingdom", perhaps), to which neighbours and those beyond look for guidance and pay tribute.

According to Zhao Tingyang, a Beijing-based philosopher known for his book of a few years ago on *tianxia*, the concept is based on the vision of an ancient sage-king, the Duke of Zhou. The duke realised that for Zhou, a small state, to exercise sway over other feuding states, he could not rely on force of arms. It had instead to draw on its own moral and political example. As Mr Zhao updates this, *tianxia* is a Utopian vision of universal harmony, unattainable, he concedes, for 200-300 years, where everybody opts into a system of global government.

Mr Zhao, a courteous, gentle and rather otherworldly scholar, is no tub-thumping Chinese nationalist. There is now no need, he says, as there was in the Duke of Zhou's day, for one predominant state. He is not advocating a world order led by China, but a system of equality. Nor is there to be compulsion. *Tianxia* is a voluntary choice. It is also, self-evidently, a distant dream rather than a manifesto for practical politics.

It has, however, made an impression. Some even see its influence in the ideal adopted by China's Communist Party leader, Hu Jintao, whom Mr Zhao has never met, of a "harmonious society". In popular culture, *tianxia* loomed large in "Hero", an epic martial-arts film by Zhang Yimou, one of China's best-known directors, set at the time of the Qin unification and released in 2002. Some also heard *tianxia* echoes in the slogan for the 2008 Beijing Olympics: "One world, one dream".

Though Mr Zhao was not proposing an indigenous blueprint for a China-led new world order to supplant the one led by America, the misconception that he explains some of his appeal within China. One of the most popular books on sale in China at the moment is on "The rise of a 'civilisational state'", by Zhang Weiwei. Mr Zhang argues that China is unique as "the world's only amalgam of an ancient civilisation and a huge modern state", and is "increasingly returning to its own roots for inspiration, and producing its own norms and standards."

In another new book (this one in English), “Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power”, Yan Xuetong, a scholar at Tsinghua University in Beijing, concludes that “it is not possible to create a Chinese school of international-relations theory.” But he does think pre-Qin thought can “develop and enrich international-relations theory”. A British commentator once dubbed Mr Yan a “neo-comm”, analogous to an American neocon—ie, an assertive Chinese nationalist intent on facing down American hegemony. But Daniel Bell, also of Tsinghua, one of the book’s editors, argues this misrepresents Mr Yan’s views by overlooking the emphasis he, like the pre-Qin philosophers, puts on the importance of morality in politics, and in establishing China as a “superpower modelled on humane authority”.

Beyond the failed state

For scholars like Mr Yan and Mr Zhao, the pre-Qin thinkers offer fresh approaches to solving the problems of what Mr Zhao calls a “failed world”, with its endless wars. One is that the nation-state system of notional equality between countries fails to recognise that some are more equal than others. As China’s foreign minister bluntly pointed out last year at a meeting with its South-East Asian neighbours: “China is a big country and other countries are small countries and that’s just a fact.” A second problem is that national governments—especially, some in China would argue, in democracies—often ignore the interests of those without a vote, such as unborn generations and foreigners.

Abroad these theorists’ ideas tend to be greeted with suspicion as excuses for China’s exceptionalism and its rejection of international rules it does not like. But at home they face equally daunting obstacles. The Communist Party, heavily pragmatic, is unlikely to adopt the moral precepts at the heart of classical Chinese philosophy. And just as fundamentally, for all that the idea of the nation-state, inviolable in its sovereignty, is a Western idea, China has become among its staunchest supporters—and is the fiercest critic of any perceived “interference”. Moreover, it is hard to maintain that China’s astonishing success in recent years has been won in spite of the current international system. Indeed, China has arguably been one of its biggest beneficiaries.