Re-Worlding China: Notorious Tianxia, Critical Relationality

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The Relevance: The Ontological and the National

The purpose of this essay is to retrieve the atypical relationality of Tianxia, which is a classic Chinese (i.e. Confucian) notion of order, remove the notion from national ownership, and reconstitute China by means of relational Tianxia. Tianxia, has become increasingly popular in the 21st century People's Republic of China (Dreyer 2015; Carlson 2010). Its adherents romanticize the harmonious relations among nation states that a spontaneous Tianxia allegedly facilitates (Zhang 2009; Zhao 2019). Being spontaneous indicates a belief in the prior constitution of the individual members' identities by Tianxia, which ironically obliges them to subscribe to harmony. Such a seeming obligation coexists with another familiar prior relation informed by the notion of the state of nature, in which autonomous nations rival each other. From the latter perspective, the ostensibly harmonious obligation presents "a new hegemony where imperial China's hierarchical governance is updated for the twenty-first century" (Callahan 2008: 749), "one party rule" (Jain 2019: 164), "autocratic empire-world order" (Wang 2015: 43), or "deceptive tactics and long-term global ambitions" (Pillsbury 2015: 30), and hence a policy resource for the autonomous actor, i.e. China, to desensitize its expansion and rise to become a revisionist power. Once discursively nationalized, Tianxia's uncharacteristic relational cosmology, together with its critical potential, no longer merits exploration as an IR agenda.

The two epistemological tendencies are parallel, with one portraying the rise of China as simultaneously reconstituting and being reconstituted by the world (Katzenstein 2012), and the other conceiving of China as an autonomous actor but threatening the autonomous status of others in, arguably, trying to discipline the rest of the world into a Sinic world-order (Wang, F. 2017). On the one hand, the autonomous-actor view comes from a familiar style of prior relations, in which certain presumably consensual principles, e.g. the law of nature, co-existence, or Judeo-Christian ethics, constitute all and enable them to feel mutual solidarity, but these ontological points of resemblance usually originate in the history of Europe, where the idea of Tianxia does not belong. A noticeable example in international relations is Realism, where nation-states are entitled to the rights of nature (Bull 1979; Held 1995). They may further establish a Liberal or rule-based regime whenever a new agenda requires coordinated governance (Suganami 1983), for example, anti-proliferation, intellectual property, free trade, or public health. Rules are presumably consciously consensual. Rule-based governance enhances solidarity. The obligation of the members of a regime, when facing the strangers to the regime, is anything but harmony.

On the other hand, the first co-constituting view of China and the world evades ontological inquiries (Wang 2012). The relational history of China, instead, is familiar with the tributary system as the prior arrangements with neighbors. More relevant than Realism are, for the tributary partners, the values of hierarchy and harmony (Kang 2007), intended to evade ontological inquiries through rituals and gift-giving. Ontological claims may reveal irreconcilable varieties between strangers and inadvertently threaten all (Gernet & Vernant 1996). In contrast, rituals and gift-giving convey togetherness, bridge strangeness, and reproduce a sense of resemblance.

Considered as a Chinese version of international order in the 21st century, Tianxia has evolved into a China-owned policy narrative (French 2017; Schweller & Pu 2011), and so becomes a brand of hierarchy as opposed to equality. This reinforces both the critical and celebratory view that Tianxia is a soft power discourse (Callahan 2008; Bell

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2009). This ironic image of Tianxia—idealistically unowned by anyone but practically owned by China—alludes to the implausibility of cross-cultural communication (Babones 2020). As a result, the critical and sympathetic views of Tianxia collude in nationalizing Tianxia into China's exclusionary moral value (Yan 2011; Qin 2009). Through the conceptual exercise of this essay, I wish to restore a relational Tianxia (Wang, B. 2017), which can undergird as well as testify to a pluriversal relation, where there exists one relational world that contains many co-constituting relations (Shahi 2019; Tucker 2018).

The Cliché: The Moral and the Empirical

Classic Tianxia avoids the constitutive question and directs attention to the mundane reality of how to ensure all remain unimposing and ready to adjust or "immune" to relational challenges (Qin 2018; Nordin 2016). In contrast, a constitutive consensus, such as everyone's right of nature, which informs the consensual principles and identities of being, can retain and reproduce egalitarian solidarity among all those who abide by the principles and respect their otherwise different identities. Such an ontological condition entrusts to its faithful members a duty and passion to monitor, enforce, and even convert authoritarian personalities, parties, and nations, namely strangers. Confucius, who aspired to the "oneness" (*yi*) of Tianxia, contrarily evaded ontological inquiries but valued the practicalities of life. In fact, oneness precisely refers to the capacity to relate to all seemingly different and yet coexisting forms of lives harmoniously (Neville 1977). Instead of preaching strangers into adopting a constitutive principle, e.g. universal human rights or Christianity, strangers can remain related by accepting and returning benevolence to one another. In short, the prior ontology rejects strangeness while Tianxia evades it.

Tianxia is a source of empirical hypothesis for contemporary social scientists (Babones 2017). One such hypothesis exists in the posit that only those communities led by princes, who faithfully extend their benevolence toward commoners, can remain harmonious. Order and freedom are two sides of the same coin in these communities, for people's loyalty arises from their appreciation of freedom from exploitation or suppression. Therefore, the rulers who achieve oneness are always those who do not kill, regardless of their ontological strangeness. Since people do not kill their kin, *The Analect*s of Confucius advised that family relationships offer a metaphor for mundane governance. The logic is as follows. As the prince faithfully plays the role of a father, he can allow people's material life to thrive and protect their security; affluence will lead people willingly to practice rituals that honor the prince as their father and all are brothers; these rituals stabilize the kin roles and naturalize reciprocal benevolence (Rickett 2001: Chapter 1). Since Confucianism has explained why the behavioral incentives to practice Tianxia must be spontaneous, Tianxia is a readily relational agenda that abides by no ontology.

The philosophy of Tianxia can be applied to the relationships between a few people as well as the order of the all-encompassing universe. It can resonate with the post-human relational concern for the earth's ecology (Kavalski 2020; Brasoven 2017; Cudworth & Hobden 2013). The greater the scope, the more complicated the needs and interests of the people, and the more general and ritual the provision of benevolence will become. The smaller the scope, the less complicated the interest calculus, and the more material the show of differential benevolence will require. Where benevolence fails to attribute sufficient credit to rituals, self-centrism will prevail. Then, the ensuing perception of strangeness will provoke fear and anarchy, internationally, leading to revolution, internally.

Confucianism as a moral principle fails repeatedly (De Bary 1991), however, because princes always mistake their role for entitlement and abuse it. They fail to restrain themselves from (enjoying) killing or extracting. For Confucianism, this hypocritical role-play mean self-destruction because, as the text of *Mencius* described (in King Hui of Liang Part 1), once princes lose credit with each other, what follows in sequence will be distrust between princes, rivalry, war, further levies and conscription. There are two ways to escape this vicious circle. One is revolution and the other is self-blaming (for insufficient benevolence) as well as self-rectification (to resume differential benevolence) by the princes (Chen 2016). Even so, in modern times, modernization and securitization through interventionary rules prevent people from being left alone to grow their own crops and live their own lives. This indicates the decline of the non-ontological regime.

An IR Agenda: The Balance of Relationships

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Tianxia echoes the relational spirit of many like notions that stress all-encompassing cosmological sensibilities, such as *runa*, *ubuntu*, s*ikhi*, *engi*, *dharma*, and *advaita*,etc (Trownsell et al 2020). All of these parallel notions transcend the divide between the social and the natural, national entities, or civilizational identities. None of these notions are becoming state-centered (Acharya 2020). Rather, they are conducive to perspectives that transcend the statist ontology.

In order to retrieve the critical relationality of Tianxia, I wish to provide a definition of it that is not culturally restrained, despite the rationale of the definition being nonetheless acquired from reading Confucianism (Tiwald 2020). In this definition, *Tianxia is a system where all are bound to relate* . Therefore, it is, at best, thinly constitutive in terms of its lack of ontological sensibility. It can evolve into a thick ontology, for example, the rights of nature, but it can remain thin. In the latter case, no principle of being applies, other than that all belong to the same inexpressible cosmology or oneness. On the other hand, the spontaneous capacity of all to secure certain relationships with one another preempts the destruction of self-identities due to a failure to relate.

The actors, ignorant of each other's ontological stance, thus have the incentive to improvise ritual relationships through reciprocal benevolence. I call this "improvised relations," whose processes contrast with the style of the "prior relations." In the latter, the actors are socially already prepared to share a certain constituent component and act with self-restraint in certain similar ways. The Anglophone literature of international relations is rich in this regard (Jackson & Nexon 2019). Such prior relations are dispositional. Once belonging to the same community, even those who have no acquaintance with one another are no strangers. They do not have to negotiate with one another each time. The study of Tianxia can contribute an agenda mainly based on improvised relations.

Doing without any imagined prior solidarity, all of us hosted by Tianxia are simultaneously metaphorical kin and potential strangers to each other. Strangeness, meaning self-centrism or outside of relations, is an acquired habitus to be tamed by rituals. For those who suffer strangeness, proper role plays in rituals retrieve their kin nature. Ritual and gift-giving are key to establishing improvised relations and controlling estrangement. While rituals are symbolic of reciprocal relationships and goodwill, gift-giving is mainly material. For example, casting a favorable vote, making an award, or facilitating a truce can, in context, be as important as waiving a tariff, conceding land, or offering a generous quota of work visas.

Given the pressure whereby a relational self relies on mutual constitution with other relational selves to achieve self-integrity, engaging in rituals and gift-giving is essential to relationships, especially when mutuality is perceived as jeopardized or between strangers, i.e. not kin by ritual or too much self-centrism. Without those rituals to reproduce nominal relationships, the entire population will wonder at the loss of benevolence. It is always wise to initiate a concession during relational crises, meaning tolerance, patience, or even another gift, to invite reconfirmation. I call this kind of reinforcement or restoration of the presumed relationship during its oscillation the "balance of relationships."

In addition to reinforcement, a complementary balance to relationships is reconstitution, which results when a breach is considered beyond mending. A breach, which is by no means a relational void, is noticeable precisely because it inverts a prior perceived relationship, and will motivate reconstitution. While the balance of relationships is spontaneous, reconstitution is a matter of skill, experience, resources, history, urgency, etc. The more extreme reconstitution involves complete denial in the form of war, a decoupling policy, whole-of-society rivalry, etc. A restored or new relationship that constitutes the self-identities of both parties must, after rivalry, be improvised. Ultimately, balance of relationships seeks to preempt strangeness and ensure that any temporary stranger can be (re)connected.

For a relational self in a rule-based regime, for example the World Health Organization, observing the WHO rules at the expense of one's own interests testifies to public-health solidarity. For a relational self in an improvised relation, as a contrasting example, solidarity is unnecessary, if not counterproductive in the long run. Rather, abiding by the WHO rules is a gift to the other members to bridge their perceived strangeness, and can be revoked in response to the emergent need to bridge mutual strangeness elsewhere. In short, rule-abiding is a (self-)role act in the prior relation but merely an (alter-)role act to satisfy the expectations of others in the improvised relations. It is an analytical

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challenge to distinguish, for example, between a China subscribing to the norms of anti-proliferation and another merely enacting the role of a friend to Washington when its leaders agreed to persuade Pyongyang to de-nuclearize. Misjudgment of the type of relation leads to unfulfilled expectations that will affect the subsequent policy orientations.

Relational China: Back to the Pluriversal

An anecdote is relevant here. Confucius once convinced Prince Lu to employ him, then wasted no time executing his competitor, Mao, on the pretext of Mao's treacherous character (Chin 2007: 155-162). In actuality, Mao was so eloquent that he attracted Confucius' students, who interrogated Confucius' rationale for this killing. The lesson is that even saints, once in power, cannot resist blaming others for relational breaches (Q. Wang 2017: 340). In their teaching, nonetheless, both Confucius and his disciples advised self-examination (Pan 2011), implying tolerance or concession as the preferred prescription for breaches.

The choice between self- and other-examining is equivalent to that between two different relationalities—to relate either through reciprocal benevolence, improvised exclusively for each encountered actor, or prior consensual principles that all practice as part of their selves (Shih et al 2019). The reciprocal approach would advise patiently awaiting the deviant's eventual return but Confucius lost patience. The consensual approach would resort to enforcing the consensual principle but there was no advice on egalitarian solidarity or consensus by Confucius. The moral hazard of Mao's victimization is, accordingly, Confucius' failure to bridge Mao's strangeness. Given Tianxia being a process of preempting strangeness, maintaining a nominal relationship is more important than insisting on any specific relationship. Tianxia is a source of soft power only for those who demonstrate sufficient patience, improvisation, and self-sacrifice to maintain all-round nominal relationships.

My argument is that a de-national Tianxia constitutes all but in a non-specific way, so it obliges all to improvise. The rule-based governance familiar to IR scholars is just another way to relate in Tianxia. The challenge is that Tianxia, along with other aforementioned non-Western cosmological orders, has incorporated the style of consensual principles through their colonial encountering. Two prior relations coexist to oblige both differential benevolence and rule enforcement. Even so, the continuation of improvised benevolence through gift-giving compromises the solidarity of the rule-based governance.

Missing in the aforementioned critiques on the use of Tianxia by the government of the PRC is the balance of relations agenda, rooted in a prior Confucian relation, which evades the ontological pursuit, exempts from a commitment to rule-based governance, and encourages improvising. Ironically, for an allegedly national China to make acquaintance with the former imperialist powers, the PRC leaders must comply with Western prior relations, i.e. rule-based governance, on behalf of an autonomous stranger rather than a relational China. On the other hand, the PRC's compliance, as gift-giving, as opposed to solidarity, is testing how ready the Western IR is to deny an intensively mutually constituted China as sheer stranger. This is how I understand Tianxia has complicated the relational pluriverse.

Acknowledgement

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