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## CHINA'S COSMOLOGICAL COMMUNISM: A CHALLENGE TO LIBERAL DEMOCRACIES

Imperial philosophy meets Marxist orthodoxy in Beijing's global ambitions

By Didi Kirsten Tatlow / MERICS Visiting Academic Fellow

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## MAIN FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

- The party is taking older norms of imperial power and statecraft and reworking them in the modernist crucible of the CCP, thus sculpting China's rise with the muscle of history.
- According to these norms, China influenced the known world beyond its borders in order to keep power safe at home. In a globalized era this influence must spread around the world.
- During the dynasties, the Confucian ideal of *tianxia* (all under heaven), the practical state of *tianchao* (heavenly empire), and the technique of *jimi* (bridling and feeding), formed China's view of its own place in the world, and how it managed relations with "barbarians" outside ethnic Han territories.
- This scheme continues to offer a culturally sensitive way to understand China's behavior patterns today as it goes global.
- Xi Jinping presents himself as a loyal inheritor of China's ancient traditions.
- China believes it is a civilized, cultured state and, as such, should have more say in how the world is run.
- The CCP rejects universalism as a Western concept but is substituting its own counter-universal values based on empire and party that Westerners have trouble understanding. These include *tianxia*, and the concept of a "commonwealth of human destiny" (人类命运共同体).

# COSMOLOGICAL COMMUNISM:

Imperial thought and Marxist ideology shape China's policy making



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## Tianxia 天下: "All under heaven."

An abstract Confucian ideal of the whole world known to the emperors with China in the middle. Once restricted to Asia, the concept is now going global.

## Community of a shared destiny for mankind.

The party's vision of a future harmonious world order after a Chinese-led process of global governance reform. As abstract as **tianxia**.

## Communist Party of China.

The party's rule over China today is monistic, based on the claim that there is only one single body, meaning or truth. During imperial times the emperor's power was monistic, deriving from heaven.

## Tianchao 天朝: "Heavenly court."

The real, existing state during imperial times, which was ruled by an emperor who was the chosen "son of heaven" (tianzi). The predecessor of today's one-party state.

## United Front Work Department.

A key party organization that aims to win over Chinese around the world and that pressures them to be loyal and further the party's goals. Uses **jimi** tactics.

## Jimi 羈縻: "Bridling and feeding."

A method used to pacify non-Chinese territories and create vassal states by reward and threat. An earlier version of today's "carrot and stick."



# 1. Introduction: words matter. Old concepts and tactics going global

A debate is spreading around the world: How will authoritarian China – some say totalitarian for its untrammelled data and security resources – change the world’s open societies, as it gathers geopolitical steam off decades of massive economic growth?

Since erupting into the open last year in Australia<sup>1</sup>, thinkers in open societies have been busy coining new terms and popularizing previously wonkish ones to explain the nature of the challenge to usually uncomprehending – and often incredulous – publics. Key terms include: Chinese interference,<sup>2</sup> sharp power,<sup>3</sup> United Front.<sup>4</sup>

These mean: The exercise of covert influence overseas by the CCP and the Chinese state, or their direct or indirect proponents; a new kind of power neither hard nor soft but disruptive and manipulative; and the United Front Work Department, an organization chiefly tasked with winning over ethnic Chinese around the world to carry out the party’s goals.

The terms are essential, as far as they go, and the impact of the tactics they describe has been demonstrated in numerous reports by journalists, think tanks and officials.<sup>5</sup> Yet do they go far enough in describing and explaining China’s rise?

They do not, for to understand that fully one must look behind the modernist curtain of power of the People’s Republic of China which has engrossed western political science and democratic societies since the western-influenced CCP seized power in 1949, to look at older, enduring norms of power and statecraft being ingested and reproduced by the CCP to project power and build legitimacy. The result: A hybrid, yet monistic, set of power and truth claims that encompasses both modern and pre-modern thought (monism being a worldview that ascribes to all varied phenomenon one truth).

This unique set of norms is rooted in a cosmological worldview located in “the center,” where, under the emperors, and today under the party, final authority resides.<sup>6</sup>

So here are some more terms to add to the popular toolkit of democracies to help understand China’s rise in broader, cosmological, cultural power terms, even as the country chases a hyper-modern, data-driven, AI future: *Tianxia* 天下, “all-under-heaven,”<sup>7</sup> or the whole world known to the emperors; *tianchao* 天朝, “heavenly empire,”<sup>8</sup> the actual Chinese imperial state and its power; and *jimi* 羈

縻,<sup>9</sup> animal husbandry, literally “bridling and feeding” horses and cattle. This was a dynastic technique of control that rendered non-ethnic Han territories outside the empire populated by foreign barbarians, *yi* 夷, safe for “the center” where the emperor and power resided with a simultaneous mixture of trade and threat, or bribe and force, to create vassal states.

Applied to international relations today, the result is an outward expanding system of direct or indirect control aimed at making the world safe for China (or, more accurately, for the party), as it engages more deeply with the world than ever before in history. Only on such terms is the party comfortable with “going global.”

Here’s the crux: In imperial times, *tianxia*, *tianchao* and *jimi* affected China and its geographic neighbors. Yet by definition *tianxia* was, and is, borderless – where can, where does, “all-under-heaven” end? In a globalized world with porous borders the necessary next step to keeping “the center” safe must be to influence everywhere.

China already has a powerful concept of cyber sovereignty at home, which rests on controlling information that enters the country via the internet. Real-world goods, business and aid decisions, made overseas, that affect China must be controlled too, through the creation of a different kind of sovereignty: a sovereignty of influence.

This is easily visualized by widening the concentric circles of the traditional vassal states to take in the world. In the core is the PRC (including Hong Kong), while southeast, northeast and western Asian nations are – more or less – within a second ring, and countries such as Australia within a third ring. Others are even further away, depending on their geopolitical proximity, trade relations and political openness to China. Of course, the rings shift in response to changing relations and deals.

Understand this and suddenly, in an “aha” moment, we see influence and interference by the party-state from Australia to Germany, from South Africa to Iceland, from the Philippines to the United States, in a far clearer light. Growing reports over slush funds, bribery, and overly large “aid” projects that create debt assume a deliberate pattern.<sup>10</sup> One recent paper described this process as “economic statecraft.”<sup>11</sup>

At the Munich Security Conference last February, Germany’s former foreign minister, Sigmar Gabriel, noted China was employing “sticks and carrots” in its foreign policy. What he was describing is *jimi* (though he did not use the term).<sup>12</sup>

It’s important to remember that while the overall picture can be seen as disruptive, *tianxia* itself is in reality flexible and ambiguous. It offers ideas such

In a globalized world, the necessary next step to keeping “the center” safe must be to influence everywhere.

as “a peaceful life for all” (天下为公, all-under-heaven for everyone). This traditional concept that could take many different directions; today its meaning is defined by the party.

## 2. Making “the center” everywhere

For thousands of years the Chinese empire theorized the world in terms of “inside” and “outside.” The ethnic Han were inside, all others outside – a view summarized by the antique phrase “*neiwai youbie*” (内外有别), or “inside and outside are different.”<sup>13</sup>

Today the United Front, the party’s “magic weapon” as Xi Jinping describes it (and Mao Zedong before him), appeals to this concept of inside and outside, by appealing to the loyalty of ethnic Han Chinese everywhere in the world, describing them with the civilizational concept of “Huaxia,” or “(people of) China Xia (dynasty).” Huaxia identifies Han people as the blood-line descended from the first, recorded Xia dynasty. With this elastic, yet unsnappable, state definition of belonging, the meaning of being “Chinese” is both expanded, and constantly bent back to the center. In theory, China is wherever ethnic Han or Chinese citizens are.

As Xi Jinping, the leader of the party, military and state, has said on several occasions, “Government, military, society and schools; north, south, east and west – the party leads them all.”<sup>14</sup>

This hegemonic claim expresses a worldview remarkably similar to the cosmological and geographical “center” of antiquity – a physical and ideological place that no one could challenge.

Importantly, both dynastic and CCP power are monistic<sup>15</sup> – reducing varied phenomenon to one truth, themselves – and therefore share fundamental characteristics.

Monistic political systems do not interact well with pluralistic political systems since monistic power does not recognize equals but always seeks to establish a hierarchy, with itself at the top, in an act of self-preservation.

A direct consequence of this worldview is that, from the party’s point of view, China’s sovereignty applies everywhere in the world. The party-state reserves for itself the right to negate values such as freedom of speech anywhere if it feels these challenge its sovereignty.

This stance is often expressed in terse demands to “outsiders” to apologize for getting things “wrong,” such as classifying Taiwan as a nation, or referencing

the Dalai Lama in an advertisement, as happened recently to western airlines, hotels and car companies. These demands are increasingly coupled to direct threat to trade, in a classic example of *jimi*.

Rarely is the rationale behind the demand spelled out, but it was, in January, in an article in Global Times.<sup>16</sup> The article responded to a previous New York Times article that documented how Chinese diplomats and soccer officials were interfering in political and speech freedoms in Germany.<sup>17</sup> (That article was by this author.)

Efforts in Germany to support the rights of Tibetans were not a question of free speech, wrote Zhang Yi in Global Times: “What the author fails to understand is that the Tibet question is a matter of Chinese sovereignty; the Tibetan separatists aimed at splitting China and they should not use freedom of speech as an excuse,” Zhang wrote.

In that quote the underpinnings of the democratic order are removed and the intrinsic value of free speech negated everywhere. This isn’t simply change. This is revolution, in the sense of overturning. While the Global Times is not the party or government, the sovereignty argument expressed by Zhang cleaves to official thinking.

## 3. Why use history to understand China’s tactics?

Why turn to history to examine contemporary PRC power? Don’t CCP ideology and its executing organizations, such as the United Front, explain it all?

They explain a lot. But on a technical level, while the remit of the United Front has expanded under Xi, it still mostly seeks to influence ethnic Chinese. *Jimi*, however, was explicitly aimed at managing non-Chinese, thus offering a precise parallel in times of globalization. There is of course no “Ministry of *Jimi*” (there doesn’t need to be – the behavior is understood, and embedded in party thinking).

Importantly, *jimi* is never a question of “either trade or threat,” but always “both ... and.” This tends to confuse non-Chinese including specialists, researchers and journalists, who are not used to contradictory policies merging into a coherent whole, but is quickly understood in China. The personal and collective ambiguity it awakens in its targets is highly effective.

The party reserves for itself the right to negate values anywhere.

The situation of Australia demonstrates *jimi* exactly: having publicly called China's bluff on interference,<sup>18</sup> Australia is being treated with an overt combination of "trade and threat."

In May, Wang Yi, China's foreign minister, told his Australian counterpart, Julie Bishop, that the major trading partner of China "certainly must abandon its traditional thinking, take off its colored glasses," and change its "reluctant" attitude towards China's development.<sup>19</sup> In a tweet, Hu Xijin, the editor of Global Times English, was blunter, threatening lost trade: "Apart from irreplaceable minerals, many other things that Beijing has been importing from Australia can be replaced with US products."<sup>20</sup>

Tantalizingly for analysts, *jimi* was historically conducted by state actors, offering a new rubric through which to view the international behavior of Chinese companies today – that they have an intrinsically political function. State-owned companies require employees above a certain grade to be party members, thus furthering the party-state's geopolitical and security interests at home and abroad. While private companies may have a little more wiggle room, they must also follow the party line – virtually nothing is free of "the center" – and this multifaceted pressure constitutes an important part of the puzzle that is China's, and the world's, growing security reality.<sup>21</sup>

## 4. Xi Jinping, a loyal inheritor of Chinese tradition

"The excellent traditional culture of our nation has always latently influenced the thinking of the children of Huaxia," Xi said in 2017.<sup>22</sup>

Revealingly, tradition is often presented as nutrition – qualities to be ingested to fortify Chinese communism.

"Three times in one year Xi Jinping 'gets intimate with' Confucian teaching. Why does he so emphasize reviving traditional culture?" People's Daily online asked, in 2014.<sup>23</sup>

The answer: "Chinese communists have always been the faithful successors and promoters of China's excellent traditional culture. We all pay attention to absorbing its active nutrients, from Confucius to Sun Yat-sen," Xi said on the 2,565 birthday of Confucius, in September that year.

CCP propaganda increasingly depicts Xi as an avatar of *jiaguo tianxia* (家国天下), "family, state, all-under-heaven."<sup>24</sup>

This governance ideal is identified with the post-Confucian philosopher Mencius, who wrote that the ruler should first correct himself, be a model to his family, then extend his moral influence to the state and the world (天下). Such a person is a monarch because he won the people's acceptance and loyalty.<sup>25</sup>

The party's efforts to craft a new, global *tianxia*-style concept were showcased at the "CCP in Dialogue with World Political Parties High-Level Meeting" in Beijing last December.<sup>26</sup>

Addressing the meeting, Xi called for the world to form an "all-under-heaven family" (天下一家).

Specifically, he called for a "commonwealth of human destiny" (人类命运共同体), a phrase, first floated in China in 2012, that is today a core component of its global vision (albeit a vague one).<sup>27</sup>

As with *tianxia*, the meaning of "a commonwealth of human destiny" is unclear, though its universalist implications are clear. What is "human destiny"? What is a "commonwealth" that is not historical (such as the British Commonwealth), but has to be created? On what agreements, what laws, will it rest? Will it remain an abstract notion, an ideal, like *tianxia*? In which case, what is its significance?

The vagueness leads some to dismiss the phrase as empty, but that is a mistake. These are more than words – they are visions, or codes, with power implications.

## 5. The emperor issue

When the National People's Congress voted in March to remove term limits for the president and place the party at the heart of the country's constitution, the result was that for the first time since 1982 the party leader is able, in theory, to rule forever, and the party he leads (it's always a he) has openly ingested the state.<sup>28</sup>

In an uncanny historical echo of this devouring process, which the party presented as the will of the people, Yuri Pines, a scholar of Chinese antiquity, wrote that during the Warring States period (about 2,300 years ago) people were said to have come to "an almost unanimous conclusion that preservation of socio-political order would be impossible unless 'all under heaven' is unified under the aegis of a single omnipotent Monarch."<sup>29</sup>

The concept of *jimi* is never a question of "either trade or threat", but always "both... and."

## 6. The domestic debate over traditional power

The historic term *tianchao* has been widely used in recent years in China to describe contemporary national power, either approvingly or critically.

In his 2012 book, “China’s *tianchao*’ism and Hong Kong,” the Hong Kong writer, Chan Koon-chung, who lives in Beijing, examined this ancient idea within the context of present-day Hong Kong and Taiwan, territories that China owns or claims.<sup>30</sup> To Chan, *tianchao* is the most relevant concept for Hong Kong as it describes a functioning state and not an abstract ideal, like *tianxia*.

Chan believes *tianchao* lies behind Beijing’s encroachment on the former British colony via laws, politics and business, despite the terms of the 1984 agreement between China and Britain governing Hong Kong’s future, which guaranteed a high degree of autonomy.

The logic goes: Hong Kong must be fully tamed in order to protect China’s core power. *Jimi* is easily visible in the many preferential economic policies plus demands from Beijing, conveyed through multiple channels including education, media, academia and entertainment.

Unfortunately for Beijing, the result has been substantial political protest in Hong Kong, culminating in the Umbrella Movement of 2014, thus raising an important question: Will such tactics one day produce instability elsewhere?<sup>31</sup>

Hong Kong, as a former neighbor that is now part of China again, is firmly within the *tianchao*. Yet territories further afield are just one ring away in this vision of concentric circles of power emanating from Beijing. In Malaysia, or Australia, even in Germany, the overarching, more abstract concept of *tianxia* is, arguably, more relevant – but the *tianchao* is a second step that creeps in when China can sufficiently control the levers of power and economy in an institution, country or region where it is increasingly deeply involved in its economics or politics.

Thinkers on the mainland of China such as Xu Jilin of East China Normal University, Bai Tongdong of Fudan University, and Zhao Tingyang of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences debate the meaning of *tianxia* using the term “New Tianxia’ism” (新天下主义).<sup>32</sup> This debate takes place in elite media seen as having Xi’s stamp of approval, such as the Shanghai-based *The Paper* (*pengpai xinwen* 澎湃新闻), and has attempted to define what is unique about China’s worldview.

Xu has pointed out a contradiction to realizing a global *tianxia* for today – it was always merely an ideal. Harsher philosophies such as that of the Legalists of Han Feizi (associated with the tyranny of the first Qin emperor who unified China,

burned books and buried scholars alive) were more relevant to understanding actual imperial governance, Xu suggested. At the heart of Legalism was something much more prosaic, and familiar to the politics of any era: “infighting over profit and power,” Xu said.

Undaunted, Bai has proposed classifying the world into a “New Tianxia” that would be composed of civilized and non-civilized states. China is a civilized state, so should have more say in how the world is run, Bai said. He noted this approach is at odds with equal representation in the United Nations.

“The *tianxia* criteria of today should be civilization, and civilization should transform barbarism. We must have confidence in order to change barbaric countries,” Bai said.

That can be done through the civilizational concept of Huaxia, since this reaches beyond national boundaries being based on ethnicity not location, “Before, China was the core of *tianxia*. Today, we should take the *Huaxia* as the measure,” he said.

Zhao Tingyang has argued in favor of a global *tianxia* that can deliver security, contrasting it to a democratic order that has produced chaos.<sup>33</sup>

“In today’s world there are all kinds of unimaginable terrorism, religious movements and irrational hazards. So the world of the future very much needs a new world system, that is, the world needs to become a *tianxia*, only in that way can security be guaranteed,” Zhao wrote.

In such a system no one state has special privileges, a concept Zhao expresses as “nothing left outside” (*tianxia wuwai* 天下无外). That would be different from today’s arrangement, where the United States has special privileges, he writes, and uses them trump others’ sovereignty: a global financial system dominated by the dollar and a universal human rights ideology embedded in the United Nations.

Zhao does not define whose concept of *tianxia* will dominate in the future, but it’s clear he thinks one version must triumph.

“As for the question of ‘whose’ *tianxia* it will be in future, this is a question we cannot answer because no one can predict the future. The question really should be: Whose global system should we hope for?” he writes.

Whose, indeed. Could, one day, traditional Confucian concepts of evenhandedness, such as “all-under-heaven for everyone” (*tianxia weigong* 天下为公) offer an alternative to a global order that seems increasingly conflict-ridden, amid chronic and unequal development? Maybe. But the power behind the ideal – the *tianchao* behind the *tianxia*, or the Legalist reality within the Confucian ideal, raises the crucial question of interests.

In a *tianxia* world no one state has special privileges.

In recent years a revived historical saying has swept the Chinese internet: “Whoever attacks our Chinese people will be killed/No matter how far away” (犯我中华者，虽远必诛).

Taken from the 2017 film *Wolf Warrior 2*, a Chinese, Rambo-style action movie set in Africa with Chinese protagonists,<sup>34</sup> it paraphrases a 2,000-year-old Han dynasty saying: “Know whoever attacks our strong Han/Will be killed no matter how far away” (明犯强汉者，虽远必诛).<sup>35</sup>

That dates to when the Han dynasty army at its height, around 2,000 years ago chased the barbarian Xiongnu deep into Central Asia, taking new territory.<sup>36</sup> The reasons for the renewed popularity of the phrase can be guessed at; the historical parallel offers us lessons.

## 7. History as the future?

People are watching as China builds its own, unique style of big power. Addressing the United States Military Academy at West Point in March, the former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd noted that history was essential to the “dynamic process” of understanding China and its leader Xi Jinping.<sup>37</sup>

“China is as much deeply marked by its past, as it is being reshaped by the unprecedented torrent of economic, social, cultural, and technological forces that are washing over its future,” Mr. Rudd said.

## 8. Conclusions

What does this mean for the world’s open societies, themselves today grappling with populist shocks, “fake” news and authoritarian influence? How can an anti-democratic, universalist China be accommodated and managed?

Firstly, a mental reset is needed. In a time of system competition it is of utmost importance to understand one’s competitor. Chinese officials and official commentators often talk about “changing and improving” global governance – pluralist societies must assume they mean to do it. Open societies must stop seeing the People’s Republic of China as a paler copy of themselves, merely lagging in terms of democratic modernity. Such teleology is unjustified, barring major political change in China.

By seeing the threads that the party is picking from the past and weaving into the future, we see China as it is – human yet totalitarian, strong yet weak, defensive yet aggressive, and ultimately a great challenge to democratic nations. When China calls for a *tianxia*-esque, civilizational system such as the “commonwealth of human destiny,” we must listen carefully, analyze closely the historical context and development of the term, identify the techniques used to achieve it, and assume party leaders mean to implement it if they can.

Then, we need to press for definitions. This last part is not easy as it requires refusing to be fobbed off by generalities that the party likes to share while concealing details. But understanding this old-new, holistic-monistic, hybrid ideological muscle that is at work will take us a long way toward responding smartly to China’s rise.

People are watching as China builds its own, unique style of power.

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