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The Question of Epistemic Reorientation:  
What Would Happen When the Orient Becomes *Tianxia*?

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## **The Question of Epistemic Reorientation: What Would Happen When the Orient Becomes *Tianxia*?**

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### **Abstract**

The project of epistemic decolonization and reorientation has attracted intellectual attention in recent decades. Historians and philosophers have turned their gaze to the non-West and non-European worlds, such as Africa, South-America, and Asia, to re-think the question of decolonization and search for different modes of modernity and alternative epistemologies. These epistemological decolonizing and reorienting projects have demonstrated the fact that the Enlightenment knowledge, with its modernity project, was developed in a particular context and a specific moment in Western Europe, but was considered as universal value and was disseminated globally, through the capitalist expansion and imperial colonization, even has shaped the epistemological structure and the worldview globally. In order to challenge the Eurocentric knowledge production and the intellectual imperialism, scholars tried to excavate the plurality of different historical processes, present different perspectives, to resurrect the ignored and subalternized knowledge from the non-European world, and so on.

The assumption that another epistemology outside of the modern/Western world such as Confucianism, Africanism or Latin American indigenous wisdom can offer some alternative, I think, falls precisely into the trap of the myth of a spatialized perception of knowledge and a typical anthropological apparatus of area partitions. When people redirect the gaze and look at the East, when we re-orient ourselves and try to unearth the forgotten and overlooked Oriental world that has been subalternized, as some scholars suggested through their project of epistemic reorientation, with the effort to decolonize the Eurocentric and Occidental domination, we are bound to face the same questions: Where is the Orient? What is the substance of the Orient or the Far East or Asia? This paper examines the operation of the epistemic reorientation toward the East or the Orient and the inherent coloniality within the discourse of Confucian tributary ideology particularly concerning the concept of *tianxia* (天下), all-under-the-heaven, a borderless realm, with no outside (無外 *wuwai*).

**Keywords:** Epistemic decolonization, Orient, Orientation, Reorientation, Tianxia

## The Question of Epistemic Reorientation:

### What Would Happen When the Orient Becomes *Tianxia*?<sup>1</sup>

#### 1. The question of the Orient or the Far East

The project of epistemic decolonization and reorientation has attracted intellectual attention in recent decades. Historians and philosophers have turned their gaze to the non-West and non-European worlds, such as Africa, South-America, and Asia, to re-think the question of decolonization and search for different modes of modernity and alternative epistemologies. These epistemological decolonizing and reorienting projects have demonstrated the fact that the Enlightenment knowledge, with its modernity project, was developed in a particular context and a specific moment in Western Europe, but was considered as universal value and was disseminated globally, through the capitalist expansion and imperial colonization, even has shaped the epistemological structure and the worldview globally. In order to challenge the Eurocentric knowledge production and the intellectual imperialism, scholars tried to excavate the plurality of different historical processes, present different perspectives, to resurrect the ignored and subalternized knowledge from the non-European world, and so on (Dussel 1993; Read 1993; Chakrabarty 2000; Mignolo 2000; Pomeranz 2001; Gipouloux 2009).<sup>2</sup>

But, the question is: What is the “West”? Where is the “West”? Where is the border between the West and non-West on the map? The assumption that another epistemology outside of the modern/Western world such as Confucianism, Africanism or Latin American indigenous wisdom can offer some alternative, I think, falls precisely into the trap of the myth of a spatialized perception of knowledge and a typical anthropological apparatus of area partitions.

To shift the gaze from the West to the East, or Asia and Africa is to adopt the same mode of spatialization of knowledge exercised by area studies, national literature or national history, and to assume the centrality and exclusivity of space in the constitution of social orders and national cultures. Such mode of hypostatization and even fetishization of the geographical area, be it Europe or Asia, the West or the East, is to ignore the reality of the simultaneously

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<sup>2</sup> Representative texts include: Dussel, Enrique. (1993) “Eurocentrism and Modernity (Introduction to the Frankfurt Lectures)”, *Boundary 2*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Autumn, 1993), pp. 65-76; Chakrabarty, Dipesh. (2000) “Introduction: The Idea of Provincializing Europe,” *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press; Gipouloux, Francois. (2009) *La Méditerranée asiatique*; Mignolo, Walter. (2000) *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* -- “Introduction: On Gnosis and the Imaginary of the Modern/Colonial World System.” Princeton: Princeton University Press; Pomeranz, Kenneth. (2001) *The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy*; Reid, Anthony. (1993) *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450-1680*.

intertwining and interacting historical processes, and the co-existence of different temporalities in the same space that co-constitute local cultural and social orders. This tendency of culturalism, just as Dirlik had pointed out, also ignores the fact that the process of global modernity is not only the expansion of Eurocentrism, but in fact involves the technique and practice of capitalism and the modes of management that follow the introduction of the capital in different local societies (Dirlik 1994; 2007). What is presented as genealogically homogeneous and consistent essence of a culture is an ideological operation. The implied colonizer-colonized dichotomy, or the West and the rest distinction, would conceal the picture of the relational processes of the colonial history and the actual question of coloniality.<sup>3</sup>

These are the same questions when we say, let's re-discover the East. When we redirect our gaze and look at the East, when we re-orient ourselves and try to unearth the forgotten and overlooked Oriental world that has been subalternized, as some scholars suggested through their project of epistemic reorientation, with the effort to decolonize the Eurocentric and Occidental domination, we are bound to face the same questions: Where is the Orient? What is the Orient or the Far East or Asia composed of? Has the Orient or Asia been intact throughout the long duration of historical processes? Were there no traditional knowledge and technologies mixed with the "Occidental" wisdom from ancient time through middle ages? Was there no inherent coloniality within the "Oriental" empires? What would happen when we reach the Orient and realize that it has turned out to be *tianxia* (天下), all-under-the-heaven, a borderless realm, with no outside (無外 *wuwai*)?

## 2. Look East! the Asian Value and the New Order as tactics to solidify local power structure

To resist the temptation of geopolitical knowledge production is not the denial of the necessity of re-configuring our knowledge of world map and world history. The problematization of the area partition of knowledge production and the politics of the intellectual gaze, on the contrary, is to unveil the logic of the game of shifting the gaze while maintaining some transcendental *a priori* as the distant vanishing point.

The imperative to reverse the look and redirect toward Asia, in fact, does not emerge only from the Occidental sphere. In the Asian world, there also has been a loud cry to decolonize the imperial gaze from the West, to shatter the Euro-centric epistemological regime, and to re-affirm the traditional knowledge and values inherited from the past in Asia.<sup>4</sup> The advocacy to return to Asia is a recurrence of the campaign for the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere

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<sup>3</sup> Dirlik, Arif, (1994) "Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Winter 1994). pp. 328-356; Dirlik, Arif. (2007) *Global Modernity: Modernity in the Age of Global Capitalism*.

<sup>4</sup> Kuan-Hsing Chen's (1994) "The Imperialist Eye: The Cultural Imaginary of a Sub-Empire and a Nation-State" is considered as the representative text in this category. Taiwan: *A Radical Quarterly in Social Studies*, 1994-07-01, Issue 17, pp.149-222.

during the Pacific war, to “free” Asia from European colonial powers and to establish “New Order in East Asia.” This discursive campaign ended up as a colonial project that took over most of East Asia and Southeast Asia during the Second World War.<sup>5</sup>

During the post-war period, current re-elected prime minister Mahathir Mohamad, former Prime Minister who ruled from 1981 till 2003, announced in 1982 his policy of “Look East.” In his promotion of “Asian Values” and his insistence of rejecting Western liberal notion of individualism and human rights, Mahathir strongly suggested, in front of the general assembly of 1982 United Malays National Organizations (UMNO), to “Look East” and to “rid ourselves of the Western values that we have absorbed” (Khoo, 1995: 69; qt. Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani 2). For Mahathir, the Malaysian perspective of “Asian values” is based on Malay-Islamic culture and should be composed of the three basic elements of “Malayness”: feudalism, Islam and *adat* (traditional customs).

Mahathir’s gesture of looking East and his campaign for Asian values resorted to cultural relativism that allowed him to exercise a strong authoritarian regime in the name of the protection of the stability and security of the community. Mahathir even reinforced the sedition act passed by the Printing Presses and Publications Act to secure more control over the local media through strengthening the media laws. Mahathir insisted that the activities of movements in civil society should be curbed and censored as these actions could easily weaken government authority and endanger the public order and even obstruct national development (Mahathir 1982: 127; cited. Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani 6). He further encouraged feudalistic loyalty among people to his leadership and forbade his cabinet to challenge his authority in their meetings. In 1993 Bangkok Declaration, Mahathir and the leaders of other Asian states stressed the principles of sovereignty, self-determination, non-interference in civil and political rights, with the preference for social harmony, socio-economic prosperity and the collective well-being of the community, loyalty and respect towards figures of authority, and collectivism and communitarianism. Mahathir’s advocacy for Asian values and social harmony easily turned out to be a smokescreen to bolster his power.

It was also in 1982 that former Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew (李光耀 1923-2015) announced his intention to revive traditional Confucian values. In the speech he gave at the Chinese New Year Reception on Sunday, 7 Feb 1982, Lee said that Singapore is on the path of rapid transformation of development, tearing down all shanty towns, removing all squatters, building a cleaner, greener environment, having a more polite, courteous and considerate people, with more hygiene consciousness. To achieve the success of modernization, Singapore should also stress more Confucianist traditional values to prevent the erosion of Western values by the impact of American and British television programmes which purvey a different way of life.<sup>6</sup> In the same year, Lee invited a group of 8 internationally renowned Confucian scholars

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<sup>5</sup> This pan-Asian discourse was shared not only by Japanese, but also by Chinese intellectuals, Taiwanese people and other people in Southeast Asia during the Pacific War.

<sup>6</sup> “Speech by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew at the Chinese New Year Reception on Sunday, 7 Feb 1982.” *National Archives of Singapore*. <http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/record-details/785604f9-115d-11e3-83d5->

to Singapore to address the issue of Confucianism and traditional values.<sup>7</sup> In his lectures, Neo-Confucianist scholar Tu Weiming's (杜維明 1940- ) stressed that the supporting system of society needs to adapt itself not only to new ways of living but also to new demands of the time. In the age of highly developed technology and competitive administration, Tu suggested, the sense of responsibility, self-restraint, self-cultivation, spirit of consensus and cooperation, valuing the leadership of the community and government, respecting the procedure and ritual of the production, as well as entrepreneur spirit (*qiye jingshen* 企業精神), are the "Confucian ethics" shared in East Asia. These Confucian virtues proved to be the reasons for the phenomenal economic success, like a miracle, of the five different regions, including Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, in the post-war era (Tu 36, 117, 125-126). In this way, entrepreneur spirit in the age of industrial capitalism is interpreted by Tu as the essential element of Confucian ethics and traditional Asian values and is indispensable for the success of the economic growth the Asian dragons supported by the US.

It should be clear to us by now that the discourse of Asian values was timely interpreted as frugality, dedication, hard-work ethic, disciplined teamwork, gearing toward economic developmentalism. It also functioned as the justification for the authoritarian government in East and Southeast Asia with the rhetoric of family values and filial piety that uphold the stability of the parent-state and its unchallengeable paternalistic authority (Thomson 1082-1085; C.Y. Hoon 156-157).

It should also be apparent to us that even the concepts of Asia, Pan-Asia, East Asia, Southeast Asia, and Pacific Asia, all are notions constructed on the ground as political-economic strategies. Instances such as the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere during the Pacific War and the US-led anti-communist bloc in the Cold War Era in the Pacific region through the ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty), ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), etc. are clearly created according to the political-economic need of the time. Even the attempt of the Bandung Conference held in April 18-24, 1955 in Bandung, Indonesia, to form an Asian-African economic and cultural cooperation, a significant event that brought about the non-alignment movement to resist the two great powers in the Cold War period and created the nationalistic Third World alliance are, in Soekarno's words, the Newly Emerging Forces (NEEFOS). These Third World countries, however, are mostly authoritarian regimes in the post-colonial era.<sup>8</sup>

The discursive construction of such regional consciousness, as always, goes hand in hand with the practical political-economic objectives. The discourse of pan-Asianism, New Order in East Asia, Asian values, or anti-colonial Third World Alignment did not guarantee the intra-regional

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<sup>7</sup> "Singapore plans to revive study of Confucianism." By Colin Cambell, the New York Times (1982). Archive. <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/05/20/world/singapore-plans-to-revive-study-of-confucianism.html>. Accessed Aug. 6, 2018. These scholars Lee Kuan Yew invited include the famous James Xiong (熊玠 1935- ), Yu Ying-shih (余英時 1930- ), Cho-yun Hsu (許倬雲 1930- ), and Tu Weimin (杜維明).

<sup>8</sup> Singh, Sinderpal. "From Delhi to Bandung: Nehru, 'Indian-ness' and 'Pan-Asian-ness.'" *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*. 01 April 2011. Vol. 34(1), 51-64.

or even local equity at all, certainly not in the despotic and authoritarian regimes, but also not in the democratic societies in recent decades.

The establishment of the production cycle from leader countries to follower ones in East and Southeast Asia after the Second World War has demonstrated such regional strategies of political-economic zoning politics. After WWII, through the US's policy to support the industrial as well as the nuclear power plant project in East and Southeast Asia, Japan's economy boomed. This trend was followed by the so-called "four dragons" (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan), and later joined by the "little dragons/tigers" (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand). Lastly, the communist converted capitalist countries including China and Viet Nam also joined this path. Faced with the 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis, the ASEAN leaders reinforced their governance policies for economic stability and security, though with their rhetoric of inclusion, further liberalize and deepen engagement of international capital and global markets, serve only the political and economic elites, and hence further aggravate regional and local inequalities (Carroll and Jarvis 2015; Kelly Gerard 2017; Simon Springer 2017).

We have observed the pervasive practice of crony capitalism that is carried on from the feudal patronage relation to the colonial comprador bourgeois elites. We have also seen the domination through both money power and muscle power, even populist mobilization that appeals to ethnic identities and indigenous primacy, that are used to win elections in the democratic system and further create internal partitions and racial tensions. These predatory clientelist exchanges between politicians and voters, both realistically and symbolically, are the engine behind the current motor of governance and pre-determined the persistence of the concentration of power and capital for the economic elites.

The question for us on the surface is the puzzle that all the post-colonial independent nation-states in East and Southeast Asia still exercise the mode of dictatorship, through military government and the rule of the state of emergency. In such conditions, a large population of their citizens were deprived of their rights of equal participation in the same society to the extent that they turn out to be in the position as the colonized people in the colonial era. But, behind this surface is another question: what is the discursive framework that legitimized the practice of such deprivation and inequity? It is evident in these cases that the exercise of power concentration and resource appropriation do not occur only in Europe but also in post-colonial nation-states such as Asia. How to think the question of decolonization in the context of East and Southeast Asia is a pressing question for us to face when we see the rise of Asia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **3. China: The Tribute System, *Tianxia*, and network power**

China, of course, has been playing a significant role in the picture of the geopolitical zoning politics of Asia in the global context. The Renaissance of Confucianism in recent decades, with



the upsurge of epistemic decolonization and re-orientation, reminds us of a desire for a new world order from this part of the world.

Being the Middle Kingdom in the Asian Sinic world in the past, occupying the center seat of the ancient political-economic tributary system, China had rose up from her slumber and shook the world first in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century through the Chinese revolution, and now in the 21<sup>th</sup> century through the new industrial, geographical and cultural revolution and cyber warfare.<sup>9</sup>

The legacy of the Chinese cultural revolution in the last century brought not only the imaginary vision of a communist society of equals but also the faith that China could lead the world to resist the capitalist empires. The exportation of the Chinese Revolution to different parts of the world, in various forms, and left indelible marks, not only in Southeast Asia, Latin America but also in Western Europe.

Mao's discursive tactic of "Sinification of Marxism" in 1938 during the Sino-Japanese war was an early attempt of decolonization, localization, and mobilization of Chinese people to resist the foreign invasion. In 1956-1957, this slogan was transformed into the strategy to mobilize popular sentiments not only to fight against US-Taiwan connection but also to challenge USSR's power. The discourse of "Sinification of Marxism" did not die with the fall of Mao's regime, but was revived by Deng Xiaoping, and then followed up by Jiang Zeming and Hu Jintao, along with the policies of economic reform and development strategies, with Deng's slogan to "establish the socialism with Chinese characteristics". Jiang Zeming stated in 1997 that "only Deng Xiaoping's theory, and no other theory, that bridged Marxism with contemporary Chinese practice and the characteristics of the time, could solve the problem of the future and the fate of socialism. Deng Xiaoping Theory is Contemporary Chinese Marxism." In 2008, Hu Jintao once again stressed the objective to "unite the basic principles of Marxism with the Sinification of Marxism," and the guiding principle of "Reform and Opening-up" is "to liberate thoughts, to be practical and realistic, to keep abreast with time, and to innovate theory on the bases of practice." Xi Jinping, current president of PRC certainly, certainly did not abandon this discourse. In the assembly commemorating the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Marx's birthday in May 2018, Xi remarked that "Writing Marxism onto the flag of the Chinese Communist Party was all correct. Unceasingly promoting the Sinification and modernization of Marxism is completely correct."

"Sinification of Marxism" ironically turned out to be the rationalization and justification for the economic reform and the developmentalism that China has followed since post-1978 and post-socialist stage. These transformations of the mode of Sinification of Marxism over time, in response to different political and economic contexts, prove to be examples of discursive

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<sup>9</sup> Numerous analysis and speculations concerning the new forms of Chinese revolution emerge: Yi Wen, "China's Industrial Revolution: Past, Present, Future." Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. 2015; Loretta Napoleoni. "The Chinese Miracle: A Modern Day Industrial Revolution." *The European Financial Review*. Feb. 12, 2012; Lily Kong, China and Geography in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Cultural (Geographical) Revolution?" *Geography and Economics*, 51(5): 600-618; William Hagestad II. *21<sup>st</sup> Century Chinese Cyberwarfare*. IT Governance Publishing, 2012.

syncretism which manifest perfectly the subject positions situated in their time and place that triggered their projects of epistemic reorientation.

Chinese revolution and its call for the Sinification of Marxism, therefore, not only served as a strategy to alter the path of revolution according to the situations of the changed political contexts but in fact, also functioned as a mirror of its own constantly bifurcated trajectories. Along with such path, other discourses are easily subsumed with concordance, including the Confucian notion of *tianxia* and the vision of new world order.

In recent decades, there is a revived interest of Confucianism in China. Contemporary Chinese scholars have been seriously devoting their energy and their time to the studies of classical Confucianism to get rid of Western influence. According to their interpretations, the moral purpose of the state, in the Confucian worldview, should carry out the ideal moral and political order observing the Confucian conception of *tianxia* (天下). According to the idea of *Tianxia*, the whole world has no boundary of territory and is to be governed by a sage king according to principles of rites (*li* 禮) and virtue (*de* 德), under the order of cosmic harmony. Such a concept of *Tianxia* explains the reason why and how neighboring countries can co-exist as the constituent members of the tributary system last for centuries.<sup>10</sup>

Zhao Tingyang's (趙汀陽) interpretation of the notion of *tianxia* offers a typical example of discursive syncretism and epistemic reorientation that reveals the imaginary identification of the ancient greater China, the *Pax Sinica* in the Han and Tang Dynasties. According to his version, the classical idea of *tianxia*, all-under-heaven, should be taken as a universal political system for the world that acknowledges the all-inclusive ethical principle: "everyone is born to share all-under-heaven" and that "no one is an outsider." Basing on this principle, Zhao suggests, no discriminatory identification or resistant recognition of others is acceptable. No one is a cultural enemy. It is a principle that "negate any cultural, religious or ideological hostile attempt to discriminate against some groups of people as incompatible" (Zhao 60). In his depiction of an ideal cosmic order, Zhao also stresses the two-way circuit between the ethical justification and political legitimacy in the theory of all-under-heaven. In this circuit, the route of families-states-all-under-heaven translate the familiar "ethical relations to political institutions," and the reversed route of all-under-heaven-states-families explains the "political responsibility to protect ethical relations and defend basic values" (Zhao 61). In the line of his argument, Zhao proposes to construct a "world constitution" basing on his "new all-under-heaven system," a "compatible all-inclusive system" founded on "universal values," defined in terms of relational values, that is, cooperation, mutual aid, and human obligations. (Zhao 64-65)

Following Zhao Ting-yang's *Tianxia* discourse, a whole group of Chinese scholars also

<sup>10</sup> See Zhang, Yongjin. (2001) "System, empire and state in Chinese international relations," *Review of International Studies* 2001: 27, 43-63; Zhang, Yongjin & Buzan, Barry (Spring 2012). "The tributary system as international society in theory and practice". *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* (Oxford Journals) 5 (1): 3-36; Cohen, Warren I. *East Asia at the Center: Four Thousand Years of Engagement with the World*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

employed Western IR language in their interpretation of China's rising status in international politics.<sup>11</sup> These Sinicizing IR processes labeled as “IR theory with Chinese characteristics” or “a Chinese IR school” modeled after the practice of Sinification of Marxism and Socialist Society with Chinese characteristics advocated by PRC political leaders (Xinning Song 2011; Hung-jen Wang 2013; Nele Noesselt 2015; Salvatore Babones 2017).<sup>12</sup> In this wave of re-writing IR theory as an alternative to the Westphalian system, *Tianxia* trope was primarily used and suggested an earnest reconsideration of international order in China.

Some critics had already pointed out that the development of newly forged Confucian rhetoric had its root in the mid-1980s in the attempt to *re-Sinicize* the Party-State's legitimacy discourse through the invocation of the quasi-Confucian concept when Confucius studies were first encouraged by the CCP regime (Christopher Ford 1032; Nele Noesselt 2015).<sup>13</sup> The *tianxia* system, initially indicates an idea of the Sino-centric hierarchical relationship among unequal partner states that was practiced through observance of ritual in the world of a *Pax Sinica*, now is believed by Chinese scholars to constitute a better world order than the Westphalian system (June Teufel Dreyer 2015).

Together with these discursive efforts of *Tianxia* as a new world order with Confucian virtues are the political-economic endeavors exercised by PRC to extend the Sino network power. We've witnessed, in an ironic reversal of “a nineteenth-century agenda for China” in the twenty-first century to “restore the regional hierarchy and maximize China's security by expanding influence and control over its neighborhoods” (Suisheng Zhao 961). The project of One Belt One Road, through the global network as a whole, appears like a gigantic game of go in the Chinese style. The purchases of seaports and securing of particular choke points on the road and at sea, already indicate the military strategies behind such global vision. The large projects of infrastructures, such as the construction of pipelines, railroads that cut across Southeast Asia and Central Asia, artificial islands in the South China Sea, global control of

<sup>11</sup> Allen Carlson 2011; Xinning Song 2011; Hung-jen Wang 2013; June Teufel Dreyer 2015; Suisheng Zhao 2015; Nele Noesselt 2015; Christopher A. Ford 2015; Zhang, Yongjin. & Teng-chi Chang 2016; Salvatore Babones 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Hung-jen Wang has written about this issue (2013). Alastair Iain Johnston, *Social States: China in International Institutions, 1980–2000* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); Zhang Yongjin, *China in International Society since 1949: Alienation and Beyond* (London: MacMillan Press Ltd, 1998); He Dong, ‘Ontology of the Chinese international relations theory on the international anarchy in the view of stimulus-response’, *Journal of Baoji University of Arts and Sciences (Social Sciences)* 27(1), (2007), pp. 16–20. See also Lei Jianyong, ‘Jiangou zhongguo guoji guanxi lilun de bentilun’ [‘建构中国国际关系理论的本体论’] [‘Constructing the ontology of Chinese international relation theory’], *Journal of Xinyang Agricultural College* 18(3), (2008), pp. 1–3; Pang Zhongying, ‘China's self-defined role in international system’, *Contemporary International Relations* 16(4), (2006), pp. 28–40; Luo Jianbo, ‘Jiangou Zhongguo Jueqi de duiwai wenhua zhanlve’ [‘建构中国崛起的对外文化战略’] [‘Constructing rising China's cultural strategy’], *Contemporary International Relations* 3, (2006), pp. 33–37; Hu Jian, ‘Zhongguo guoji jiaose de zhuanhuan yu guoji shehui de renzhi’ [‘中国国际角色的转换与国际社会的认知’] [‘China's changing international role and the recognition of it in international society’], *Contemporary International Relations* 8, (2006), pp. 21–52. See also Li Mingming, ‘Lun Guoji Guanxi zhong de Wenhua Qujie’ [‘论国际关系中的“文化曲解”’] [‘On “cultural misunderstandings” in international relations’], *Contemporary International Relations* 5, (2006), pp. 51–62.

<sup>13</sup> As early as 1985, the Party-State established the first “Chinese Confucius Research Institute” that marked the beginning of the cultural debates on ‘Chineseness’ that ensued since mid-1980s (Christopher Ford 1033).

internet information security through cyber-network: these encompassing bi-lateral trade deals often end up either as debt traps or involving corruptions on both ends. All these gestures seem to reveal the reawakening of the mentality and the vision of the ancient empire of *Tianxia*, all-under-heaven belongs to the sovereign; everyone under heaven is my subject (普天之下莫非皇土，率土之濱莫非皇臣—詩經).

Zhao and other Chinese IR scholars who advocate *Tianxia* concept and stress “relational ethical justification” that links “human obligations” and “political responsibilities” in the hope of creating a “universal order” presents a very fundamental problem. The proposal of *tianxia* with the relational universalism, tolerance of different forms of life, the priority of universal values, the primacy of relational interests over unilateral self-interests, obviously have overlooked the materialist and historical processes that were intertwined and entangled with different power holders both in Chinese histories and in the contemporary world. They also seem to have presumed that the parents are necessarily protective of their children and the children naturally observe filial piety toward their parents. Such unchallengeable parental authority, therefore, justifies the stable power position of the ruling regime.

Zhao also argues that the “war-oriented thinking” is a “typical complex in Western political consciousness or subconsciousness” and would encourage wars to happen. To Zhao and other sinologists, China would never follow the Western imperial path to conquer the world. Zhao and these scholars seem to forget about the numerous cases of murder of one’s parents and siblings in Chinese histories during the power seizing process. They also have forgotten about the even more instances of the genocides of the entire clans and even the whole town during the wars of conquering or annexing the neighboring states. Chinese history is not a smooth continuation of the same culture and the same race, but a gradual re-composition of different tribes in the course of long historical processes, either through commerce, migrations or battles.

The texts of Zhao Tingyang and other *tianxia* IR scholars have demonstrated the discursive and epistemic operations and reorientation of Confucianism that provides a convenient framework and situates the dominant center and the subordinate periphery in a clearly defined hierarchical order. The tribute system practiced by the pre-modern Chinese empire is now transformed into the geo-economics and the financial subsidiaries of China in the attachment system in the new world order, particularly in the age of neo-liberalism. The central paradox of the normative discourse of *tianxia* and Confucianism is that, while stressing the superiority of Confucian moral virtues and the Kingcraft (*wangdao* 王道) of the Emperor who can lead the country to a harmonious and borderless world, historical facts proved that military forces were always unavoidable. If the neighboring countries avowed their loyalty and obedience and paid tributes to the Imperial Court, they could be protected from the attacks of other countries. Otherwise, the Imperial Court would use its forces to conquer them if necessary.

What is striking concerning modern China is not only the exportation of the Chinese revolution in the 1960s and the recent revival of Confucianism, but the follow-up economic revolution, industrial revolution, financial revolution, and even cyber revolution that she has accomplished from the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the 21<sup>st</sup> century. What changing security

dynamic that would take shape in Asia in the coming years is something worth observing.

#### 4. **Concluding remarks: reorientation, disorientation or continual concrete analysis of concrete situations?**

We began with the question of epistemic reorientation and to rethink the Orient that has been overlooked by world history and has been written with a Eurocentric perspective. What concerns us here is the question that when we revert our look toward the East and realize that the East or Asia has her epistemic orientation geared toward the well-positioned hierarchical and center-peripheral world order, would we begin to observe a new mode of knowledge production that would affect the world to come? What would be the world of *tianxia*, implemented with traditional Confucianist discourse, with its potential to look at all-under-heaven with the vision of a borderless world, a world of harmony and consensus, with no discords and no outside? The hegemon of *Pax Americana* seems to be crumbling down while the US is still launching a trade war against China and shooting pro-government drones and missiles in the Middle East. China, on the other hand, is spreading her net all over the world with a *tianxia*-scope.

What is the project of epistemic decolonization in this emerging context of global transformation?

It is not merely a question of rediscovering the history of the empirical past or the prediction of the future, but the often-forgotten reality of the continual process of cultural syncretism in human history and the innate power struggle in all societies. So-called Asia or China is, in fact, a zone of constant contact and power maneuvering, just as any other geopolitical regions, traversed and mixed by various ethnic groups and heterogeneous cultures, through the long passage of time, with multitudinous forms of exchanges, commerce or battles, and with follow-up discursive legitimation and institutional and bureaucratic implementation.

As I have argued elsewhere, Confucianism has never been Confucianism in itself or by itself. It is a complex cluster of texts woven by intellectuals in different historical moments and reflected the demands of different politico-economic forces. China is not composed by people who shared the same cultural identity, nor a homogeneous continuity throughout centuries either. Through the efforts of hermeneutic reinterpretation of classical texts, various epistemic sources were imbedded through the guise of the same linguistic markers. The discursive and institutional apparatus implemented by different scholars and rulers in various stages of historical processes, merged with the pragmatism of the legalist penal system and calculative manipulation, time and again solidified their power regime. The centralized domination is stabilized not only through the imperial examination as the selection system for the official bureaucracy but also through the mystic logic of the mandate monarch and the daily education in the families and the clan academies run by landed gentries and ancestral temples. The Confucian discourse of the ethics of filial piety, through such multilayered educational system,

further enhanced the hierarchical order between the emperor and its subjects. This mode of Confucianism is the infrastructure of the infrastructure of the state: The Kingcraft of the rule of *tianxia* begins from the internalization of the system of loyalty in the heart of the subjects.

The project of epistemic decolonization, we are bound to acknowledge, is not to retreat to any geopolitical region, be it Asia, Africa, Latin America, or any other undiscovered indigenous tradition. What we need to do is to analyze critically and concretely the power concentration and inequity through the institutional, juridical and discursive apparatus that each society practice locally, and to observe how such operation was syncretized and transformed in different historical moments. These historical moments, such as the colonial period, the independent modern-state, the cold-war geopolitical security policies, or the transnational financial and economic security control, are never isolated local events, but always intra-regionally and globally implicated. New forms of social stratification and racism would emerge in different discursive practices, supported by different epistemological structure. Epistemic decolonization, therefore, is not to abandon any particular epistemological paradigm. It is not to assume the primacy of another uncontaminated model either. What requires us to do is to conduct a rigorous and continual concrete analysis of concrete situations, through the practice of materialist dialectics, to uncover the traces of multi-facet modes of syncretic power-game, both discursively and institutionally, that are operating in our societies.