

Can this ancient Chinese philosophy save us from global chaos?

Opinion by **Zhao Tingyang**

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BEIJING — Today's world is full of conflict, hostility and continuing clashes among civilizations. All indications suggest we are headed beyond failed states to a failed world order. In this Hobbesian context of growing chaos and anarchy, U.S. President Donald Trump has emerged as an old-fashioned hero from early modern times, with his misperception of the world as a battlefield instead of a shared community. However, as globalization has connected economies and shared information around the world, such a course will surely end in failure.

Thus, I suggest another path, one rooted in the ancient Chinese concept of tianxia, which roughly translates to "all under heaven" coexisting harmoniously. This concept of world order was embraced for hundreds of years from around 1046 to 256 B.C. during the Zhou dynasty, China's longest-lasting.

The rationality of tianxia

To explain the concept of tianxia, let me introduce an imitation test, a game that reveals the concept's philosophical roots. In this game, each player seeks to maximize his or her own self-interest within a Hobbesian state of nature, and each player learns and imitates the successful strategies deployed by the other players.

As a result, none of the successful strategies dominate for long, since all of them are copied by others and soon become common knowledge. The stable equilibrium among strategies finally comes about when all players have learned all available successful strategies and thus have become equally smart or equally stupid.

An imitated strategy could be one of hospitality or hostility. A strategy is irrational if it leads to self-defeating consequences when universally imitated. A rational strategy — where the first consideration is coexistence — continues to produce positive rewards when copied by other players. It is the only strategy not to incur any retaliation and thus successfully to withstand the challenge of others imitating it.

Tianxia is thus a rational worldview. In game theory, it is the best conception of an undefeatable strategy or a stable evolutionary strategy. And it is precisely what the world needs today at this historical juncture.

What does tianxia look like?

The concept of tianxia defines an all-inclusive world with harmony for all. It often refers to the physical world in early literature, but it is essentially a political concept consisting of a trinity of realms.

First, tianxia means the Earth under the sky, "all under heaven." Second, it refers to the general will of all peoples in the world, entailing a universal agreement. It involves the heart more than the mind, because the heart has feelings.

the world, entailing a universal agreement. It involves the heart more than the mind, because the heart has feelings. And third, tianxia is a universal system that is responsible for world order. The world cannot achieve tianxia unless the physical, psychological and political realms all coincide.

About 3,000 years ago, the Zhou dynasty brought the tianxia system — the only one ever practiced — to prominence. The dynasty sought to bring the whole world together under one tent as a way to eliminate any negative external influence, and thereby conflict, within what was then considered the civilized world. Tianxia thus defines the concept of “the political” as the art of co-existing through transforming hostility into hospitality — a clear alternative to the more modern concepts of German legal theorist Carl Schmitt’s recognition of politics as “us vs. them,” Hans Morgenthau’s “realist” struggle for power and Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations.”

How can tianxia be made accessible now?

The idea of “perpetual peace,” famously associated with philosopher Immanuel Kant, proved possible during the Zhou dynasty in a region that was mostly culturally homogenous, but it was ineffective in settling the kind of civilization clashes noted by Huntington. A “tianxia peace” for our hyper-connected, interdependent world would have to go a big step further. It would have to be built on the broader foundation of a compatible universalism that includes all civilizations — not an exclusive unilateral claim of one civilization to universality.

To put it in philosophical terms, and to go back to my imitation test, the methodology for possible tianxia must be what’s called relational rationality. Or, to put it another way: existence presupposes coexistence. Everyone can live if — and only if — they let live; otherwise everyone will suffer from unbearable retaliation. This truth is captured in the Confucian concept of ren, which literally means that being is only defined in relation to others, not by individual existence.

Aversion to risk is much stronger when guided by relational rationality than when guided by individual rationality. As I define it, relational rationality emphasizes the minimization of mutual hostility over the maximization of self-interest. Tianxia suggests that relational rationality should have priority over individual rationality in political and economic practices.

Relational rationality and universal consent are essential for a sound world order that includes all peoples. Confucius was the first to have understood this and proffered his principle that one becomes established if and only if one lets others be established, and one is improved if and only if one lets others improve. Hence, tianxia could be named the “Confucian optimum” as a more acceptable alternative to the so-called self-interest-driven “Pareto optimal.”

I can think of no better overarching concept for governing our present world, which is, more than ever, an interdependence of plural identities. Seeking to maximize self-interest in such a world is only a recipe for endless conflict to the detriment of all.

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