

## CHINA'S *TIANXIA* AND FOREIGN POLICY IN THE PANDEMIC CONTEXT

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### Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic as a global threat has made it possible to gain a dynamic perspective on the behavior of States, and some light on the new international scenario. In this context, it has become clear that People's Republic of China (PRC) and the West are competitors in more than one area, and that it will be necessary to cooperate with the Asian giant for global stability/balance. In this article, we propose a retrospective (historical) look at the centralized State of China, and then characterize the current regime in that country. In the context of Chinese theories of International Relations, we propose to develop the concept of *tianxia* as a guide for the definition of a political strategy, considering the criticisms and limitations to the application of that same concept. Still in the pandemic context, we propose a reading of the political actions taken by the Chinese regime. The study of *tianxia*, whatever international scenario is set, may help us to understand some of the historical foundations of what PRC is today.

### Keywords

*tianxia*; universal values; China; Foreign Policy; Covid-19

### Resumo

A pandemia Covid-19 enquanto ameaça global tem permitido obter uma perspectiva dinâmica acerca do comportamento dos Estados, e algumas luzes sobre o novo cenário internacional. Neste contexto ficou claro que a República Popular da China e o Ocidente são competidores em mais que uma área, e que será necessário cooperar com o gigante asiático em prol da



estabilidade/equilíbrio mundial. Neste artigo propomos um olhar retrospectivo (histórico) sobre o Estado centralizado da China, para depois caracterizar o regime actualmente vigente. No âmbito das Teorias das Relações Internacionais chinesas, propomos desenvolver o conceito de *tianxia* como guia para a definição de uma estratégia política, considerando as críticas e limitações à aplicação desse mesmo conceito. E ainda no contexto pandémico, propomos uma leitura das acções políticas levadas a cabo pelo regime chinês. O estudo do *tianxia*, seja qual for o cenário internacional que se configure, poderá ajudar-nos a compreender alguns dos fundamentos históricos daquilo que é a RPC hoje.

**Palavras-chave**

*tianxia*; valores universais; China; Política Externa; Covid-19

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### **Introduction**

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has brought humanity a double challenge: to immediately control the virus and, in the long run, to reduce inequalities within and between States, appealing to solidarity among them. However, the health crisis has also exposed two assumptions that have been part of collective imagination for some time: first, that PRC is now the main adversary of the West in the economic field, and increasingly in other fields, and that it will be necessary for the latter to cooperate with the Asian giant to achieve global stability.

China's rise has been seen by several authors as a potential destabilization factor of the world order. For Nicholas Spykman, a powerful China would threaten western powers in the "Asian Mediterranean"<sup>1</sup> area, and an alliance between the USA and Japan is crucial to maintain the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region (Spykman in Sempa, 2019). In the same vein, in the 1960s, historian Arnold Toynbee would warn of the following:

*(during the Cold War), each of them (the USA and the USSR) will become suspicious of the other, and mutual trust, without which positive cooperation between them would be impractical, would be difficult to establish. Therefore, it was possible that America and Russia would make "the great refusal" and, if they did, they would be leaving the initiative to China. It would then be the turn of the latter to make its attempt to establish the world political organization which, in the atomic era, was humanity's only alternative to the ultimate mass suicide (Toynbee, Arnold, 1968: 163).*

Looking back at the 19<sup>th</sup> century, China's decline dictated the end of an era of leadership that will have lasted for 90% of the existence of the modern world (García, 2020: 30). Following the natural logic of *tianxia* itself, Chinese rule was replaced first by European colonial expansion, and later by the rise of the United States of America (USA). There are even those who believe that Washington's leadership is an American interpretation of the system originated in China by respecting its base: all land under heaven; a public

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<sup>1</sup> Composed of the seas of Japan, East China, and South China. Access to these seas allowed (and allows) China to connect the Pacific to the Indian Ocean (Sempa, 2019).



choice that represents the desires of humanity; a universal political system too (Sempa, 2017). What is certain is that it is increasingly evident that both Chinese academics and the political class itself of that country have sought to reaffirm the position of PRC as not only a world leader, but also one that takes responsibility for the stability of the world. President Xi Jinping has expressed this commitment to political discourse and action: the 2022 Winter Olympics held in Beijing were a moment of Xi's affirmation of power (Buckley, 2022), while cementing China's stance on leading the globalization process (Xi, 2017: 18) and creating a Community with a Shared Future for Humanity<sup>2</sup>. There is thus a challenge for the West in an era that will tend to balance if the Great Powers in competition choose the way of cooperation to resolve their frictions.

For K. Holsti (1995), the external policies of States are defined according to objectives, but there are also visions or ideas that guide and legitimize their behavior (actions and decisions). An objective that might seem to a State a long-term aspiration, for another, at one point, could be considered central to its survival. Theories have clearly contributed to this.

The theories of International Relations and their images of the world have evolved over time and shown a certain vocation for practical action. For China, it has not been different from the rest of the world. In this sense, Arenal (2013) states that the interpretations that appear in the writings of Mencius and Confucius in Ancient China are a clear expression that Theories of International Relations have found their expression in a cultural context distinct from the West.

The Theories of Chinese International Relations, under construction, are clearly based on concepts of classical culture that serve as an instrument for the interpretation of the international scenario.

In this study, we will define the concept of *tianxia* and explain, in the light of theories of authors such as Tingyang Zhao, among others, and through several concrete historical examples, how the ideal model was followed by several dynasties. To understand the actions and decisions of the current Chinese leadership, we will develop the idea of internationalization of *tianxia*, while relating Confucian thinking and political decision making. China's world leadership potential will be analyzed considering the criticism stifled to the application of the concept in Chinese politics.

### **The *tianxia*: "under Chinese heaven"**

One of the identifiable characteristics of the current totalitarian regime in China is its collectivist and/or unitary essence. Since the foundation of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1921 and especially since the foundation of PRC (1949), an effort has been made by the communist leadership to create a strong collective sense. At the time of the regime's founding act, Mao Zedong proposed mobilizing the masses to bring about the revolution.

Over the past seventy years, several examples of this mindset can be easily identified: the social movement in defense of North Korea during the 1950-1953 conflict (Brown,

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<sup>2</sup> Included in the Constitution of PRC in 2018, it aims to create a community of States that cooperate with each other to achieve mutual benefit (Mardell, 2017).



2012), the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962) and the disastrous attempt to boost Chinese industrial production<sup>3</sup> or the very theory of The Three Representations of Jiang Zemin. In general, these types of initiatives that serve to bring the population together in favor of an initiative or project are one of the parchments of the CCP. This centrality is one of the crucial elements to justify the party's position today. Nevertheless, it must be clarified that the existence of a central State such as that which exists today is not new in Chinese history.

### **1.1. The Zhou dynasty and the idea of a central State**

The Zhou dynasty (11<sup>th</sup>-century BC-256 BC) contributed decisively to the establishment of a central State idea based on a centrifugal power of attraction that persists today, serving as justification for the fact that the present State is not merely the product of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century Western ideological thought adapted to Chinese preferences.

The Zhou State came to power under special circumstances. Not being the one with the largest army or with most resources, this State had to look for other ways to gain, exercise and maintain power. Through a strategy that was the establishment of cooperation relations, the other States of the sinocentric world were attracted into a system that promoted interdependence. This *tianxia*, or "all under heaven", can be seen as a clear attempt to organize the world within a sphere of values or practices that promoted what today could be called mutual benefit.

Zhou State's strategic location in China's central plains region facilitated the kingdom's rise to the position of leader of the sinocentric world. In addition to being an important communications center, Zhao (2019) highlights three elements that characterized this State:

First, the writing used was intelligible to the different peoples who lived on those plains. This form of expression did not have a fixed oral equivalent, i.e., each people had their own pronunciation of Chinese characters, allowing and or facilitating their expansion (Zhao, 2019: 29-31):

*Owing to their ability to exist and be understood independently from pronunciation as an ideographic writing, Chinese characters can be naturally shared far and wide, thus becoming the common script for many ethnic groups; and the spiritual world in Chinese writing also becomes a common spiritual world for all (Zhao, 2019: 30).*

Secondly, *tianxia* itself was open to anyone. In other words, this system was inclusive since it was the "reflection of Heaven". If we think of heaven as a space shared by all, *tianxia* will be represented in a similar way. This compatibility allows other States to be able to integrate the system without disturbing its functioning or excluding different ethnic groups (Zhao, 2019: 31). The way *tianxia* could embrace different cultures without eliminating them made it the ideal model to follow by later dynasties. For example, the Han dynasty (202 BC-220 AD), when expanding to the western regions, did not seek to alter their customs because their leaders understood that it was easier to maintain the unity of the territory without erasing the unique characteristics of the peoples covered

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<sup>3</sup> Dikötter (2010: 333) points out that about 45 million people died in that period.



by their government (Zhao, 2019: 37). The founder of the Yuan dynasty<sup>4</sup>, the Mongol Khublai Khan, was regarded by the Confucian thinkers of the time as a defender of Confucius' ideals and as one of "them" (Clements, 2010: 221). The Qing dynasty itself (1636-1911) – now known as the one responsible for the decline of Imperial China in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – was able to create a period of internal peace and harmony between the Han majority and the different ethnic minorities in a truly cosmopolitan environment (Hang, 2016: 11).

Thirdly and last, but not least, Zhao highlights the existence of a certain political theology evident in the perpetuation of the myth of the succession of *tianxia*. It is essentially a process of adapting to a pre-existing system, as the costs of creating something to replace it are too high and would not get enough support to achieve its objectives (Zhao, 2019: 31).

### 1.2. *tianxia* and the Republic

Sun Yat-sen, the "father" of Chinese republicanism, understood the difficulty of succeeding a regime that presented itself as inclusive of various ethnic groups and realities. When implementing the Republic in 1912, Chinese nationalism was imbued with anti-Manchu positions that had been essential in the fall of the Qing dynasty. The new Chinese leadership, fearing the collapse of territorial union, declared itself to be the Republic of Five Races or Nationalities (Duara, 1997: 1041). Already in the communist stage of Chinese history, in 1999, the white paper *National Minorities Policy and Its Practice in China* sought to ensure that the country was multi-ethnic since the times of the Qin dynasty (221 BC-206 BC) and that unity had been the norm of Chinese reality (China-UN, 1999).

Successive dynasties, as well as the different governments in China's republican era sought to keep the scrolls of this concept, extending the system to an international and not necessarily Chinese perspective. In this sense, Sun Yat-sen tells us of the "*tianxia weigong*" (天下为公)<sup>5</sup>, that is, that *tianxia* belongs to all (Por, 2020). For us to understand the importance of this statement it is necessary to look again at the origins of the concept: whoever had the power (Son of Heaven), had the Mandate of Heaven, and had to rule based on moral norms. These norms should ensure the well-being of the population in favor of the construction of a civilizational moral order (Liang, 2018), that is, the leader would have to rule with virtue. A leader unable to rule morally was in danger of losing his status (Zhao, 2019: 15).

## 2. On the internationalization of *tianxia*

We find ourselves now at a point that many consider to be a turning point. The idea that the West is under decline is not new: the fall of Western ideals comes not only from external forces or civilizations that threaten their dominance (Huntington, 1993: 3), but

<sup>4</sup> Yuan (元) means "first" or "original". The name suggestion was made by the councilor Liu Bingzhong to mark a new era (Clements, 2010: 101).

<sup>5</sup> Only the most empowered must rule and the throne is not monopolizable, as described in *The Book of Rites* (Kallio, 2016: 6).



also from their own experiences within their political systems that have turned out to be debilitating to the structures that underpin their societies (Mahbubani, 1993: 41).

Before the "Decline of the West", the Chinese response emerges, often seen as being totalitarian. At the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the CCP, Xi Jinping, through the vote of the Central Committee, eliminated the term limit of the presidency and did not appoint a successor to the Politburo Central Committee. The impact of these measures has become even more relevant because Xi has become the supreme leader of PRC by holding three key positions: secretary-general of the CCP, president of China and chairman of the Central Military Commission of PRC (Stoffey, 2021). This behavior of the Chinese government was interpreted by the international media as a breach of the antecedent proposed by Deng Xiaoping to limit the presidency to only two five-year terms (Huang, 2018; The Economist, 2018; Marschik, 2018).

Another perspective to understand these actions, according to Stoffey (2021), is that it is only an extension of what has been Chinese politics to date: of the six leaders of PRC, only two prepared their succession (Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao) and ended up respecting the term limit.

In our view, President Xi's decision to extend his governance beyond 2022 is not born of the CCP's influence and position of power, but rather stems from Confucian thinking. Historically, China has gone through long periods of instability that have included wars, famine, and constant rebellions<sup>6</sup>, which have fueled the need for a strong leadership:

*La imagen del no orden, el caos animal, la injusticia humana, tiene como respuesta la creación de un Estado poderoso, unipersonal, capacitado, al cual se le enviste de un poder absoluto, a cambio de su compromiso con la sociedad. El poder central y absoluto se fundamenta en China desde su época de las 100 escuelas<sup>7</sup> y pervive, bajo diversas facetas hasta la presente fecha (García, 2019: 40).*

### **2.1. Confucian Thinking and Political Decision**

In China, the legitimacy of a ruler or, in practical terms, of a dynasty, has always been intrinsically linked to the Mandate of Heaven. Through this creation, the Zhou dynasty sought to justify its takeover of the Shang dynasty. According to the logic of this concept, the Son of Heaven is its ultimate representative, receiving divine legitimacy to rule. However, the Son of Heaven does not, in any form, own the goods and lands of the world, but rather only functions as an administrator of the possessions of Heaven. According to Zhao (2019), the ruling of the Son of Heaven must be fair; in other words, it should ensure the happiness and well-being of those he governs (Zhao, 2019: 7). There is a certain deal with the divine right that in Europe legitimized the power of kings. However, there is a fundamental difference: emperors in ancient China attained their leadership position through their virtue and to the detriment of previous rulers unable to provide good quality of life to their subjects (Zhao, 2019: 7). In essence, the idea that a dynasty can last in time is completely dependent on the merits of its rulers, and there is always

<sup>6</sup> The Taiping uprising (1850-1864) will have resulted in around 20 million people dead (Britannica, 2021). More recently, Henan's great famine of 1942 has led to around 3 million people dead (Ho, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> The Hundred Schools of Thought emerged in the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BC) and in the Combatant States Period (475-221 BC) (China Culture, 2021).



the possibility of loss of legitimacy and a dynasty being succeeded by another. This also applies to the entire Chinese vassal system. The overlord State, through virtuous governance, manages the relations it maintains with its vassals. The latter, in turn, offered different tributes to the Son of Heaven, though it did not mean that they could not take power in the future. Confronted with the loss of legitimacy, an alliance of vassal States had the right to rebel against the overlord (Zhao, 2019: 15). But how are these concepts still present in current Chinese leadership?

As far as Xi Jinping's presidency is concerned, the legitimacy of his governance comes in the first instance from the centralization of power in his personality. In 2018, at the 19<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CCP, the centralization of power upon him was complete from a formal point of view. In addition to the designation of *lingxiu* 领袖 (leader), Xi's thinking was also included in the constitution and is expected to remain in power beyond 2022 (Jash, 2018: 1 and 2). This outcome was made possible to a large extent by the major anti-corruption campaign that eliminated several of Xi's political opponents and by centralizing control over the Armed Forces in the president's figure (Jash, 2018: 3). In this way, President Xi consolidates his position as the supreme leader, opening the possibility to develop projects that extend Chinese power internationally, namely the Belt and Road Initiative and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

For China and Xi Jinping, this is a way of offering an alternative to the world and achieving a higher level of development through cooperation mechanisms. We note, however, that the ideas of Zhou's kingdom and Confucianism are present in the rhetoric and political actions of PRC. This statement is founded on the concepts of justice and virtue. The latter is of special prominence. For Confucius, it is a gift that man receives from Heaven and only a virtuous government can guarantee that citizens can improve themselves:

*Guide them (the common people) by virtue, keep them in line with the rites, and they will, besides having sense of shame, reform themselves.* (Confucius, II. 3: 63).

Governing by virtue will derive from the same governing system as the Zhou Dynasty. In general, the benefits should be universal, i.e., there must be a fair and equitable distribution of the gains that are obtained. For Zhao (2019), it is about maximizing earnings for everyone and not just a restricted group of people. Given the military limitations of the Zhou rulers, investment in virtuous leadership proved to be the best option proven by the longevity of this dynasty:

*The Duke of Zhou's political consciousness discovered a true political concept: rule by force is not politics, but just a way of ruling; true politics is an art that creates universal cooperation and coexistence. In that sense, Zhou's tianxia system is not merely a political experiment, but also an ideal political concept* (Zhao 2019: 9).

The same concept appears to be being promoted by the current Chinese government. In the communiqué of the 4<sup>th</sup> Plenary of the 18<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of the CCP comes the expression "combine the rule of law with the rule of virtue" (China, 2014), alluding to the Confucian concept. Justice or just actions end up deriving from the concept of virtue. Under this light, despite the importance of national interests for China, this should not be achieved by unfair means. However, these same goals, warns Kallio (2016), should



not be overlooked. The author quotes Ye Zicheng from Beijing University who highlights the importance of balancing justice and interests. In a way, the country's actions must always be in accordance with its possibilities, although it is desirable to support the weak (Kallio 2016: 5).

Above all, today's China seeks to walk a path in which it presents itself to the world as the most virtuous country, alongside the less developed, in counterpoint to the USA. The active way that PRC approaches several African, Asian, and Latin American States, promising mutual benefits, reinforces the idea that its leadership is virtuous and capable of creating the conditions to, in Xi Jinping's words, "create a community of a shared future for humanity" (Xinhuanet, 2020).

## **2.2. China's *tianxia* and Foreign Policy**

China's foreign policy has undergone several adaptations over the years. In 1990-1991, Deng Xiaoping assumed the need for "keeping a low profile"<sup>8</sup> (KLP), given China's relative weakness at the time, not wanting to raise suspicions about the real intentions of the Chinese State. Likewise, PRC also recognized the status of USA as a superpower, in addition to determining that it was not able to compete with the Americans (Yan, 2014: 155-156). What the 21<sup>st</sup> century brought, however, was a clear change of that assumption. This leads us to wonder whether we are witnessing the definition of a strategy for internationalization of *tianxia*.

Among the reasons that may be the basis of this internationalization strategy, we can highlight the worsening of mistrust of China's real intentions in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the increased tension in the framework of the territorial disputes of the South China Sea, from 2009 and 2010 (Yan, 2014: 155-156)<sup>9</sup>. In the framework of the policies that underlie the same strategy, we also highlight President Xi's coming to power, adopting a foreign policy based on "striving for achievements"<sup>10</sup> (SFA), in which China seeks to influence other States (power) through tools to increase this influence (strength). In short, it is about Beijing taking responsibility for intervening in the most important issues of humanity while behaving morally to attract more allies (Yan, 2014: 163-170).

For this stance to succeed, Chinese foreign policy has been creating and developing various political mechanisms that, although they also contain an economic component, serve to strengthen China's global position: in 2013, President Xi presented the Silk Road Economic Belt in Kazakhstan and later the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road in Indonesia (Chatzky & MacBride, 2015). During the first six years of the project, about \$575 million will have been invested, an amount that could reach more than \$8 billion (Hillman, 2018). By January 2021, 140 countries have signed memorandums of understanding to participate in the Belt and Road Initiative (Nedopil, 2021). The Comprehensive Regional Economic Partnership (RCEP) gave rise to the largest free trade area in the world, even with the absence of India (Shotaro, 2020). China's growing influence within the World Health Organization (WHO) after USA's "resignation"<sup>11</sup>, should also be highlighted as a sign of how China seeks through international standards to exert its influence.

<sup>8</sup> "To keep a low profile" or "have a discrete position" (transl. of the authors).

<sup>9</sup> The Obama administration's response to a more participatory policy in the Pacific Asia is an example of KLP's failure (Yan, 2014: 156).

<sup>10</sup> "Aspire to results" (transl. of the authors).

<sup>11</sup> Decision reversed by the Biden administration (Morales, 2021).



All these initiatives can be summarized in what Zhao (2018: 13) calls relational rationality, that is, that coexistence precedes existence. In advocating a form of universalism based on relations between States that protect the interests not only of China but also of humanity, Beijing is resonating on the *zhongyong* (中庸), a concept of Confucianism: being impossible to eliminate tension and potential conflicts, the fundamental concept is that the two halves (yin-yang, 阴阳) do not eliminate each other and contribute to the relationship between States being the main factor affecting the international environment (Qin, 2016: 40 and 44).

The internationalization of *tianxia* is reflected, therefore, in a center of power that seeks to manage the affairs under heaven, to remain as characteristics of States that are under Chinese influence and to promote interdependence and cooperation among all. However, this view is not without criticism:

First, the concentration of power in the figure of Xi Jinping is a clear distancing from the path traced by Deng Xiaoping. Fearing the possibility of the emergence of a new leader who centralizes power in his charge and creates a cult of personality (as Mao Zedong did), Deng proposed a collective leadership based on consensus, power-sharing and a succession or detonating scheme. What President Xi achieved with his reforms was a setback to the time of governance based on an undeniable figure which limits the possibilities for democratic reforms.

Secondly, and equally relevant, as the actions of the People's Liberation Army flattened themselves conditioned by Xi's leadership. Even on issues concerning the future of the Chinese army, the final decision will always be a responsibility of PRC's president (Jash, 2018).

Another key question that critics present is whether China is a faithful representation of *tianxia*. In previous paragraphs, it has been argued that the communist regime is nothing more than a continuation of the natural content that had been established by the Zhou kingdom 3000 years ago, including that *tianxia* itself is occasionally used to justify governmental actions.

Indeed, the Qing dynasty was able to manage a vast multiethnic territory. Its success was due to the followed form as the *tianxia* and its three concentric circles: the central circle was ruled directly by the emperor through the bureaucratic system; the middle circle included as regions of views of the empire governed in the name of the emperor by vassals, tribal leaders, and other hereditary titles; and the outer circle composed of the tax system in which other nations provided vassal to the emperor (Xu, 2015). However, this hierarchical system is not currently replicable, and it is desirable that the new form of *tianxia* is based on universal values, and it is not sufficient for PRC to move to a democratic regime:

*Given China's power, size, and population, once it rises it will be a great power with the capacity to dominate. Even if it becomes an "empire of freedom," it will make neighboring countries fearful, particularly small ones* (Xu, 2015).

What seems to be lacking in PRC, therefore, is a certain universalism capable of creating harmony between different ethnic groups and regions without creating tension. For Xu (2015), the exacerbated nationalism present in China today calls into question the formation of the same *tianxia*. A key aspect that exemplifies this problem is that the



nation-State causes the identity of the various minorities to be diluted in favor of the formation of a Chinese citizenship based on the Han majority. Fei Xiaotong's "unity in diversity" exemplified in the Qing administration has been replaced by policies that call into question China's territorial integrity, especially due to the separatism of Xinjiang and Tibet (Xu, 2015).

### 3. *tianxia* and Chinese Nationalism

Cabestan (2005) points out several forms of nationalism that have emerged in China in the last century and a half. The first nationalist demonstrations had arisen in the wake of the First Opium War in 1840. The author points out that the CCP, however, sought to implement its own nationalist rhetoric based on the success of the revolution and triumph of this ideology in 1949. Zheng (2019) extends this issue by considering that the May 4 movement was, in fact, the unifying moment of the Chinese nation, and it was not only a rejection of the colonial rule imposed on Chinese territory, but also of the Qing dynasty itself. This State-centered nationalism, Cabestan continues, is joined by a more revanchist and xenophobic nature that had some of its most public expressions in 2005 and 2012, for example, during the mass protests towards Japan, joined by pragmatic nationalism, derived from the Chinese economic success of recent decades.

However, what we are witnessing today is a nationalist message aimed at domestic consumption. Wong (2020) says the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic was the catalyst for most of Western criticisms directed at the CCP and the lack of transparency surrounding the pandemic crisis. The Chinese government's response has been to consider this criticism as a form of interference in China's internal affairs, which fuels the government's own rhetoric. This issue is summed to many xenophobic cases reaction towards the Chinese people themselves<sup>12</sup>, accused of being responsible for the spread of the disease. The young people who make up the Chinese diplomatic corps today are precisely, according to Wong (2020), what PRC needs to fuel this thought by defending their country's position at the expense of improving China's relations with its neighbors. The target audience is "Chinese consumers":

*Chinese nationalism is what is sold here, and the new consumers are China's COVID-battered population. (Wong, 2020).*

For the author (Wong, 2020), there are five main reasons for this change in the approach of Chinese diplomacy:

1. The adoption of a more belligerent way of doing diplomacy is seen as the most appropriate for the present situation, and a more cooperative attitude, well known in the past, has come to be seen as a weakness;
2. The determined refusal of any PRC's involvement in the origin of Covid-19 in response to Western requests for greater transparency. In the beginning, this reaction was allied to sending medical aid to different parts of the world. However, its effects do not seem to have been sufficient, as several States have not shown,

<sup>12</sup> Four young people have been convicted in France of racist insults and incitement to crime at the height of the pandemic in China (Poupon & Wojazer, 2021).



according to Chinese public opinion, sufficient gratitude for Beijing's help.

3. Nationalism is also used as a way of diverting attention from more serious problems affecting China, for example, the possible demographic collapse that the country could suffer if it does not reverse the negative growth trajectory of recent years<sup>13</sup>.
4. Public demonstrations by Chinese authorities of concern for the well-being of the population also serve to fuel this nationalist response on the part of the Chinese people. One of the most symptomatic cases concerns the leadership of Prime-minister Li Keqiang himself of the Crisis Response Team, created in the context of the pandemic.
5. Finally, Wong (2020) highlights the emergence of xenophobic attacks against Chinese citizens abroad<sup>14</sup>, giving not only reasons for a strong connection with those residing outside the country, but also for citizens to worry about the diaspora situation.

On the other hand, the coming to power of Xi Jinping has also given way to a growing reinforcement of ideological rhetoric linked to nationalism. During the eras of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, PRC showed signs of greater political openness and less ideological rigidity, as Sahoo (2021) said. With Xi's presidency, the country has returned to its ideological base this time centered on the figure of the president himself as a providential leader in the face of what are external threats to China's rise. Document 9, which went public in 2013, explains how Xi perceives those who endanger the Middle Empire and communism, namely liberal democracy, the defense of human rights and universal values, or the very interpretation of historical events such as the Tiananmen Square massacre (China File ed., 2013)<sup>15</sup>. Criticism from abroad around Xinjiang, Hong Kong and the Covid-19 pandemic is seen, in general, as an external aggression that seek to tarnish China's image internationally. In celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the CCP, President Xi praised the Chinese people's efforts to build PRC, as well as efforts to achieve China's complete unification with Taiwan. However, the great highlight of the speech were the words referring to external threats:

*We Chinese are a people who uphold justice and are not intimidated by threats of force. As a nation, we have a strong sense of pride and confidence. We have never bullied, oppressed, or subjugated the people of any other country, and we never will. By the same token, we will never allow any foreign force to bully, oppress, or subjugate us. Anyone who would attempt to do so will find themselves on a collision course with a great wall of steel forged by over 1.4 billion Chinese people (Xi, 2021).*

<sup>13</sup> The recent Three-Child Policy aims to reverse this trend. The government fears that active and older populations (EAF, 2021) will reach levels that undermine the country's ability to achieve its goals by 2049, the so-called Global China Initiative 2049 (ODI, 2021).

<sup>14</sup> The "Chinese virus," as then-President Donald Trump called it, was one of the determining factors in the rise of racial hate crimes against the Chinese community in the USA (Tavernise & Oppel Jr., 2021).

<sup>15</sup> To control external influence, the government banned distance teaching of English language with teachers abroad to under 15 years old students (Luo, 2021a). This measure includes measures from different provincial governments aimed at ending the use of foreign manuals in schools. These measures affect, in the case of Beijing, students from 1<sup>st</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> years of schooling (Luo, 2021b).



This is a time when Xi, through an attack on the political stance of several Western States towards China, speaks to his supporters in the country. Overall, by adopting an open-defense stance of China's interests using aggressive and confrontational rhetoric, it ends up appeasing the internal voices that call for greater assertiveness on the part of PRC.

However, some believe that this exacerbated nationalism has more negative than positive consequences for Chinese foreign policy. Recently, there has been an attempt to mitigate some rhetoric given the fear of leading to an isolation of China on the international scene. "Wolf-warrior diplomacy", crucial in the confrontation with the Trump administration, is now regarded by some sectors of Chinese politics as detrimental to the Chinese image. Zhang (2021) states that it is advisable for the country that its leadership adopt a less aggressive language on the international scene:

*China would be unwise to surrender to such temptations, however. Now is not the time to get more forceful in the South China Sea, demand concessions from major trading partners, aggressively reinvigorate the Belt and Road project or engage in a nationalist diplomatic offensive against Western critics. Quite the opposite: China should be pivoting to a quieter, softer foreign policy (Zhang, 2021).*

It is a matter of great relevance, since within developed countries, Beijing's stance in the face of criticism directed at it has only contributed to the deterioration of Sino-Western relations. For example, the China-EU investment agreement is in effect and New Zealand has drawn some criticism over what happened in Xinjiang and Hong Kong (Meyers & Bradsher, 2021)<sup>16</sup>. In fact, there is a clear understanding that conducting an aggressive rhetoric with nationalist slogans could be counterproductive at a time when China is seeking to achieve a status that will allow it to confront Americans.

### **Final considerations**

As defined here, *tianxia* is not sinocentric and can be replicated by any center of power capable of leading the lands beneath heaven. This is a valid argument, as it is not known for sure whether PRC is respecting the basic presuppositions of this millenary concept. If it is true that it seeks to deal with its partners equally and without ostracizing those who follow political regimes other than their own, the present form of *tianxia* followed by Beijing seems more based on nationalism than on universal ideals that can be followed by humanity. China's concern to defend its territorial integrity without accepting any kind of external criticism reveals that there are ideological differences that clash.

Whatever international scenario is set, the study of *tianxia* helps us to understand some of the historical foundations of what PRC is today. The attempt to organize the world within a sphere of values, an inclusive system that promotes mutual benefit, was the ideal model to be followed by the different dynasties.

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<sup>16</sup> Jacinda Ardern's change of speech is of particular importance, given that her country has been repeatedly praised by the Chinese authorities for its responsible policies (Meyers & Bradsher, 2021).



Regarding Xi Jinping's presidency, the legitimacy of his governance comes, in the first instance, from the centralization of power in his figure, which is not new in local politics, just as the presence of a system that seeks to administer the States surrounding the central power is also not new. The ideas of Zhou's kingdom and Confucianism are also present in the rhetoric and political actions of PRC. However, what we have today is a nation-State that goes beyond its natural area of effect, able to influence other countries to follow its leadership and promote initiatives that favor its long-term interests. Its position as leader became even more evident during this pandemic when we initially came across the failures in the American and European responses. What this crisis shows us is that China can potentially take over the world, with the West being responsible for looking after its interests while cooperating and demonstrating that it remains a system of universal values with sufficient potential and capacity for attraction.

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