

Rethinking Empire from a Chinese Concept 'All-under-Heaven' (Tian-xia) Abridged

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The Concept of 'All-under-Heaven'

In contract to the western concept of empire, China has a three thousand year-old traditional concept, 'All-under-Heaven', very closely relevant to the *Idea* of empire...The term 'All-under-Heaven' (Tian-xia,), found in almost the oldest Chinese texts, means firstly the...whole world under heaven.¹ It is almost equivalent to 'the universe' or 'the world' in western languages. Its second meaning is the 'hearts of all peoples', or the 'general will of the people'...All-Under-Heaven...consists of both the earth and the people. Consequently, an emperor does not really enjoy his *empire of All-under-Heaven*, even if he conquers an extraordinary vastness of land, unless he receives the sincere and true support from the people on the land.

Philosopher Xun-zi (313BC- 238BC) said in his essay 'On kingship and supremacy':

Enjoying All-under-Heaven does not mean to receive the lands from people who are forced to give, but to satisfy all people with a good way of governance.

The ethical and/or political meaning, is... a universal system for the world, a utopia of the world-as-one-family...The ideal of All-under-Heaven (is different) from the pattern of the traditional military empire, for instance the Roman Empire...The defined Empire of All-under-Heaven does *not* mean a country³ at all...it expects a *world/society* instead of nation/states. All-under-Heaven is a deep concept of the world, defined by...the geographical, psychological, and political worlds.,,,

...In Western political theory, the biggest political unit is found to be a country or nation/state, while in Chinese theory it is the framework of 'world/society'...Chinese political philosophy defines a political order in which the world is primary, whereas the nation/state is primary in western philosophy. Certainly, westerners do think

¹ Two thousand years ago, the popular Chinese imagination of the so called 'All-under-Heaven' was interesting in its square division of the world into 'nine regions' () spreading from the central region to the rest in eight directions. And the land consisting of the nine regions was the area of ancient China while the oldest capital city in China is rightly in the central region. But Zou Yan, one of China's earliest geographers, had a much wider sight of the land that was thought to comprise 81 'nine regions'* reckoned by multiplying by nine* and he said that ancient China was 'just the one of the eighty-ones' in the world. See Shima Qian, 91BC, p. 2344.

about the world, but...the world (is) international alliances or unions of nation/states, not going beyond the framework of nation/states...

All-under-Heaven should be understood together with another closely related concept the '*Son of Heaven*'. The *Son of Heaven*, an emperor, is entitled to 'enjoy his reign of the world...Of most importance is that a *Son of Heaven* *does* rather than *is* . In other words, one...has to be reconfirmed the *Son of Heaven* if and only if there is evidence to justify his qualification...(by being) being supported by the peoples.²...The Chinese theory of political legitimacy allows two ways to prove the rightness of the reign: one...is to save peoples from a terrible situation when, and only when, welcomed by most of the people* and the other is...to keep the world in the order that most of the people want.

According to Confucius...we do not say that a king, an institution or a political system *is* better but rather *does* better as evidenced. However, what is considered evidence in the Chinese way is not always based on statistics, a democratic election, but rather...observation of social trends or preferences, and especially by the obvious fact that people autonomously (of their own will) choose to follow and pledge their allegiance, instead of voting for one of several...politicians...The autonomy of people *to follow or not to follow* is regarded as a fundamental question in Chinese political philosophy as the matter of 'people's heart'....

...The unspoken theory is that most people do not really know what is best for them, but that the elite do, so the elite ought genuinely to decide for the people. ...

...Laozi, the founder of Taoism, pointed out:

a king could rule a state by his orders, win a war by strategies, but enjoy All-under- Heaven only by doing nothing to decrease the freedom and to deny the interests of people. (see Laozi, *Tao Te Ching* , c.500BC)

The appeal to the evidence of the people's support had become the justified reason for another political group to launch a revolution, a 'rewriting of the mandate of heaven' in Chinese terms. In fact the justification of revolution has become a 4000- year-old tradition....

...The Chinese system of families, states and All-under-Heaven, which differs fundamentally from the western system of individuals, nations and internationals, is often criticized for its neglect of the individual as well as individual rights, but this is a misunderstanding of Chinese philosophy and a poor understanding of political

² Mencius argued that people were of greater weight than the government and the support from people was the final confirmation of the reign. And he insisted that the king would lose his reign if he lost his people's support, and he lost his people's support because he was against the people's hearts. And *Interpretation of Rites* also said: 'enjoying the reign when receiving the support from the people, and losing the reign when losing the support of the people'

society. There is no Chinese denial of the value of the individual, but rather a denial of the individual to be a political foundation or starting point, because the political makes sense only when it deals with 'relations' rather than 'individuals', and the political is meant to speak for co-existence rather than a single existence. In a very Chinese way, politics aims at a good society of peaceful 'order', which is the first condition for any possible happiness of all, and at keeping a society from the 'disorder' that destroys all possibilities of individual happiness. ..

...The empire of All-under-Heaven highlights the problem of time rather than of space, that is, the duration (of the reign measures the success of the emperor) rather than...actual territorial conquest...

..Some scholars have argued that the general Chinese ethical principle appears the same as the western Golden Rule...The Bible's golden rule, 'do unto others as you would have them do to you' sounds promising, but it would encounter challenges and difficulties when other hearts are taken into account. The...other heart might reasonably want a different life....The Chinese ethical principle thus runs: 'let others reach their goals if you reach yours'. It is easy to see the subtle difference between the western and Chinese rules....Chinese philosophy found a solution in the highlighting of voluntariness. The 2000-year-old *Interpretation of Rites* says...

It is proper to learn values from others whereas unjust to impose one's values onto the others. Or to say, the values are to be learnt by rather than to be taught to the others.³