

Shu Liang<sup>1</sup> , Karlygash K. Usserova<sup>2\*</sup> , Zhiger D. Anuash<sup>1</sup> , Fatima T. Kukeyeva<sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>*Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Almaty, Kazakhstan;*

<sup>2</sup>*Narxoz University, Almaty, Kazakhstan*

(\*Corresponding author's e-mail: [k.usserova@gmail.com](mailto:k.usserova@gmail.com))

## Revival of the «Tianxia» Concept in Historical Perspective: Ideological Reconstruction and Diplomatic Legitimation of the Chinese Vision of the World Order

The article examines how the traditional Chinese concept of Tianxia («All Under Heaven») has been reinterpreted in contemporary Chinese political thought and incorporated into China's foreign policy discourse. The aim of the study is to determine how this classical moral and philosophical concept has been adapted to contemporary international realities and transformed into one of the normative instruments through which China justifies its vision of the international order. The methodological framework combines historical-philosophical analysis, a comparative examination of different models of world order, and qualitative discourse analysis of the works of contemporary Chinese scholars, official documents, and major policy speeches by the leadership of the People's Republic of China. The analysis demonstrates that the contemporary interpretation of Tianxia does not imply a return to the traditional imperial system. Rather, it involves reinterpretation of selected elements of the classical concept in light of contemporary political conditions and global challenges. In this context, the emphasis shifts from a hierarchical organization of the world to the principles of interstate interconnectedness, harmonious coexistence, common development, mutual benefit, and shared responsibility for addressing global challenges. At the same time, the traditional logic has not been entirely abandoned. The modern interpretation of Tianxia retains elements of normative hierarchy, as China is portrayed as a state capable of providing normative guidance and conceptual approaches to the reform of the global governance system. The scientific novelty of the article lies in its comprehensive examination of the Tianxia concept at three interconnected levels: the classical philosophical tradition, contemporary academic interpretations, and the official diplomatic discourse of the People's Republic of China. This approach makes it possible to trace the continuity between the historical meaning of the concept and its contemporary political interpretation, while also identifying the mechanisms through which China's traditional intellectual heritage has been adapted to the objectives of its foreign policy. The study concludes that, under contemporary conditions, Tianxia functions primarily as a discursive and normative construct that provides the value-based foundation of China's approach to world order rather than as a fully developed institutional model for organizing international relations.

**Keywords:** Tianxia, Chinese political philosophy, Chinese foreign policy, world order, diplomatic legitimation, Community with a Shared Future for Mankind, global governance, normative order, Sino-centric order, ideological reconstruction.

Шу Лян<sup>1</sup>, Карлыгаш К. Усорова<sup>2</sup>, Жігер Д. Ануаш<sup>1</sup>, Фатима Т. Кукеева<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Ал-Фараби атындағы Қазақ ұлттық университеті, Алматы, Қазақстан;*

<sup>2</sup>*Нархоз университеті, Алматы, Қазақстан*

## Тарихи перспективадағы «Тянься» тұжырымдамасының жаңғыруы: Қытайдың әлемдік тәртіп жөніндегі көзқарасын идеологиялық қайта құру және дипломатиялық заңдастырылуы

Мақала дәстүрлі қытайлық «Тянься» («Барлығы аспаннан астында») тұжырымдамасының Қытайдың қазіргі саяси ойында қалай қайта пайымдалып, сыртқы саяси дискурста қалай қолданылып отырғанын зерттеуге арналған. Зерттеудің мақсаты — осы классикалық моральдік-философиялық идеяның қазіргі халықаралық жағдайда қандай жолмен бейімделіп, Қытайдың әлемдік тәртіп туралы көзқарасын негіздеуге қызмет ететін нормативтік құралдардың біріне айналғанын анықтау. Зерттеудің әдіснамалық негізін тарихи-философиялық талдау, әлемдік тәртіптің әртүрлі үлгілерін салыстырмалы зерттеу, сондай-ақ қазіргі қытайлық зерттеушілердің еңбектеріне, ресми құжаттарға және Қытай Халық Республикасы басшылығының бағдарламалық сөздеріне жүргізілген сапалық дискурстық талдау құрайды. Жүргізілген талдау «Тянься» тұжырымдамасының қазіргі заманғы түсіндірмесі дәстүрлі империялық жүйеге қайта оралуды көздемейтінін көрсетеді. Керісінше, классикалық тұжырымдаманың жекелеген элементтері қазіргі саяси жағдайлар мен жаһандық сын-қатерлерді

ескере отырып қайта пайымдалады. Бұл ретте назар әлемнің иерархиялық ұйымдастыруынан мемлекеттердің өзара байланыстылығы, үйлесімді қатар өмір сүруі, ортақ даму, өзара тиімділік және жаһандық мәселелерді шешудегі ұжымдық жауапкершілік идеяларына ауысады. Сонымен қатар дәстүрлі логикадан толықтай бас тарту байқалмайды. Тяньсяның қазіргі түсіндірмесінде нормативтік иерархияның жекелеген элементтері сақталады, өйткені Қытай жаһандық басқару жүйесін реформалауға бағытталған құндылықтық бағдарлар мен тұжырымдамалық тәсілдерді ұсына алатын мемлекет ретінде қарастырылады. Зерттеудің ғылыми жаңалығы — «Тянься» тұжырымдамасын өзара байланысты үш деңгейде: классикалық философиялық дәстүр, қазіргі академиялық интерпретациялар және Қытай Халық Республикасының ресми дипломатиялық дискурсы арқылы кешенді зерттеумен байланысты. Мұндай тәсіл тұжырымдаманың тарихи мазмұны мен оның қазіргі саяси түсіндірмесінің арасындағы сабақтастықты айқындауға, сондай-ақ дәстүрлі зияткерлік мұраны Қытайдың сыртқы саясатының міндеттеріне бейімдеу тетіктерін анықтауға мүмкіндік береді. Зерттеу нәтижесінде қазіргі жағдайда Тянься халықаралық қатынастарды ұйымдастырудың дайын институционалдық үлгісі емес, керісінше Қытайдың әлемдік тәртіпке қатысты ұсынымының негізін қалыптастыратын дискурстық-нормативтік құрылым ретінде қызмет етеді деген қорытынды жасалды.

*Кілт сөздер:* Тянься, Қытайдың саяси философиясы, Қытайдың сыртқы саясаты, әлемдік тәртіп, дипломатиялық заңдастыру, адамзаттың ортақ тағдыры қауымдастығы, жаһандық басқару, нормативтік тәртіп, Қытайорталық әлемдік тәртіп, идеологиялық реконструкция.

Шу Лян<sup>1</sup>, Карлыгаш К. Усерова<sup>2</sup>, Жігер Д. Ануаш<sup>1</sup>, Фатима Т. Кукеева<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Казахский национальный университет имени аль-Фараби, Алматы, Казахстан;

<sup>2</sup>Университет Нархоз, Алматы, Казахстан

### **Возрождение концепции «Тянься» в исторической перспективе: идеологическая реконструкция и дипломатическая легитимация китайского видения мирового порядка**

Статья посвящена исследованию того, как традиционная китайская концепция Тянься («Всё под небесами») переосмысливается в современной политической мысли Китая и используется во внешнеполитическом дискурсе. Цель исследования состоит в том, чтобы определить, каким образом эта классическая морально-философская идея была адаптирована к современным международным реалиям и превратилась в один из нормативных инструментов, посредством которых обосновывается китайское видение мирового порядка. Методологическую основу работы составляют историко-философский анализ, сравнительное исследование различных моделей мироустройства, а также качественный дискурсивный анализ трудов современных китайских исследователей, официальных документов и программных выступлений руководства КНР. Проведённый анализ показывает, что современная интерпретация Тянься не предполагает возвращения к традиционной имперской системе. Напротив, речь идёт о переосмыслении отдельных элементов классической концепции с учётом современных политических условий и глобальных вызовов. При этом акцент переносится с иерархической организации мира на идеи взаимосвязанности государств, гармоничного сосуществования, общего развития, взаимной выгоды и коллективной ответственности за решение глобальных проблем. Вместе с тем полностью отказаться от традиционной логики не удаётся. В современной трактовке Тянься сохраняются элементы нормативной иерархии, поскольку Китай рассматривается как государство, способное предлагать ценностные ориентиры и концептуальные подходы к реформированию системы глобального управления. Научная новизна исследования заключается в комплексном рассмотрении концепции Тянься на трёх взаимосвязанных уровнях: классической философской традиции, современных академических интерпретаций и официального дипломатического дискурса Китайской Народной Республики. Такой подход позволяет проследить преемственность между историческим содержанием концепции и её современной политической интерпретацией, а также выявить механизмы адаптации традиционного интеллектуального наследия к задачам внешней политики Китая. Сделан вывод, что в современных условиях Тянься выступает прежде всего как дискурсивно-нормативная конструкция, формирующая ценностную основу китайского подхода к мировому порядку, а не как завершённая институциональная модель организации международных отношений.

*Ключевые слова:* Тянься, китайская политическая философия, внешняя политика Китая, мировой порядок, дипломатическая легитимация, сообщество единой судьбы человечества, глобальное управление, нормативный порядок, синоцентричный мировой порядок, идеологическая реконструкция.

### *Introduction*

The contemporary transformation of the world order is accompanied by a crisis in the universality of Western concepts of international relations and a growing interest in non-Western intellectual traditions. In this context, China is not only expanding its economic and political presence but also seeking to strengthen its own capacity to formulate norms, concepts, and visions of a just international order. One of the most significant intellectual resources in this process has become the concept of Tianxia — «All under Heaven».

Tianxia simultaneously refers to ancient Chinese cosmology, political philosophy, historical practices of imperial governance, and modern debates about the global order. It is precisely the polysemy of the concept that makes it attractive for modern ideological reconstruction. It allows for linking the Chinese civilizational tradition with pressing issues of global governance, including the deficit of international coordination, great power competition, climate change, uneven development, and the crisis of trust in international institutions.

However, directly equating the classical Tianxia, the philosophical theory of Zhao Tingyang, and the official foreign policy line of the PRC is methodologically incorrect. These levels are connected but do not coincide. Classical Tianxia was part of a hierarchical imperial order; modern Tianxia theory is an academic reconstruction; the official discourse of the PRC utilizes certain motifs of the tradition but articulates them through modern categories of sovereignty, development, multilateralism, and a community with a shared future for mankind.

The research question of the article is formulated as follows: how has the traditional concept of Tianxia been reinterpreted and integrated into contemporary Chinese foreign policy discourse to legitimize China's role in shaping the world order?

The main hypothesis is that the modern revival of Tianxia represents a selective ideological reconstruction. During this reconstruction, historically hierarchical elements of the concept are partially neutralized, while its universalist and relational components are used to justify a more inclusive model of global governance. However, simultaneously, a soft hierarchy is maintained: China acts not as a formal imperial center, but as a source of normative initiatives, economic connectivity, and civilizational leadership.

The scientific novelty of the study lies in three propositions. First, a clear distinction is made between classical Tianxia, modern academic theory, and official diplomatic discourse. Second, the mechanisms of ideological transformation are identified: universalization, selective forgetting, discursive bridging, and institutionalization. Third, the dual nature of modern Tianxia is demonstrated: it serves both as a critique of the state-centric order and as a means of legitimizing China's central role.

### *Materials and Methods*

The source base comprises classical texts of Chinese philosophy in modern academic editions; the works of Zhao Tingyang, Qin Yaqing, Yan Xuetong, and Gan Chunsong; as well as party and state documents of the PRC: the report to the 20<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the CPC, the CPC Constitution, the PRC Constitution, and official formulations of the concept of a community with a shared future for mankind. Such a corpus allows for tracing the transition from philosophical idea to political language, but it does not provide grounds to automatically consider all PRC initiatives as direct embodiments of Tianxia. Therefore, the article distinguishes between intellectual community, discursive borrowing, and political instrumentalization.

The research is based on an interdisciplinary approach that integrates the history of political thought, international relations theory, and foreign policy discourse analysis.

Historical-philosophical analysis is used to reconstruct the original content of Tianxia in the pre-Qin and imperial traditions. Its task is not to provide a complete history of the concept, but to identify those elements that later became the resource for modern ideological adaptation: universalism, moral legitimacy, relationality, hierarchy, and the perception of the world as an integral political space.

Comparative analysis is applied to contrast Tianxia and the Westphalian model not as opposites of «harmony» and «conflict», but as distinct principles of political legitimacy. The Westphalian system relies on territorial sovereignty, the legal equality of states, and formalized institutions. Historically, Tianxia was predicated on a moral-civilizational hierarchy, mutual obligations between the center and the periphery, and the perception of the world as a unified normative space.

Qualitative discourse analysis aims to identify the semantic links between modern academic interpretations of Tianxia and official concepts of Chinese foreign policy. The analytical categories include: «harmony without uniformity», «common development», «mutual benefit», «absence of the external order»,

«community with shared future for mankind», «rejection of hegemony», «multilateralism», and «civilizational diversity».

### *Results*

#### *Tianxia as a Historical-Philosophical Model*

##### *Moral-Cosmological Foundations*

The contemporary revival of the concept of Tianxia («All under Heaven») cannot be fully understood without considering its historical evolution within the Chinese political and philosophical tradition. Although today the concept is frequently associated with debates on China's vision of global governance, its intellectual origins date back more than three millennia and are deeply rooted in the political culture of ancient China.

The earliest understanding of Tianxia emerged during the Western Zhou period (1046-771 BCE), when it functioned as a cosmological and political principle defining the legitimate organization of the known world [1]. At that time, political authority derived from the doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven (Tianming), according to which the ruler governed as the Son of Heaven (Tianzi) [2]. Consequently, Tianxia did not simply denote a geographical territory but represented a universal moral and political order encompassing all civilized peoples. Membership in this order depended less on territorial boundaries than on cultural affiliation and recognition of a common normative system. Political legitimacy was therefore understood primarily as an ethical rather than coercive phenomenon [3].

Confucian political philosophy further developed this understanding by placing moral virtue at the center of governance. According to Confucian thought, the stability of political order depended on the ruler's ability to govern through ethical example rather than military coercion [4]. In this framework, surrounding polities were expected to acknowledge the authority of the imperial center voluntarily because of its moral superiority [5]. Consequently, the classical Tianxia worldview differed fundamentally from the modern Westphalian conception of international relations. Instead of sovereign equality among states, it envisioned a hierarchically organized political community in which relationships between the center and the periphery were structured through ritual obligations, cultural affinity, and reciprocal responsibilities.

During the imperial period, these philosophical principles gradually acquired an institutional dimension through the tributary system. Contrary to frequent interpretations portraying it as a mechanism of territorial domination, the tributary order functioned primarily as a diplomatic framework regulating political recognition, commercial exchanges, and interstate communication. Neighboring states generally retained their domestic autonomy while symbolically acknowledging the superior status of the Chinese emperor. Thus, imperial Tianxia should be understood less as an empire in the territorial sense than as a civilization-centered model of regional order founded upon political hierarchy and cultural legitimacy [6].

The nineteenth century marked a decisive turning point in the evolution of the concept. Following the Opium Wars and China's incorporation into the Westphalian international system, the traditional worldview based on hierarchical universalism gradually gave way to the principles of sovereign equality, fixed territorial borders, and international legal reciprocity. Throughout much of the twentieth century, Tianxia largely disappeared from political discourse and survived mainly as a historical and philosophical category. During the Maoist period, China's foreign policy was instead framed by Marxist-Leninist ideology, revolutionary internationalism, and anti-imperialist narratives rather than classical political philosophy.

Renewed scholarly and political interest in Tianxia emerged only in the early twenty-first century, coinciding with China's growing economic capabilities and expanding international influence. This revival reflected not merely an attempt to rediscover traditional philosophical thought but also a broader search for indigenous theoretical foundations capable of explaining China's role in an evolving international order. Among contemporary Chinese scholars, Zhao Tingyang has offered the most influential reinterpretation of Tianxia, conceptualizing it as a normative model of global governance rather than a historical description of imperial institutions. His approach shifts the analytical focus from sovereign states to the world as a single political community whose stability depends upon inclusiveness, shared responsibility, and the reconciliation of competing interests. In contrast to the ancient hierarchical order, the contemporary interpretation does not advocate the restoration of imperial institutions but proposes an alternative normative framework for managing global interdependence.

Nevertheless, the modern revival of Tianxia remains the subject of considerable academic debate. Chinese scholars generally interpret the concept as an intellectual resource for constructing a more inclusive model of international governance that emphasizes cooperation, mutual benefit, and civilizational dialogue.

Western scholars, by contrast, often question whether the universalist language of Tianxia conceals a revised form of Sino-centric political hierarchy. William A. Callahan, for example, argues that contemporary interpretations of Tianxia should be understood not only as philosophical reflection but also as normative projects articulating China's preferred vision of the world order. From this perspective, the concept performs both an ideational and a political function by contributing to the international legitimation of China's expanding global role.

This divergence of interpretation suggests that Tianxia should neither be reduced to an historical relic nor viewed exclusively as an ideological instrument of contemporary Chinese diplomacy. Rather, it represents an evolving political concept whose meaning has continuously adapted to changing historical contexts. While preserving the traditional aspiration for a universal and harmonious order, its contemporary reinterpretation incorporates the realities of globalization, economic interdependence, and multipolarity. For this reason, Tianxia increasingly serves as one of the principal intellectual foundations through which contemporary China articulates its vision of international order and justifies its expanding participation in global governance [7].

#### *Imperial Institutionalization and the Problem of Hierarchy*

After the unification of China under the Qin and Han dynasties, Tianxia transformed from a predominantly moral-philosophical ideal into the basis of imperial political legitimation. The emperor, regarded as the Son of Heaven, occupied a central position in the cosmological and political order. A centralized bureaucracy, an administrative system, and the standardization of laws and measures provided the practical institutionalization of this order [8].

In its external dimension, Tianxia upheld the image of China as a civilizational center. Tributary relations, investiture, diplomatic exchange, and trade created a concentric structure of interaction with neighboring political entities. This system was not reduced exclusively to coercion, nor was it entirely voluntary or egalitarian. It combined cultural influence, material incentives, symbolic subordination, and, when necessary, military force.

Therefore, the juxtaposition of «peaceful Tianxia» and «violent Western colonialism» is overly simplified. Historical Tianxia contained its own forms of political and cultural hierarchy. Its difference from European colonialism lay rather in a different structure of legitimation: not in formal territorial sovereignty and colonial administration, but in the recognition of a civilizational center, ritual dependence, and moral superiority.

This contradictory legacy is of fundamental importance for modernity. It explains why Tianxia can be simultaneously interpreted as a resource for universalism and as a potential form of Sinocentrism.

#### *Modern Academic Reconstruction of Tianxia*

##### *The Theory of Zhao Tingyang*

The most systematic modern interpretation was proposed by Zhao Tingyang. In his work «The Tianxia System» he considers the world, rather than the national state, as the primary unit of political analysis [9]. In his view, the Westphalian system is capable of regulating relations between states but does not create a genuine world political community. Global problems remain «external» to national interests, and thus states lack sufficient incentives to solve them jointly.

Zhao identifies three principles of modern Tianxia. The first is «the absence of the external»: all peoples and territories should be viewed as internal participants in a unified world order. The second is relational rationality, according to which the stability of relationships and the minimization of mutual harm are more important than unilateral maximization of benefits. The third is Confucian improvement, suggesting that a political decision should bring positive outcomes to all participants.

The strength of this concept lies in its critique of methodological individualism and state-centric logic. However, its weakness lies in the ambiguity of its institutional mechanism. It is unclear who establishes the common norms, how compliance is ensured, and how the moral center is prevented from morphing into a political hegemony. Therefore, Zhao's theory represents primarily a normative philosophy and intellectual experiment, rather than a ready-made blueprint for a world constitution.

##### *Relational Theory and Moral Realism*

Qin Yaqing's relational theory complements the modern reconstruction of Tianxia by treating relations and processes as the primary elements of international reality [10]. Unlike approaches based on predefined and autonomous actors, relational theory emphasizes that identities and interests are formed in the process of interaction. This aligns with the logic of Tianxia, in which order is built not only on formal institutions but also on stable relations and mutual obligations.

Yan Xuetong, developing moral realism, emphasizes the importance of political leadership and strategic authority [11]. His theory is closer to the realist tradition and is not identical to Tianxia; however, it also draws on classical Chinese thought to explain contemporary international politics. Collectively, these approaches demonstrate the formation of a Chinese theoretical space in which morality, relations, and leadership are treated as independent categories of the world order.

It is important, however, not to amalgamate these into a single official doctrine. They differ in their objects of analysis, normative foundations, and attitudes toward power. Their significance for PRC foreign policy lies primarily in expanding the intellectual vocabulary through which China can articulate its own visions of the international order.

### *Discussion*

#### *From Political Philosophy to Official Foreign Policy: Competing Interpretations of Tianxia*

The reinterpretation of Tianxia as a component of China's contemporary foreign policy discourse has become one of the central issues in current debates on Chinese political thought and international relations. Although there is broad agreement that the concept has undergone substantial transformation, scholars disagree over the nature and purpose of this process. Zhao Tingyang regards the revival of Tianxia as an attempt to reconstruct the normative foundation of Chinese political philosophy in response to the challenges of global governance beyond the Westphalian paradigm [12]. Callahan, by contrast, interprets the renewed appeal to Tianxia less as a philosophical project than as a discursive strategy that legitimizes China's preferred vision of international order and its expanding global role [13]. Qin Yaqing offers a different perspective, emphasizing relationality and coexistence rather than hierarchy as the defining characteristics of the Chinese approach to international politics [14].

The analysis presented in this article suggests that each of these interpretations captures an important dimension of the contemporary revival of Tianxia, yet none fully explains the way in which the concept has been translated from classical political philosophy into the language of official diplomacy. Rather than representing either a straightforward continuation of the traditional worldview or a purely instrumental political narrative, the contemporary reinterpretation is shaped through a combination of contemporary discursive practices.

One of the most significant of these practices is universalization. Concepts that originally referred to the Mandate of Heaven, the ruler's moral authority, and China's civilizational centrality are reformulated as universal principles of shared security, common development, and global responsibility. This tendency broadly supports Zhao Tingyang's argument that elements of classical Chinese thought have been reinterpreted to address contemporary global challenges [12]. At the same time, the present analysis indicates that the transformation extends beyond philosophical reinterpretation. The political function of Tianxia has also changed, enabling the concept to operate within the normative vocabulary of contemporary international relations rather than within the hierarchical framework from which it originated.

An equally important feature of this transformation is selective reinterpretation. Official discourse largely omits notions historically associated with the tributary order, the distinction between the Chinese and non-Chinese worlds, and the privileged position of the Son of Heaven. Instead, Chinese diplomatic documents consistently emphasize harmony, mutual benefit, civilizational diversity, and opposition to hegemonism. These observations only partially confirm Western interpretations that regard Tianxia primarily as a reformulated expression of Sino-centric hierarchy [13]. While the historical logic of hierarchy remains relevant for understanding Tianxia, it is largely absent from the explicit language through which contemporary Chinese diplomacy presents itself.

A third mechanism may be described as discursive bridging. Rather than reproducing the vocabulary of classical political philosophy, official discourse links selected Tianxia principles with contemporary concepts such as the Community with a Shared Future for Mankind, «harmony without uniformity» and «extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits». Such conceptual linkage creates a sense of historical continuity without preserving the institutional structure of the traditional Tianxia system. Continuity therefore exists primarily at the level of normative ideas, whereas the institutional and political context has been fundamentally redefined.

The final mechanism is institutionalization. Once the concept of a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind was incorporated into the Constitution of the Communist Party of China in 2017 [15] and subsequently into the Constitution of the People's Republic of China in 2018 [16], it acquired the status of an officially endorsed principle of Chinese foreign policy rather than remaining a political slogan or academic

proposition. This process was reinforced in the report delivered at the Twentieth National Congress of the Communist Party of China, where the concept was explicitly embedded within the country's broader diplomatic strategy [17]. The institutionalization of these ideas demonstrates that the contemporary reconstruction of Tianxia is no longer confined to academic debate. It has become an integral element of China's official foreign policy discourse, providing an ideological framework through which the country's international role is increasingly articulated.

*Community with a Shared Future for Mankind as the Normative Link*

Whether the concept of a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind should be regarded as a contemporary expression of Tianxia remains one of the most contested issues in the literature. Chinese scholars generally interpret the concept as a practical extension of traditional Chinese political philosophy and as evidence of the continuing relevance of Tianxia to contemporary global governance [12]. Many Western authors, however, dispute this interpretation, arguing that the modern concept differs fundamentally from its historical predecessor because it explicitly accepts sovereign equality and operates within the institutional framework of the existing international system rather than seeking to replace it [13].

The evidence examined in this study suggests that both perspectives capture important aspects of the relationship but neither fully explains it. The concept of a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind should not be viewed as a direct continuation of classical Tianxia. Instead, it functions as a normative link through which selected philosophical principles are reformulated for contemporary diplomatic practice. Ideas of interconnectedness, harmony, and collective responsibility remain central, whereas the hierarchical institutional logic of the historical Tianxia order is deliberately excluded. What is preserved, therefore, is not the traditional political structure itself but its normative orientation toward an integrated vision of international order.

*Diplomatic Initiatives: Between Normative Continuity and Political Practice*

A similar debate concerns the relationship between Tianxia and China's major international initiatives. Some Chinese scholars interpret the Belt and Road Initiative, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, BRICS, the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, and the Global Civilization Initiative as practical expressions of Tianxia-inspired principles. Other researchers adopt a more cautious position, emphasizing that these initiatives differ considerably in their institutional arrangements, strategic objectives, and patterns of participation, making it difficult to regard them as components of a single political project.

The findings presented here are closer to the latter interpretation. None of these initiatives represents an institutional embodiment of Tianxia in the historical sense. Nevertheless, they share a common normative orientation that emphasizes connectivity, dialogue, inclusiveness, and collective development. Taken together, these initiatives reinforce China's self-presentation as a supporter of a more pluralistic international order while simultaneously strengthening the legitimacy of its expanding international role.

At the same time, the normative aspirations reflected in official discourse should not obscure the political and economic realities within which these initiatives operate. Their implementation is shaped by differences in economic capacity, bargaining power, and national priorities. As a result, the rhetoric of harmony and mutual benefit coexists with structural asymmetries that influence the distribution of costs, benefits, and political influence. This suggests that contemporary Chinese diplomacy combines an inclusive normative discourse with forms of soft hierarchy that emerge not through formal political domination but through unequal capabilities and asymmetric interdependence.

*Main Contradictions of the Contemporary Reconstruction of Tianxia*

Despite the growing interest in Tianxia as a possible conceptual foundation for China's vision of global order, its contemporary reconstruction remains characterized by several unresolved tensions. These contradictions reflect the difficulty of adapting a historically specific political-philosophical tradition to the institutional and normative environment of modern international relations.

One of the central tensions concerns the relationship between universal aspirations and cultural particularity. Chinese scholars often emphasize the universal relevance of Tianxia as a philosophy based on harmony, interconnectedness, and shared responsibility [9, 18]. At the same time, the conceptual foundations of the idea remain closely associated with Chinese intellectual history, Confucian ethics, and a particular understanding of political legitimacy [3, 8]. This creates a fundamental question regarding whether a concept rooted in one civilizational tradition can acquire genuinely universal significance without imposing specific cultural assumptions on other societies [13, 19].

Another important contradiction emerges from the coexistence of the principles of equality and hierarchy. Contemporary Chinese diplomatic discourse consistently emphasizes sovereign equality, respect for civilizational diversity, and opposition to hegemonic practices [17, 20]. However, China simultaneously occupies the position of the main initiator of many global initiatives, the producer of key conceptual frameworks, and one of the principal sources of their material support [21]. Such asymmetry does not reproduce the historical tributary system, which was based on formal recognition of imperial superiority, but it nevertheless creates unequal structures of influence. In this respect, the analysis partially corresponds with Callahan's argument that contemporary interpretations of Tianxia may contain elements of Sino-centric political imagination [13].

A further tension concerns the relationship between moral authority and institutional effectiveness. Classical Tianxia was based primarily on the idea that legitimate order emerges from ethical leadership and the ability of the center to maintain harmony [8]. Modern global governance, however, requires more than normative appeal: it depends on legal frameworks, institutional mechanisms, accountability procedures, and agreed rules of interaction. Therefore, moral legitimacy alone cannot guarantee the effectiveness and stability of international governance [22].

The final contradiction relates to the difference between China's self-representation of Tianxia and its external interpretation. Within Chinese political discourse, the concept is presented as an inclusive framework promoting mutual benefit, cooperation, and peaceful coexistence. Outside China, however, some scholars and policymakers continue to view it with caution, interpreting its universalist language as potentially reflecting a renewed form of civilizational centrality. This divergence demonstrates that the international legitimacy of Tianxia depends not only on the coherence of China's normative discourse but also on the extent to which other actors perceive themselves as genuine participants in shaping the emerging order.

Thus, the findings of this study do not support either of the two dominant interpretations of contemporary Tianxia: the optimistic view that presents it as a complete alternative to the existing international system, or the skeptical view that reduces it to a rhetorical instrument of Chinese foreign policy. A more balanced interpretation considers Tianxia as an evolving normative framework situated between historical continuity and political adaptation. Its contemporary significance lies precisely in this dual character: it functions simultaneously as a reinterpretation of China's political-philosophical heritage, a source of diplomatic legitimacy, and a conceptual instrument for articulating a particular vision of a pluralistic world order.

### *Conclusions*

The modern revival of Tianxia represents a complex process of historical, theoretical, and political reconstruction. The classical concept combined cosmology, moral legitimacy, and hierarchical order. In modern academic thought, it has been reconceptualized as a critique of the state-centric system and as a blueprint for a world based on interdependence and relational rationality. In the official foreign policy discourse of the PRC, selected motifs of Tianxia have found expression through the concept of a community with a shared future for mankind and the language of harmony, joint development, and civilizational diversity.

The study confirms the proposed hypothesis: modern Tianxia is not a restoration of the imperial model. It is a selective ideological reconstruction in which historical hierarchy is attenuated, and universalist elements are utilized to legitimize a more active role for China in global governance. At the same time, a soft hierarchy persists, as China acts as the primary initiator of normative concepts and the material center for a significant portion of related initiatives.

Tianxia should be viewed primarily as a discursive-normative framework, rather than as a finalized institutional alternative to the Westphalian system. Its significance lies in broadening the intellectual space of international relations and raising the question of the feasibility of a world order based not only on sovereignty and the balance of power but also on mutual responsibility. Its limitations include the ambiguity of procedures, the problem of external perception, and the risk of universalism turning into Sinocentrism.

Prospects for further research involve empirical testing of how the discourse of Tianxia and the community with a shared future is perceived outside China. Of particular importance are interviews, analysis of official documents of partner states, and comparative case studies in Central Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Global South. This will help determine whether Tianxia is truly becoming a Chinese method of describing the country's global role.

## References

- 1 葛兆光. 宅兹中国: 重建有关«中国»的历史论述 [M]. 北京: 中华书局, 2011.
- 2 丁耘. 天下与天命—基于气论的历史哲学 [J] 开放时代, 2014 (1).
- 3 冯友兰. 中国哲学史 [M]. 北京: 商务印书馆, 2011.
- 4 余英时. 论天人之际: 中国古代思想起源试探 [M]. 北京: 中华书局, 2014.
- 5 郭树勇. 从文化天下主义到文化国际主义: 中国古代国际关系理论嬗变的一种考察 [J] 国际观察2024 (1); 1-47.
- 6 杨伯俊 (译注). 论语译注 [M]; 北京: 中华书局, 2006.
- 7 杨伯俊 (译注). 孟子译注 [M]; 北京: 中华书局, 2005.
- 8 彭永杰. 论儒家政治哲学的特质、使命和方法 [J]. 江汉论坛, 2014 (4) 64-70.
- 9 Roger T. Ames, Sor-hoon Tan, Steven Y.Y. Yang, Peter D. Herschok (Eds). *Tianxia in Comparative Perspectives: Alternative Models for a Possible Planetary Order (Confucian Cultures)*. — Honolulu: East-West Center, 2024. — 390 p.
- 10 汪金国, 令小熊. 中国天下观视域下的人类命运共同体文化哲学论析 [J]. 理论学刊, 2021 (5): 118-126.
- 11 阎学通. 道义现实主义的国际关系理论 [J]. 国际问题研究, 2014(5):102-128.
- 12 Zhao T. All under Heaven The Tianxia System for a Possible World Order / T. Zhao. — Oakland: California Press, 2021. — 332 p.
- 13 Callahan W.A. Chinese Visions of World Order: Post-hegemonic or a New Hegemony? / W.A. Callahan // *International Studies Review*. — 2008. — Vol. 10, No. 4. — P. 749–761. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2486.2008.00830.x>
- 14 Qin Yaqing. A Relational Theory of World Politics / Yaqing Qin // *International Studies Review*. — 2016. — Vol. 18, No. 1. — P. 33–47. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viv031>.
- 15 Constitution of the Communist Party of China, revised and adopted at the 19th National Congress of the CPC on October 24, 2017. — Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2017.
- 16 Amendments to the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, adopted at the First Session of the 13th National People's Congress on March 11, 2018. People's Daily, March 12, 2018. — [Electronic resource]. — Access mode: <https://fdi.mofcom.gov.cn/EN/come-falvfagui-con.html?id=10493>
- 17 Xi, Jinping. Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive in Unity to Build a Modern Socialist Country in All Respects: Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, October 16, 2022 / Jinping Xi. — Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2022.
- 18 Zhao T. 'All-under-Heaven': between idealism and realism // *Journal of Global Ethics*. — 2021. — Vol. 17, No. 1. — P. 26–41. — P. 26–41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449626.2021.1964579>
- 19 Dunhua Z. A defense of universalism: With a critique of particularism in Chinese culture / Z. Dunhua // *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*. — 2009. — Vol. 4, № 1. — P. 116–129. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11466-009-0007-4>
- 20 A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions. The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. — September 2023. — [Electronic resource]. — Access mode: [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyxw/202405/t20240530\\_11332291.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyxw/202405/t20240530_11332291.html)
- 21 Rolland, N China's Eurasian Century? Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative / N. Rolland // *The National Bureau of Asian Research*, 2017. — 208 p.
- 22 Dellmuth L.M. Institutional sources of legitimacy for international organisations: Beyond procedure versus performance / L.M. Dellmuth, J.A. Scholte, J. Tallberg // *Review of International Studies*. — 2019. — Vol. 45, No. 4. — P. 627–646. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S026021051900007X>

## References

- 1 葛兆光. 宅兹中国: 重建有关«中国»的历史论述 [M]. 北京: 中华书局, 2011. Ge, Zhaoguang. (2011). *Zhai zi Zhongguo: Chongjian youguan «Zhongguo» de lishi lunshu* [Dwelling in China: Reconstructing the Historical Narrative of «China»]. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju [in Chinese].
- 2 丁耘. 天下与天命—基于气论的历史哲学 [J] 开放时代, 2014 (1). Ding, Yun. (2014). *Tianxia yu tianming: Jiyu qilun de lishi zhexue* [Tianxia and the Mandate of Heaven: A Philosophy of History Based on Qi Theory]. *Kaifang Shidai* (Open Times), 1 [in Chinese].
- 3 冯友兰. 中国哲学史 [M]. 北京: 商务印书馆, 2011. Feng, Youlan. (2011). *Zhongguo zhexue shi* [History of Chinese Philosophy]. Beijing: Shangwu Yinshuguan [in Chinese].
- 4 余英时. 论天人之际: 中国古代思想起源试探 [M]. 北京: 中华书局, 2014. Yu, Yingshi. (2014). *Lun tianren zhi ji: Zhongguo gudai Sixiang quyuan shitan* [On the Relationship between Heaven and Humanity: An Exploration of the Origins of Ancient Chinese Thought]. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju [in Chinese].

- 5 郭树勇. 从文化天下主义到文化国际主义: 中国古代国际关系理论嬗变的一种考察 [J] 国际观察2024 (1); 1-47. Guo, Shuyong. (2024). *Cong wenhua Tianxia zhuyi dao wenhua guoji zhuyi: Zhongguo gudai guoji guanxi lilun shanbian de yizhong kaocha* [From Cultural Tianxiaism to Cultural Internationalism: An Examination of the Evolution of Ancient Chinese International Relations Theory]. *Guoji Guancha* (International Review), 1 [in Chinese].
- 6 杨伯俊 (译注). 论语译注 [M]; 北京: 中华书局, 2006. Yang, Bojun. (2006). *Linyu yizhu* [The Analects: Translation and Annotation]. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju [in Chinese].
- 7 杨伯俊 (译注). 孟子译注 [M]; 北京: 中华书局, 2005. Yang, Bojun. (2005). *Mengzi yizhu* [Mencius: Translation and Annotation]. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju [in Chinese].
- 8 彭永杰. 论儒家政治哲学的特质、使命和方法 [J]. 江汉论坛, 2014 (4) 64-70. Peng, Yongjie. (2014). *Lun Rujia zhengzhi zhexue de tezhi, shiming he fangfa* [On the Characteristics, Mission and Methodology of Confucian Political Philosophy]. *Jiangnan Luntan* (Jiangnan Tribune), 4, 64-70 [in Chinese].
- 9 Roger, T. Ames, Sor-hoon Tan, Steven Y.Y. Yang & Peter D. Herschok (Eds). (2024). *Tianxia in Comparative Perspectives: Alternative Models for a Possible Planetary Order* (Confucian Cultures). Honolulu: East-West Center.
- 10 汪金国, 令小熊. 中国天下观视域下的人类命运共同体文化哲学论析 [J]. 理论学刊, 2021 (5): 118-126. Wang, Jinguo and Ling, Xiaoxiong. (2021). *Zhongguo Tianxia guan shiyu xia de renlei mingyun gongtongti wenhua zhexue lunxi* [A Cultural-Philosophical Analysis of the Community with a Shared Future for Mankind from the Perspective of the Chinese Tianxia Concept]. *Lilun Xuekan* (Theory Journal), (5), 118-126 [in Chinese].
- 11 阎学通. 道义现实主义的国际关系理论[J].国际问题研究 · 2014(5):102-128. Yan, Xuetong. (2014). *Daoyi xianshi zhuyi de guoji guanxi lilun* [The Theory of Moral Realism in International Relations]. *Guoji Wenti Yanjiu — International Studies*, 5, 102–128 [in Chinese].
- 12 Zhao, T. (2021). *All under Heaven The Tianxia System for a Possible World Order*. Oakland: California Press.
- 13 Callahan, W.A. (2008). Chinese Visions of World Order: Post-hegemonic or a New Hegemony? *International Studies Review*, 10, 4, 749–761. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2486.2008.00830.x>
- 14 Qin, Yaqing. (2016). A Relational Theory of World Politics. *International Studies Review*, 18, 1, 33–47. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viv031>
- 15 (2017). *Constitution of the Communist Party of China, revised and adopted at the 19th National Congress of the CPC on October 24, 2017*. Beijing: People's Publishing House.
- 16 Amendments to the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, adopted at the First Session of the 13th National People's Congress on March 11, 2018. People's Daily, March 12, 2018. [www.elegislation.gov.hk](http://www.elegislation.gov.hk). Retrieved from <https://fdi.mofcom.gov.cn/EN/come-falvfagui-con.html?id=10493>
- 17 Xi, Jinping. (2022). *Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive in Unity to Build a Modern Socialist Country in All Respects: Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China*. Beijing: People's Publishing House.
- 18 Zhao, T. (2021). 'All-under-Heaven': between idealism and realism. *Journal of Global Ethics*, 17, 1, 26–41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449626.2021.1964579>
- 19 Dunhua, Z. (2009). A defense of universalism: With a critique of particularism in Chinese culture. *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*, 4, 1, 116–129. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11466-009-0007-4>
- 20 A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions. The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*. September 2023. Retrieved from [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyxw/202405/t20240530\\_11332291.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyxw/202405/t20240530_11332291.html)
- 21 Rolland, N. (2017). China's Eurasian Century? Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative. *The National Bureau of Asian Research*.
- 22 Dellmuth, L.M., Scholte, J.A., & Tallberg, J. (2019). Institutional sources of legitimacy for international organisations: Beyond procedure versus performance. *Review of International Studies*, 45, 4, 627–646. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S026021051900007X>

## Author Information

**Shu Liang** — PhD Student, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Almaty, Kazakhstan, e-mail: [liangshu971218@gmail.com](mailto:liangshu971218@gmail.com), <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-4303-0228>

**Karlygash K. Usserova** (corresponding author) — PhD, Assistant Professor, School of Law and Public Policy, Narxoz University, Almaty, Kazakhstan, e-mail: [k.usserova@gmail.com](mailto:k.usserova@gmail.com), <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8120-7545>

**Zhiger D. Anuash** — PhD Student, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Almaty, Kazakhstan, e-mail: [Anuash.zhiger@gmail.com](mailto:Anuash.zhiger@gmail.com), <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-4286-258X>

**Fatima T. Kukeyeva** — Doctor of Historical Sciences, Professor of the Department of International Relations and World Economy, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Almaty, Kazakhstan, e-mail: <mailto:fturar@mail.ru>, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4570-5680>

#### Авторлар туралы мәліметтер

**Шу Лян** — PhD докторант, әл-Фараби атындағы Қазақ ұлттық университеті, Алматы, Қазақстан, e-mail: [liangshu971218@gmail.com](mailto:liangshu971218@gmail.com), <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-4303-0228>

**Карлығаш К. Усєрова** (*хат-хабарға жауапты автор*) — PhD, ассистент профессор, Құқық және мемлекеттік басқару мектебі, Нархоз университеті, Алматы, Қазақстан, e-mail: [k.usserova@gmail.com](mailto:k.usserova@gmail.com), <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8120-7545>

**Жігер Д. Ануаш** — PhD докторант, әл-Фараби атындағы Қазақ ұлттық университеті, Алматы, Қазақстан, e-mail: [Anuash.zhiger@gmail.com](mailto:Anuash.zhiger@gmail.com), <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-4286-258X>

**Фатима Т. Кукеева** — тарих ғылымдарының докторы, халықаралық қатынастар және әлемдік экономика кафедрасының профессоры, әл-Фараби атындағы Қазақ ұлттық университеті, Алматы, Қазақстан, e-mail: <mailto:fturar@mail.ru>, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4570-5680>

#### Сведения об авторах

**Шу Лян** — PhD докторант, Казахский национальный университет имени аль-Фараби, Алматы, Казахстан, e-mail: [liangshu971218@gmail.com](mailto:liangshu971218@gmail.com), <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-4303-0228>

**Карлығаш К. Усєрова** (*автор-корреспондент*) — PhD, ассистент профессор, Школа права и государственного управления, Университет Нархоз, Алматы, Казахстан, e-mail: [k.usserova@gmail.com](mailto:k.usserova@gmail.com), <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8120-7545>

**Жігер Д. Ануаш** — PhD докторант, Казахский национальный университет имени аль-Фараби, Алматы, Казахстан, e-mail: [Anuash.zhiger@gmail.com](mailto:Anuash.zhiger@gmail.com), <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-4286-258X>

**Фатима Т. Кукеева** — доктор исторических наук, профессор кафедры международных отношений и мировой экономики, Казахский национальный университет имени аль-Фараби, Алматы, Казахстан, e-mail: <mailto:fturar@mail.ru>, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4570-5680>

**Conflicts of Interest.** The authors declare no conflict of interest / **Конфликт интересов.** Авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов / **Мүдделер қақтығысы.** Авторлар мүдделер қақтығысының жоқ екенін мәлімдейді.