

How Chinese Identity Politics Shapes Its Depictions of Europe

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Abstract

Sino-EU relations are officially described as a ‘comprehensive strategic partnership’ and are bound to play a key role in shaping the character of the newly-emerging multi-polar system. At present, the EU is China’s biggest trading partner, while China is the EU’s largest source of imports and second largest two-way trading partner. However, while recognising such closeness, this paper will adopt a slightly more critical stance towards Sino-EU relations. I analyse how internal political debates within China influences how leading Chinese actors construct various images of Europe. Central to this analysis will be Chinese attempts to create counter narratives of both colonial history and of the structure of the state system as a way of challenging dominant European conceptions of order – that is to say, the paper will describe China’s efforts to launch an ideational challenge to the Westphalian system.

Keywords: Sino-EU relations, Chinese identity politics, post-colonialism, century of humiliation, Zheng He, tianxia

1. Introduction

At first glance the EU and China seem to be a natural match: each side claims a long proud history and a perception of themselves as the *sui generis* of international politics. Each side is also maintained by a large bureaucracy with miles of red tape. However, misunderstandings between China and the EU, as well as its Member States, have been common. Differing views of human rights, sovereignty and democracy, as well as differences in how to promote development have all been crucial factors (Pan, 2010; Chatham House, 2011; Lisbonne-de Vergeron, 2007). For almost half a century Sino-European relations were defined by the Cold War. Whereas in the early 1960’s China denounced the European Economic Community (EEC) as the ‘economic arm of the aggressive NATO bloc’, Beijing eventually came to see Europe as a ‘grey zone’ between the Soviet Union and the United States (Scott, 2007: 26). As a result, China established initial diplomatic relations with individual European states, starting with France in 1964, Italy in 1970 and the UK and Germany in 1972. Beijing formally established diplomatic ties with the EEC in 1975. From then until 1989 relations were largely determined by shared economic interests and China’s opening up policy of 1978. After the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989, EU and its member states adopted a series of sanctions against China, including a suspension of mutual high level visits, curtailment of new development aid and loan guarantees, a temporary stoppage of new large joint ventures and a cessation of military cooperation. Over time most of these restrictive measures softened. By 2003, in its first EU Policy Paper, China was able to declare that ‘common ground between China and the EU far outweighs their disagreements’ and that ‘China-EU relations now are better than any time in history’ (State Council, 2003: 2). As the Policy Paper makes clear, today China views the EU strategic partner.

In this paper I will first explore the changing nature of economic ties between China and Europe as a means to further investigate how China today perceives and depicts the Europe as a political actor. Whilst China in no way views the EU as a global hegemon, we will nonetheless see that many within China give focus to Europe’s role as a colonial power and its support of the Westphalian state system. The paper relies on a conceptual framework which takes seriously the role of identity and culture and international relations. Accordingly, my analysis of Chinese views of Europe takes as its starting point Suzuki’s observation that having been ‘coerced into

European International Society' by gunboat diplomacy, it is no wonder that today, as China rises, it will begin to reject linear and homogenous understandings of what it means to be civilized in the international system (Suzuki 2009: 11). I conclude by arguing that as Chinese power grows, Europe faces a loss of centrality. At the heart of this loss is an identity crisis over its colonial legacy.

2. 'Beijing-on-Shannon': China's New EU Investment Strategy

European-Chinese business ties are well established and are underpinned institutionally by an annual EU-China Business Summit which allows for a high level of exchange between political leaders and businesspeople on both sides. At present, the EU is China's largest trading partner and fourth largest investor, while China is the EU's second-biggest export market. This relationship has grown more complex, and as we shall see, more ironic, since the 2008 financial crisis. Since the crisis, China has taken advantage of downgraded government debt in a number of countries by buying up depressed assets, particularly in Greece and Spain. It has also launched a new investment campaign in ports, highways, and industries in troubled countries on Europe's eastern and southern edges, including direct investment in the transportation infrastructure network where Western and Eastern Europe meet (Alderman, 2010; People's Daily, 2010).

The complexity of these new investments are twofold. First, Beijing hopes to achieve not just more business for its own companies, but also greater influence over European economic policies. During a recent European tour, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao reminded politicians in Brussels that China had acted as "a friend" to Greece, Spain, Italy and other troubled European countries in their time of need by buying bonds other investors would not risk. In return, however, Wen advised that "European leaders shouldn't join the choir" of voices pressuring China to appreciate the value of its currency, a move that would favour European exports to China (Wu, 2010).

The second factor complicating this new wave of Chinese investment is that it often involves the immigration of Chinese workers, supported by state owned companies (Folliath 2010). One may think that this would be a politically sensitive issue but given the dire shape of many European economies, many countries have pro-actively sought Chinese involvement. The Irish government, for instance, has not been coy about seeking Beijing's support for a €50m project to build a new school, railway station, and hundreds of factory units and apartments on a 600-acre stretch of land near Athlone in central Ireland (Inman, et al 2010). Although the planned site would eventually employ over 8,000 Irish staff, the project would require sending over 2,000 Chinese workers to build the site. As with numerous other Chinese investments in Europe (or Africa, for that matter), the money also helps support Chinese state-owned companies, giving them a substantial foothold into the European market for a range of goods and services. Whilst the Irish plan has been dubbed 'Beijing-on-Shannon', referring to the river which runs through Athlone, the local press has also recognised its potential to 'cut an entire region's dole queue' (MacConnell et al 2010)

2.1 Beyond Business as Usual

However, as deep as these economic ties are, they do not form the focus of this paper. I cite them in order to illustrate a larger irony which has now come to characterize relations between the two sides. But to grasp this irony a brief historical detour is required. Readers will no doubt know of the series of 'Opium Wars' in the mid 19th Century, where European powers (led by Britain and France but involving many more nations), laid siege to China's Qing Dynasty. Outraged at the seizure and outlawing of opium, a product which had helped Britain in particular balance its trade with China, European states easily defeated the Qing and imposed on China a series of 'unequal treaties' which forced open ports for trade, exempted foreign imports from internal transit duties, and ceded Hong Kong to the British. Beyond these treaties, in the most humiliating act of all perhaps, the occupying forces also burned the Summer Palace (*yuan ming yuan*), where the Emperor resided and conducted much government business.

While these facts are well known, their continued impact on Chinese politics is often underappreciated in the West. The ease with which the British forces had defeated the numerically superior Chinese armies seriously affected the Qing Dynasty's stability and eventually helped contribute to its demise in 1911. Known in China as the 'century of humiliation' (*bainian guochi*), these acts of colonial aggression are still used to structure Chinese reaction to the Western world. For example, when China achieves a significant milestone, such as the return of Hong Kong, or the grand opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, press reports claim it is one more step on the way to cleansing national humiliation. Conversely, when the West is seen as interfering in Beijing's aims, Chinese media often respond by taking the affront as evidence that the humiliation is continuing. Any number of events in recent years illustrate this point, such as when pro-Tibetan activists assaulted the Olympic torch across several European cities, or when French President Nicolas Sarkozy met with the Dalai Lama, or, most recently, when Oslo awarded the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize to a Liu Xiaobo.

Of course one must take a critical view of the use of history in this way, for within China contradictory emotions are often used in the formation of China's changing national identity. Nationalism is continually produced and consumed in a circular process that knits together both urban and rural, rich and poor, mainland and overseas Chinese. In this way the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) boosts its own legitimacy through a form of anti-Western (generally anti-European and American) nationalism. This practice both feeds into and grows out of the emotions of ordinary Chinese. Patriotic education and popular opinion are intertwined, just as pride of a once great civilization and humiliation over its subjugation are interwoven. In this way, China's domestic politics are inseparable from its foreign relations; its own identity is inseparable from how it perceives others. All these elements are bound together, linking national security with nationalist insecurities (Callahan, 2010).

In the remainder of the paper I provide two examples of how Chinese views of Europe are shaped by the legacy of its colonial past. The first case, the story of Ming Dynasty Admiral Zheng He, shows how the Beijing leadership is actively putting forth its own version of colonialist history in order to counter European narratives and achieve a series of geopolitical objectives. The second example shows how public intellectuals in China are attempting to move away from European concepts of "nation" and "state" by referring back to an ancient Chinese concept of political order, known as *tianxia* (all under heaven).

3. The Legacy of Zheng He

One key to understanding China's perception of Europe lies in the story of Admiral Zheng He, a legend of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). The facts surrounding Zheng are relatively well established and without dispute. Having won the favour the Yongle Emperor, Zheng was subsequently given command of the imperial fleet of trading ships, warships, and support vessels (Chang 1976). By every account, the Ming ships were a technological accomplishment. Their size dwarfed their contemporaries and had watertight bulkheads which limited the spread of flooding should the vessel be damaged in battle or from storms. They also included incendiary weapons which could project catapult-like gunpowder bombs. Equipped with detailed nautical maps (scrolls, actually) Zheng was able to led his naval expedition across the South China Sea and eventually to Ceylon (modern day Sri Lanka), Arabia, and East Africa. At his peak, Zheng sailed with as many as 300 ships and 3000 men, trading silk and porcelain with Arab and African merchants for spices, ivory, medicines, and other goods by the Chinese imperial court (Levathes, 1994; Holmes, 2006).

While Zheng himself is thought to have died on route home from a voyage in 1435, his memory is kept alive today by Chinese leaders. In 2005, to mark the 600th anniversary of the voyages, Beijing actively helped plan and finance a series of public exhibitions both in China and across Southeast Asia, Africa and the Middle East. The campaign included new museum displays, public recreations, replicas of Zheng's ships, television shows, conferences, and a national day of honour on 11th of July. The use of this Ming Dynasty legend serves a number of political aims for the CCP, allowing it to contrast its victimisation status with European history of aggression.

3.1 "But Not One Inch of Land Was Occupied"

First, the legacy of Zheng allows China to make a geopolitical point that it has a strong tradition as a technologically advanced seafaring power. As Premier Wen Jiabao himself noted, Zheng had set sail even before Christopher Columbus (Xinhua, 2004). The message here is that China had become a maritime power in Asia long before the West arrived. Similarly, in 2003 President Hu Jintao told the Australian Parliament: 'Back in the 1420s, the expeditionary fleets of China's Ming Dynasty reached Australian shores. For centuries, the Chinese sailed across vast seas and settled down in what they called Southern Land, or today's Australia'. Hu went on to claim that Zheng 'brought Chinese culture to this land and lived harmoniously with the local people, contributing their proud share to Australia's economy, society and its thriving pluralistic culture'. (Hu, 2003)

Many have noted the historical inaccuracy of Hu's statement as it is highly doubtful that Zheng reached Australia. Hu seems to have based his claims on the now discredited history of Chinese exploration by Gavin Menzies. But historical inaccuracies are hardly the point here for Hu's message was clear: China's maritime presence and power in Asia came before that of Europe (Menzies, 2003).

Secondly, Zheng gives Beijing a historical and cultural narrative to reinforce its notion of peaceful development, and, more importantly, to contrast this development with the former colonial powers of Europe. As China's State Council proclaims in a White Paper titled 'China's Peaceful Development Road':

'Six hundred years ago, Zheng He reached more than 30 countries and regions in Asia and Africa. . . . What he took to the places he visited were tea, chinaware, silk and technology, but did not occupy an inch of any other's land. What he brought to the outside world was peace and civilization. . . . Based on the present reality, China's development has not only benefited the 1.3 billion Chinese people, but also brought large markets and

development opportunities for countries throughout the world. China's development also helps to enhance the force for peace in the world' (State Council, 2005).

Similarly, in 2007, at the University of Pretoria in South Africa, President Hu claimed that Zheng's voyages 'brought to the African people a message of peace and goodwill, not swords, guns, plunder or slavery. For more than one hundred years in China's modern history, the Chinese people were subjected to colonial aggression and oppression by foreign powers and went through similar suffering and agony that the majority of African countries endured' (Hu, 2007).

Here we can see the politics of the 'Century of Humiliation' on full display. Hu's speech (and many others like it) attempts to draw links between the historical roots of China's current policy and the memory of the 19th century Opium War. This move aims to first establish common experiences of Western colonization with other occupied states, and then to reinforce the idea of Chinese power as 'different' from previous (i.e. European) Great Powers. Thus, the aim of using Zheng is not only to give historical credibility to the idea that China will be peaceful but to stress that in so doing, it will act unlike the Western powers when they rose to power. This point has been re-enforced time and again by China's leaders.

Premier Wen, while visiting the United States, declared that Zheng 'brought silk, tea and the Chinese culture' to foreign peoples, 'but not one inch of land was occupied' (Chen and Zhao, 2003). In the same vein, China's ambassador to Kenya, proclaimed, 'Zheng He's fleet [was] large. . . . But his voyages were not for looting resources' – i.e. were not interested in colonialism or imperialism – 'but for friendship. In trade with foreign countries, he gave much more than he took,' fostering 'understanding, friendship and trade relation[s] between China's Ming Dynasty and foreign countries in southeast Asia, west Asia and east Africa' (cited in Holmes, 2006: 6)

Here China seems to giving voice to an alternative version, the victim's version, of colonial history. These statements can be seen to represent a new era of Chinese ideational persuasion through the creation of an idea of a historical regional order that prospered when China was strong and in a leadership position. China's appeal to harmony provides a cultural alternative to Europe in those parts of the world that have suffered from hegemony – whether through colonial rule in the 19th and 20th centuries or through the imposition of Western economic and political norms in more recent times.

Of course underlying these aims are very real geopolitical goals: Chinese economic development, and by extension, the legitimacy of the CCP, depends on foreign supplies of oil, natural gas, and other commodities – supplies transported predominantly by sea. Seen in this way, China has deployed the legacy of Zheng He in order to help ease its access to vital resources. That is, the narrative allows China to craft a maritime strategy, based in its version of history, to uphold its interests along the sea lanes and justify its naval expansion to domestic and international audiences.

To sum up, China has used the story of Zheng He to: a) re-enforce its claim to vital shipping lanes; b) remind the world of its technological prowess; c) give historical evidence to support the narrative of China's peaceful development; and, d) define itself to the developing world as a rising power without colonial or imperial ambitions, unlike Europe – or the United States or Japan for that matter. As deft as this narrative is, its success relies on the West's own guilt over its colonial legacy and ambivalence to the values (good and bad) that helped propel it to world power status in the first place. This narrative is important for in a networked globalized era, 'success depends not only on whose army wins, but also on whose story wins' (Nye, 2005). By promoting Zheng, Beijing is attempting to win over key areas of the developing world through a story of solidarity aimed against European powers.

4. Tianxia: 'All under Heaven'

The legacy of Zheng He touches on a much larger question which preoccupies Chinese intellectuals and government officials: what is the role of China in the world? Increasingly in China there is feeling that in order to become a true world power, China must contribute its own theories and knowledge about how the world works and how it *should* work. But in so doing, it must not simply import European ideas and give them 'Chinese characteristics'. Instead, as one key thinker puts it, China must 'create new world concepts and new world structures' if it is to realise its rightful status as a global superpower (Zhao, 2005).

The heart of this new system is an old idea: *tianxia* – literally meaning 'all under heaven', a concept which has long been central to Chinese understandings of political order and territorial boundaries (Note 1).

To understand the nature of *tianxia*, and why it is a counter to the Westphalian state system, it is necessary to re-visit China's era of Warring States (475-221 BCE). This period of Chinese history is important for those

interested in contributing Chinese theories of the world since it serves as a model of how to view the current international system. In this time, also known as the ‘pre-Qin’ era (before China’s unification under the first Emperor Qin), seven separate states co-existed alongside each other in near constant conflict. Regional warlords annexed smaller states around them to consolidate their power; it was, in short, a system without an overarching authority to counter state bullies. However, the great competition between states of the Warring period also helped facilitate rapid technological advancement (such as the use of iron tools) and cultural development. In these ways, many in China consider this time to be a sort of analogy to the modern system where technology flourishes but nation states are doomed to conflict since they exist in a world system that lacks any supreme global power to enforce peace. As we will see below, during the Warring States period, *tianxia* was often used to refer to an ideal order of a unified state, representing the wish for the Warring era to end with the merger of the different state factions (Ford, 2010).

Today, *tianxia*’s utopian appeal is being revived in China amongst leading intellectuals and in popular culture. Foremost amongst its adherents is Zhao Tingyang, a leading philosopher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). Zhao’s version of *tianxia* is utopian, hence it is an abstract and idealized version of how the world is and should be. Nonetheless, his work has helped to structure the very boundaries of the debate within China concerning the future of non-Western dominated international relations.

4.1 Visions of Order

Zhao argues that in addition to the literal and physical meaning of *tianxia* as ‘all under heaven’, it also contains a psychological meaning, referring to ‘a common choice made by all peoples in the world, or a universal agreement in the ‘hearts’ of all peoples. He writes that a political system can claim to be in a state of universal and perpetual peace only when the notion of externality no longer exists. In other words, such a state can only happen when nothing and nobody is excluded. In order to enjoy universal and perpetual peace, a complete and efficient political system should be as extensive as possible, contributing to a worldwide system in which all are included and protected, and in which nobody is treated as an outsider (Zhao 2005; 2006; 2009).

Zhao draws on the late Qing Dynasty reformer Liang Qichao (1873-1929) who claimed that ‘since civilization began, the Chinese people have never considered national government as the highest form of social organization. Their political thinking has always been in terms of all mankind, with world peace as the final goal, and the family and nation as transitional stages in the perfecting of World Order (*tianxia*)’ (Liang, 2005: 743-44). The world, states, and families all must be consistent in a political continuum in their way of governance, so in essence each level is nothing but different manifestations of one universal institution.

According to Zhao, in line with the principle of the inclusion of all peoples, the creation of a ‘world-for-all-peoples’ is now a political necessity. He argues that European style social democracy has failed to provide such a world and is unable to do so as it is inherently flawed by excessive interest in personality, money, and marketing. In place of democracy, Zhao argues that the people’s general will needs to be determined by a ‘careful observation of social trends’ inspired by a Confucian inspired elite. Thus, the criteria to judge the people’s hearts is not ‘freedom’ but ‘order’. And *tianxia*, Zhao reminds us, refers to the greatest and highest order (Zhao 2005; 2009).

In order to achieve this order, Zhao states that *tianxia* must also develop into a ‘world institution.’ Here he specifically cites the failings of the EU. Zhao reasons that although the EU and the United Nations seem to be world institutions, they are limited by a worldview that is based on nation-states and do not have the effective power to be ‘above’ those states. Without ‘a supreme political authority’ international conflict is unlikely to end. Zhao writes that international organizations are meant to resolve problems but since they are ‘nothing more than auxiliary bodies confined by, and pertaining to, the nation-state system, in which only national interests, and not universal ones, matter’, they are incapable of overcoming any serious conflict in the world. The international will always be limited by the national until and unless a world viewpoint becomes the universally-accepted framework. (Zhao 2009) In his view, the advantage of all-under-heaven is in its perspective, being above national interests, inviting people to consider a much wider context, in which the most complicated of problems can be identified and solved.

Zhao writes that the legitimacy of a universal political institution should reflect moral rightness – that is, political legitimacy was justified if it corresponded to ethical obligations. For Zhao, the ‘family’ is the natural basis and strongest evidence of harmony and mutual obligation, a concentrated model of ‘the very essence of humanity’. Thus, it was an ethical archetype to be universally promoted on all political levels. In this way Zhao taps into a long tradition of Chinese philosophy since governing ‘all-under-heaven’ in just the same way one runs a family is a widely-recognized Confucian principle. In other words, world peace is impossible if world governance does

not follow the family model. Thus, a political system is valid if and only if it simultaneously constitutes a suitable moral system (Zhao 2009: 13).

In sum, *tianxia* refers to a hierarchical system that values order over freedom, ethics over law, and elite governance over democracy and human rights. In many ways, Zhao's work represents the return of a grand narrative, a totalizing politics of harmony. Of course it is not as if *tianxia* were about to suddenly displace the current international order. Many Chinese commentators disagree with Zhao on many important issues but that is not the point. His work has had a sympathetic ear with many Chinese intellectuals who believe that China's moral system of domestic and international order (i.e. the ancient Tributary System) was destroyed by the violence of the West and the Westphalian world system. As Callahan points out, Zhao's work is instructive for it can tell us about current debates in Beijing about identity, security and China's role in the world. In this way, *tianxia* is a strong example of how domestic and international politics inform each other as part of a broader struggle over the meaning of 'China' (Callahan, 2010). Zhao's ideas are indirectly influential because he has been able to set the agenda of international relations theorizing within China, and thus to productively generate a powerful discourse that sets the boundaries of how people think about China's past, present and future. In this way, his paper serves the same function as Francis Fukuyama's *End of History* or Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*: it doesn't matter if the theory is true in any real sense if its constant re-circulation means that *tianxia* is a key topic of debate. In this way, it serves to define problems in specific ways that actually limits the range of possible solutions – in the process adding to its own influence.

This influence has not been limited to obscure academics. More recently, the ideal of *tianxia* has formed the basis of one of the most successful films in recent times.

4.2 Zhang Yimou's *Hero*

Directed by Zhang Yimou, the artistic mastermind of the Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony, *Hero* is a film layered with multiple political discourses. It was also highly successful movie by any standard, earning over US\$180 million in box office sales globally and being nominated for numerous awards, including the Best Foreign Language Film at the 2003 Academy Awards (Louie, 2008).

In the film, an assassin (known as 'Nameless', played by Jet Li) meets with China's first Emperor Qin Shihuang, who was King of the state of Qin during the Warring States Period. Nameless has been granted an audience because he successfully killed three known assassins who sought to murder Qin in order to stop him from invading neighbouring states and taking greater power. The story of the film is told through the dialogue between the two men. As evidence of his success, Nameless presents the swords of King Qin's three would-be killers and Nameless recounts how he eliminated the assassins. However, during the story Qin begins to suspect that his visitor is engaged in a conspiracy and that the three assassins are actually still alive. Qin believes that the stories of their death are nothing more than a ploy so that Nameless himself can get close enough to the King to kill him with his special skill 'death within 10 paces.'

Eventually Nameless admits that he is in fact from a rival state and that years past Qin's army had killed his family. But to the King's surprise, Nameless does not kill him once he is within his reach. The reason becomes apparent in a flash back scene where Nameless is meeting with one of the three assassins, who, as Qin suspects, are not dead. In the flashback the assassin pleads with Nameless not to follow through with the plot to murder. The co-plotter explains to Nameless his reasoning: the only way to achieve peace within China was to allow all the states to be unified under a common dynasty. And in his opinion, the king of Qin was the only man capable of accomplishing this task. Thus, assassinating him would only cause China to disintegrate into anarchy and civil war. In dramatic fashion, the co-plotter draws his sword and as Nameless watches, he scrawls into the desert sand: *tianxia*. 'These words express my mind', he tells Nameless. 'Please consider ... The people have suffered years of warfare. Only the King of Qin can stop the chaos by uniting all under heaven'.

Thus, after the flashback, when Nameless is within the fatal ten paces of Qin, the King says 'So it is up to you if you want to kill me. But whether or not you do, the fate of *tianxia* will not be altered because *tianxia* will get what it wants and deserves once the trend of history has been determined'. The closing scene of the film sees a surrendered Nameless killed by Qin's army as the epilogue notes: 'Nameless was executed an assassin but buried a *Hero*'. Qin then went on to become the first emperor of a unified China, ruling until his death in 210 BCE.

The political meaning of the film was clear: the assassin was transformed into a hero when he decided not to kill the emperor, much like Zhao's goal of transforming enemies into friends. The lesson meant to be drawn here is that the individual person – and individual nations – ought to sacrifice everything for the greater good of all under heaven, the universal empire.

As Zhao's writings and Zhang's movie show, *tianxia* is clearly an important notion that forms an imagined Chinese world in which security is defined by unity and diversity is seen as dangerous (Chen and Rawnsley, 2010). In this way, *tianxia* represents a version of the 'One World, One Dream' 2008 Olympic Games theme. Indeed, the goal for many Chinese intellectuals is to find a way back to China's *tianxia* system that was destroyed in the 19th century by Europe's 'immoral' violence. Callahan rightly notes that the worrying aspect of *tianxia* is that the hierarchy of cultures takes as its goal the transformation of enemies into friends – if not by force then by conversion. When Zhao suggests, for example, that we need to transform people by improving their interests, it reminds one of the tactics used by the Chinese government in Tibet and Xinjiang – that is, the exclusion of people who want to maintain a different system and way of life (Zhao, 2006; Callahan, 2008). But again, the advantages or drawbacks of the *tianxia* system are not relevant to our point here. What does matter is how the idea of all under heaven is being used by public intellectuals in China to question the state system and to find a way back to Chinese versions of order.

5. Conclusion

In this paper I have used two examples to show how some in China seek to re-define European conceptions of colonialism and state order. If Zheng He challenges notions of historical legacy and reminds the West of its uncomfortable past, *tianxia* does the same for understandings of the international system and political theory.

When China appeals to narratives such as Zheng, it touches a nerve that runs deep through the West: that of colonial guilt. Here, we can see post-colonialism has become a portmanteau concept – no longer a historical process as much as a symbol for everything that is bad and worthy of rejection. Pascal Bruckner is not alone arguing that in many ways, Europe has never recovered from its own barbarity. In his view, the West has been overly eager to apologize for the sins of colonialism and as a result, a disabling form of narcissism has developed (Bruckner, 2010). China's appeals to the legacy of Zheng cleverly play on this emotion. It shows how Chinese values are being promoted for the future by referring back to an idealized period when Chinese naval power was (as it is claimed) a source of international peace. What matters here is less the historical accuracy of what Beijing says about Zheng. It is the appeal to the imagination about what he did (and did not) do that is important.

In a similar vein, *tianxia* challenges the assumption that the same philosophical foundations for democracy should emerge from very different contexts. It seeks to develop a Chinese school of international relations in an environment that is dominated by European theory. For sometime now the West (and here I mean Europe and the United States) have been lecturing China on the intrinsic merits of democracy as an ideal form of political order. But this is a democracy experienced by the West for only two centuries, whereas China has undergone thousands of years of continuous self-government, with written records, legislation and political philosophies. It may be an exaggeration to claim that China will soon lecture Europe on political theory. But the rise of China makes it so that Europe will no longer be the lone standard by which others are judged and non European societies will no longer be represented by European categories of political thought. As the world heads towards multi-polarity, different states with different understandings of order will begin to impact global debates about the makeup of regional and international systems.

And so perhaps we may be forgiven for wondering: in the future, will Chinese versions of history become as familiar to those in Europe as European history is now to the Chinese? Will the ideals of harmony and hierarchy eventually compete with the values of democracy?

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Note

Note 1. Tian means the heavens, the sky, and what is above something. Xia refers to what is a below, lower, or inferior. Together, Tianxia means everything below the sky, or ‘all under heaven’ and is used in classical texts to refer to “the earth” and “the world.” In written Chinese it is: 天 (tian)下 (xia)