

# Under the Same Sky: A New World-view from China

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## Peace in the war-view

Military thought is an integral part of the Chinese philosophical tradition. Among the ancient classics, 'military thinking' is present not only in the *Sunzi Bingfa*, but also in the work of Mozi, China's first really systematic philosopher and the first to mount an opposition to the Confucian school. Here we have the three chapters on *fei gong* (against offensive war), which explain why a state should not conduct offensive wars but only defensive ones. Furthermore, in Mozi we have fragments of technical chapters on the preparation of city defence, meaning that these philosophers were not only thinking about war, but preparing practically for it.

However, from the beginning of philosophical thought in China, war was not simply an episodic clash of arms or a parenthesis in the normal unfolding of politics and diplomacy, as Clausewitz would put it many centuries later. War was 'a matter of life and death for the state', as Sunzi said. In the military classics there is an extended concept of war, so as to include overall state preparation for war.

Shangjun is the philosopher credited with helping to organize the Qin state – the state that eventually unified China in 221 BC – and who inspired Hanfei Zi, one of China's greatest thinkers. In Shangjun's work, the author presents the organization of the tax system, the tilling of the land and the military levy as a unified concept: they are all integral parts of state organization and military preparation.

In fact war is the main function of the state. In the *Sima Fa*, a volume on the philosophy of war compiled in early Han times but reflecting previous ideas, the author begins by addressing the matter of the benevolence of the son of heaven. That is to say that a good government or benevolent ruler is the necessary basis for waging a good war. He creates the system that citizens are ultimately willing to defend with their own lives. And the good government guarantees a good life for the families of those who die on the battlefield.

To sum up, war is a total concept that includes what goes before and comes after the

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actual clash of arms. We can see the same attention to war in modern thinkers like Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, in *Chaoxian zhan* (War beyond limits – Asymmetrical war, Beijing, 1999). Here the two authors explain that war is political thought: strategy that goes beyond the use of weapons and tactics on the battlefield. This reasoning is echoed in the Italian author and general Fabio Mini's *La guerra dopo la guerra* (The war after war), where he explains that one must not wage war without considering the sort of peace one wants to achieve. These ideas also appear in Mao's thought, which deals with both the issue of social contradictions and guerrilla warfare.

Seen through these eyes, war – conflict and competition between states – is wider than shooting between soldiers. It is reasonable to argue that states are always at war. But by the same token – with respect to the Chinese principle of yin and yang – one can also argue that states can be always at peace, that actual clashes and bloodshed can always be avoided or minimized. In other words, if war is constantly being waged in many ways then one could try to curb war in which millions die. Wars could be 'waged' in the form of cold or soft wars, as Joseph Nye would have it.

But in order to resolve conflicts without bloodshed, communication is crucial. Nevertheless even the understanding created by open channels of communication would still require, if not an impossibly unified world view, then a lingua franca of ideas.

This is, in a nutshell, the idea put forward by Zhao Tingyang in his *Tianxia Tizhi*: it is necessary for the world to have a common '*tianxia* view'. *Tianxia* is not precisely a shared culture so much as a shared sensibility; it is a common understanding that we all live in the same world and have to share some kind of common understanding and tolerance of each other's ideas. It is different from our concept of empire.

Generally speaking, states and statesmen have differing world-views. For instance, during the Cold War or the Second World War states embodied strong ideologies that compelled their people to fight for them. Or, in the case of the First World War, warring states were motivated not by ideologies but by opposing national interests, and in their citizens' case by nationalism itself.

What is the situation now? Are we witnessing clashes of ideologies, world-views, civilizations? Can war be avoided? Here we should not be under any illusion: war has been with us for millennia and will accompany us into the future. But a common *tianxia* would help smooth over conflicts, and avoid the kinds of misunderstanding that lead to war. It could lead to some kinds of agreement like the ones that forbid bombing of hospitals during wartime.

What would be the content of a *tianxia* system? We can sketch in the minimal requirements: market economies, freedom of enterprise. These elements, though not implying deeply shared values, make it possible every day for goods to travel from one side of the world to the other. Russia has such a system to a certain extent. Others groups, like radical Islamic movements, or old-fashioned communist movements such as the new Red Brigades in Italy, appear to reject the concept of the value of a common market.

Chinese tradition could ameliorate the present difficulties in the world. In ancient times, China was not 'China' for the people living there; it was 'all there is under heaven'. The rest, everything that was not part of the Chinese world, was simply not under heaven, beyond the sphere of this world. The West's encroachment has helped

to form a new identity: that of China. This in turn has created a new sense of the relationship of the 'Chinese' people with the rest of world. However, the ancient sense of history still lingers on, creating new challenges as China is driven to become the largest economy in the world, or in the expanded scope of 'all there is under heaven'.

During China's imperial past, order, *zhi*, was easy to understand. It entailed the concept of peace, with all things in their appointed places. *Luan*, disorder, was chaos, disaster, death. Merchants and other businessmen began, over time, to cause *luan*. Things had no fixed place: the price of their goods would change with time and place; businessmen could become richer than the local mandarin and thus put in jeopardy the order of society whereby the official had to be the richest and most powerful. But businessmen were a small, necessary evil, containable, but impossible to eradicate, like secret societies, or small-scale peasant uprisings.

However, business is different in modern society and in modern China. If business itself becomes an integral part of peace, to be encouraged as the driving force of development and military might that leads to greater stability for China in the international arena, then how can order and peace be said to exist at all? What kind of order and peace can be expected in a place of constant and growing business? How can we square this with the Chinese historical consciousness, preferring *zhi* over *luan*?

In a world in which wars are minimized and pushed to the periphery, war becomes a form of large-scale policing. This new perception would radically change the idea of war. When wars were like the First World War, the lines between peace and war were clearly demarcated. If war becomes a matter of policing against rogues and criminals, then one is always at war, because there will always be criminals. For these matters a different international framework is needed. The old traditional UN will simply not work, just as it is not working now. Yet it is not at all clear what new structure should be established.

Similarly, if *luan* is an integral part of the new order by way of international business, we need a new political structure to manage this society, different from the imperial past. Here things are somewhat easier: experience in the West has proved that democracy has been effective in preserving a large degree of order and stability while still encouraging economic growth. In China there are many students of Marx who believe deep down in their souls that economics and politics go hand in hand. So, putting things very simply, if China wants to manage the turbo capitalism it has ignited, it will need some strong political change. What the future will be is certainly not clear, but some form of democratization might be unavoidable.

### Geography in the traditional Chinese world-view

Feng Yulan, in his landmark work *History of Chinese Philosophy*, first translated into English in 1952, started from a geographical description of the conditions that gave rise to Chinese thought. Ancient Chinese philosophers were born on a large plain that shared a common language and culture. Tiny states, possibly concentrated around small towns, were expanding by conquering other neighboring states. The conquerors would try to manage the territory of the conquered better by fully integrating the vanquished population and land into a political and economic system unified with

their own. Communication was very convenient along the existing roads linking different parts of a world that shared the same language and values. Thinkers and thoughts circulated widely in this humus as well, because there was a very concrete practical value in them – they provided a better means to make each ruler richer and stronger and thus helped each state to fend better for itself in times of conquest.

This environment was dramatically different from that of the Greek towns squeezed between the mountains and the sea. These cities were independent, did not create organized land states of the Chinese kind, but were largely trading posts. Here ideas were freely traded and discussed in the market place, alongside all other different goods, with potential ‘customers’, i.e. likely followers, competing thinkers. Here the thinker wanted to ‘win’ an argument, that is, gain the support of the public listening to the debate as if they were at the theatre.

This was very different from China. Here we find the local philosopher talking most of the time to kings and rulers, trying to convince them that by adopting his theory the ruler’s state will become stronger. The practical goal of the philosophical debate was so strong that Hanfei Zi, the master whose theory made possible Chinese unification with the first emperor, went so far as to reject the use of debate.

Yuqing made a house and told a carpenter, ‘The house is too high.’

The carpenter said, ‘This is a new house, the mud is wet and the wood of the architrave is fresh.’

Yuqing replied, ‘It is not so – the wet mud is heavy and the fresh wood of the architrave is bent. The heavy mud cannot be sustained by the bent architrave, this will be proper when the house is lowered. After a few days the mud will be dry and the architrave will be desiccated. Dry mud is light and desiccated architraves are straight. To sustain light mud with a straight architrave, in this way it will be high.’

The carpenter obeyed. He made it like that and the house collapsed.

Someone else said that Yuqing wanted to have a house made and a carpenter told him, ‘The wood is fresh, the mud is heavy. If the wood is fresh it will bend; if the mud is wet it will be heavy; to sustain the heavy with the bent, even if it works today, in the long run it will necessarily be a disaster.’

Yuqing replied, ‘When the wood dries then it will be straight, when the mud dries it will be light. Now it certainly will become dry and after a few days it will be light and straight, and even after a long time necessarily there will be no disaster.’

The carpenter obeyed, made it, finished, and after a while the house as expected collapsed.

Fanqie said, ‘In the case of the breaking of a crossbow it must be at its completion, not at its beginning. When an artisan bends the crossbow he has to keep it in the bow-last three nights and then put the string on, wait for a day and then start the trigger. This is having rules at the beginning and being violent at the completion. Then it will not break.’

Fanqie said, ‘It is not so. Place it in the bow-last for a day and then put the string on. Wait for three nights and then start the trigger. This is being violent at the beginning and having rules at the completion.’

The artisan had nothing to say but when it was used, the crossbow broke.

Fanqie and Yuqing’s words are beautiful in debates and make them win, but are against the truth of facts. The lords are persuaded and cannot stop them – this is how they are defeated. When one does not plan an orderly and strong result but revels in the sound of hairsplitting discussions and beautiful speeches, then one will turn down the gentlemen who have the art and trust to the ones who make houses collapse and crossbows break. Thus in dealing with the affairs of the state the lords do not even reach artisans and crafts-

men building houses and bending crossbows. Being so the gentlemen are limited to the cases of Fanqie and Yuqing: make up empty talk which is useless and win; the truth of facts, which does not change, is confined. The lords thrive in useless debates and have few unchanging words – this is how there is disorder. Today the ones who act like Fanqie and Yuqing are not stopped and the edicts of the lords do not stop – this is the category of why aristocracy is defeated and artisans and craftsmen are considered the ones who know the techniques. They cannot practise their skills, thus houses break down and crossbows break. The ones who know how to rule cannot perform their method and art so the state is in chaos and the lord in peril. (Hanfei Zi: *Wai chu shuo zuo shang* [my translation])

Hanfei Zi's influence is huge, as his ideas helped the first emperor to unify China under his rule. But he is also part of an ancient tradition starting as early as the first Mohists, in the 4th century BC. They all wanted to prove theories against reality. This was in a way very different from the Greeks, who also, like Plato and Aristotle, despised empty talk. But Plato and his peers wanted to search for an argument's validity in the pure, true realm of mathematics, which provided 'true' ideas. Hanfei Zi simply asked: is the roof or the crossbow solid? Will the house collapse, or will the crossbow shoot? Behind these questions we can feel the ruler's interest wondering: is this theory going to make me powerful, or will it destroy my country?

Feng suggests that behind these different attitudes there were the needs of two peoples. The sea-faring Greeks looked at the fixed stars to find themselves and the route home on the wide ocean. There were also farmers struggling with changing weather and vicious invading enemies, and trying to set up a system that could increase crops and protect from encroaching invaders. The Greeks had no large bountiful plain land to protect from a motley array of possible invaders, and the invaders were challenged at sea.

The ancient Chinese world-view was landlocked, because to the north and west China had the desert, to the south it had the mountains and to the east there was the sea. In the middle there was very rich soil. Then the issue and the drive for philosophers and rulers was not to try to move beyond these hard geographical limits but to retain this solid agricultural welfare.

The welfare of the Greeks was in the sea, not their scarce land. It was in their searching for new trade, new ports, new bargains, trying not to get lost and so looking to the stars, to the strict rules of navigation. Solid, mathematical truths helped those sailors.

In China, in other words, there was no reason to believe the world counted, everything under heaven that really mattered was those plains locked between desert, mountains and sea. Quite early the Chinese ventured out of those plains. The Han, the dynasty following the unifying Qin, reached the Caspian Sea in the west, went as far south as modern Hanoi to 'pacify' the people of Yue (the modern name 'Vietnam' comes from the Chinese for 'the pacified Yue') and sent explorers to Korea and Japan. But nowhere in their vicinity did they find a place as rich as their plains to justify arguably a further extension of their rule. So the geography of China has remained roughly the same since the first unification.

This is totally different from the geography of the Western world's history. The Greek world included modern Greece, southern Italy and coastal Turkey, which is not now considered part of the Western world, and Greece itself was until recently called 'the near east'. Rome was centred around the Mediterranean sea, which after

the 7th–8th century split in two: the Western, Christian world occupies the north and the ‘Eastern’, Muslim world holds the south. The split has been there for over a thousand years and there is no end to this in sight.

The West, child of Greece and Rome, has moved into previously barbaric lands in the north of Europe and to distant America. In itself, with this migration, the idea of the West is associated with a cultural tradition, not a land. In a way this was consistent with the ancient ideas of Greeks and Romans, who remained Greeks and Romans regardless of the place they inhabited.

In China cultural tradition and land stayed the same and together for centuries. Only recently have the Chinese adopted the ancient Roman habit of bringing ‘China’, building China-towns, where they live. But this possibly occurred because of cultural changes that started four centuries ago.

### **A new world – no longer under heaven**

Ge Zhaoguang, in his classic *Zhongguo sixiang shi* (History of Chinese thought, Shanghai, 2001, Vol. 2 ch. 13), explained the dramatic change in world-view brought to the Chinese court with the maps drawn by Matteo Ricci. Ricci had arrived in China years before. He learned Chinese, donned Chinese robes, took on Chinese manners. At the time this was enough to make him ‘Chinese’, which at that period was called *hua ren* (flowery man, civilized man). Foreigners (barbarians) were called *yiren*. At the time it was enough to become fully integrated in Chinese society, which did not recognize races and ethnic origins, but only cultural upbringing.

But at this point, according to the reconstruction by Ge, the sinicized Ricci said to his Chinese friends: Thank you for calling me civilized, as I am actually civilized, but I do not belong to your civilization but a different one. This sparked the emperor’s curiosity. He knew of the rest of the world, he knew of other people, but he thought no other people had the level of civilization of the Chinese. So he ordered new maps to be drawn by Ricci.

This Ricci did according to the knowledge of the time. His first challenge was to save China’s face. The emperor called himself the son of heaven and his empire was simply ‘everything under heaven’, *tianxia*. Ricci had to show not simply that China was not everything (which the emperor knew) but also that its territory was considerably smaller than the Chinese thought. He tried to compensate for this by putting China at the centre of the map, thus cutting the globe at the Atlantic Ocean, and christening China, not *tianxia* but *zhongguo*, the middle kingdom. The term had previously been used in ancient times, before the first emperor’s unification, to indicate the kingdoms sitting in the middle of the Chinese plains. It was also used later, in Song times, to indicate the Song realm when the northern barbarians were pushing the Song court southwards. But with Ricci it took on a completely different nuance. When the empire was strong and occupied the plains it was *tianxia*, because it ruled everything that mattered. Now Ricci was showing a different world, of which China was only about 5 per cent; this could still be called *tianxia* for ideological purposes, but it was really at best the ‘middle kingdom’.

A different era was dawning for China and the world. Ricci died in Beijing in 1610;

Shakespeare's death came just six years later. At that time the power of England was coming of age, after its victory over Spain, yet Shakespeare, interpreting no doubt a common feeling in England at the time, thought that Venice was the centre of the world. He set many of his plays in the Republic of Venice, for instance *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice*. Shakespeare was not far from the truth. Despite the discovery of America the Mediterranean was still the centre of the Western world and here Venice was the linchpin of the sea's security and economy. Just a few decades before, in 1571 at Lepanto, Venice had led a Christian fleet that stemmed the invading Turkish forces. If the Turks had won at Lepanto, Europe might have been unified under Istanbul and, who knows, the Turks could have reached London by 1610 or 1616. Yet after its victory Venice began a rapid decline. The centre of the world and its trade became the Atlantic, with an increasing flow of products reaching Europe from America.

As a new world was starting for Europe, in a similar fashion a new world was starting for China at the time of Ricci's maps. Not long after his death, the Ming emperors were replaced in 1644 by the Qing, invading 'barbarians' from the north who retained and promoted the Jesuits who had reached China following Ricci. By the 18th century the Jesuits had become a force to be reckoned with in the imperial court. They held important offices with Fathers Von Schall and Verbiest, while another Italian, Giuseppe Castiglione (Milan 1688–1766 Beijing), was promoted court painter, and from there proceeded to change further the Chinese way of looking at the world.

Castiglione is famous for being the first to introduce the use of perspective into Chinese painting. Yet he did not simply paint according to Western methods, he adapted himself and Western perspective considerably to Chinese sensibilities. His paintings had no *punto di fuga* (vanishing point), a concept well known and widely used in the West since Da Vinci. Nor did they have the shading of light that had reached fantastic levels since the Venetian paintings of Tintoretto and his followers. They did have a deep knowledge of anatomy, the working of the body beneath the clothes, and the bodies of animals, horses especially. In more than one respect Castiglione invented a new way of representing reality in a picture, something that was acceptable to the Chinese viewer. It was palatable for his immediate public, but nevertheless brought new elements to the representation of reality.

The role of court painter, and of court painting, is hard to assess in a world with TV, cinema and the internet. Yet, in a world without moving images, without photography, court painting could be considered the one official way to represent reality, and thus to show the public how the court wanted reality to be seen, how the emperor wanted to show himself and his actions. In other words, next to the work of the official historian, court painting was the official representation of how reality should be seen. In this way Castiglione contributed to changing the way the empire wanted to show itself. The influence of Western perspective and sensibility went on to influence the building of the imperial summer palace of Yuanmingyuan, and even the design of some imperial gardens.

In all these artistic representations Western sensibility trickled into Chinese sensibility, creating something new and different. However, this new sensibility was consistent with the original Chinese one; it was not a total break like the one that occurred over a century later with the arrival of Western knowledge.

Perhaps never before had Chinese history experienced such a massive shock. Buddhism had radically changed China over fifteen hundred years before, but it had done so over a period of a few centuries, a time when China also helped to change Buddhism and adapt it to its own habits and customs. This time Western knowledge took China by storm and in a few decades changed everything from language to systematization of knowledge, modes of dress, family structure and houses. It brought total change. Nothing was to be the same again. For millennia Chinese knowledge was organized into *shi*, history, *wen*, literature in a very broad sense, *zi*, the classical masters, *jing*, the classics. The West introduced a totally new system and totally new categories: philosophy, economics, sociology, etc. Of these, some, like philosophy or logic, were ancient concepts, others, economics and sociology for instance, were new.

The new concepts were somehow easier to cope with: the new cultural production had to follow the new Western rules. But old Western concepts, like philosophy or logic, required the Chinese to look back at their own tradition and re-organize their previous knowledge into new categories. New words had to be invented, some craftily coined according to the meaning of the original Chinese characters, like *zhexue*, philosophy; others were so new that translators could not help but just borrow the sound, so 'logic' became *luoji*. Accordingly, armed with *zhexue* and *luoji*, the Chinese had to look back to their past and find their own history of 'philosophy' and logic. In a way the whole Chinese past had to be reconsidered in the light of the present. Chinese tradition was used to some extent in this exercise. Any new dynasty would write the history of the previous dynasty to set its own records straight. But it was a small attempt, as historians had to handle two or three thousand years of history and had the task of finding continuity between present and past. In a way then the present had to conform to the past.

The cultural revolution of the late 19th century and in fact all of the 20th century in China was (and still is) much wider. It does not want to have the present conforming to the past, on the contrary it wants to re-read over three thousand years of past history according to present necessities and sensibilities. These sensibilities are largely, if not totally, Western. In a way China was forced by circumstances to look back at herself through different eyes – Western eyes. The effort of conversion went so deep that it engulfed almost every aspect of life. Traditional ideal families, with many wives and crowds of children, gave way first to one-wife families then even to single-child families. Homes, which ideally developed horizontally in a sequence of courtyards and pavilions, now developed vertically in apartment buildings. The traditional imperial system, which had lasted for millennia, was replaced by a republic that crowned a handful of foreigners (Marx, Engels and Lenin) as its inspiring force.

In other words, for over a century China looked at herself through new, foreign lenses and thus did not have any real ambition, or even time and will, to develop a fresh look onto the new world outside. In ancient times it did not, because it had little or no interest in the outside world, later it not have the time and energy.

But China's growing economic and political role in this century forces her to develop, for the first time in her history, a really global world-view. In this sense the first systematic effort by Zhao Tingyang is special. He does it by drawing inspiration from ancient Chinese history. The present world looks to Zhao similar to that of the Springs and Autumns period, between the 8th and 5th century BC. Then there were many



states, *guo*, competing with each other. Some were far more powerful than others and vied to gain the power to be the 'hegemon', *ba*. At the same time there was still the person of the 'son of heaven', *tianzi*, who was devoid of any real power but still retained an important ceremonial influence. It was a situation possibly similar to that of medieval Japan, where powerful fiefs fought over the right to become *shogun*, the main driving power in Japan, while the emperor was relegated to a largely ceremonial role. But the victory of one *shogun* or one *ba* did not eliminate all other fiefs or states. Or it was similar to late medieval Europe, where many states were competing for power and the pope retained a religious role of mediation between them.

Nowadays there is no Japanese emperor, no medieval pope, no son of heaven to mediate between competing states and bestow his blessings on the winner. But there is a situation of competition among states and there is the need to establish a common language, a common understanding among them, similar to the one China had during the Springs and Autumns period, argues Zhao Tingyang. At the same time Zhao appears concerned about the emergence of possible 'hegemons' whose power could be unrestrained, as there are no mediating figures, like the son of heaven, and international organizations like the UN are very weak.

Besides the political, practical consequences one can draw from Zhao's analysis, there is perhaps an even more important consequence. After decades of looking at the world through the lens of the history of Greece and Persia, of the Roman Empire, Zhao offers to a world public the lens of a particular period of Chinese history to see modern reality. This in turn encourages a wider knowledge of Chinese history, beside Western history, that will also influence the global world-view.

In this way Zhao actually makes evident what was a 'hidden' reality: that the Chinese, despite over a hundred years of intense westernization, travelling, doing business, talking about world politics, continue to look at the world according to protocols that are different from those used in the West. However, re-read according to Western criteria, Chinese history and philosophy have a thrust that is very different from that of Western history and philosophy. After these hundred years of westernization China is different from its past, but it is still China, and it will not become another Western country.

This effort is necessary for China and for Asia, as the Thai thinker Pansak Vinyaratn said to us, analyzing the present situation in the region. Asian countries, he argued, need a sophisticated intellectual system underpinning their dealings with the West. This intellectual system should also underpin a modern management capacity and the efficiency of the economy. As Pansak argues, only China is moving in the direction of building this system; in other Asian countries there is only chauvinism under a veneer of modernization. Asian countries need this system to balance what from Asia look like two separate intellectual forces – continental Europe and the Anglo-Saxon world, the US and Great Britain.

The practical consequences of this – as we are speaking of China and we want to be practical like the Chinese – could be huge: families, homes, clothes, despite their apparent Western flair, retain and will retain an important Chinese content. And so in a way the world, and in this case the West, will also have to learn to become a little Chinese.

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