



**A Study in Strategic Empathy: A
Critical Exploration of Mainland
Chinese Legitimisations for a
Taiwan Scenario**

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About the Danube Institute

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About the Author



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A Study in Strategic Empathy: A Critical Exploration of Mainland Chinese Legitimisations for a Taiwan Scenario

Eric Hendriks

Abstract

This article sheds light on mainland Chinese political-theoretical perspectives on reunification with Taiwan—perspectives that, particularly in their idealism, tend to remain hidden from Western observers. Explaining these perspectives in their basic contours should not be mistaken for endorsing them. Further, the analysis does not seek to detract from the heartfelt idealism that informs Taiwanese and Western commitments to Taiwanese self-determination and liberal-democratic governance. However, even the most elementary form of strategic intelligence requires some understanding of the ideas on “the other side.” Chinese intellectuals and political leaders have developed an extensive arsenal of political conceptions—including elevated philosophical frameworks and even millenarian visions—that serve to legitimise a future reunification with Taiwan. According to Party doctrine, reunification would enable China to liberate the international political order from America’s hegemonic spirit and to elevate international politics to a “community of common destiny.” Meanwhile, in the most lofty philosophical renditions, international power politics must ultimately give way to a new *tianxia*, an “all-under-heaven” global harmony. Such conceptions tie the very well-being of humanity to the incorporation of Taiwan into the People’s Republic of China (PRC). These ideas form a script (or set of scripts) ready to be deployed polemically should the PRC take concrete steps towards reunification.

Introduction

Where better to examine mainland perspectives on the Taiwan question than Budapest, a site of ideological disruption and, within Europe, arguably the capital most deeply connected to the wider world of multipolarity? The Danube Institute, part of a broader conservative intellectual ecosystem, offers an additional advantage: Conservatism, more than contemporary liberalism, is attentive to historical and cultural differences, which are crucial for understanding non-Western perspectives.

From within Budapest's conservative milieu, our multipolar world—or bipolar world, if one counts only the United States and China as the truly comprehensive geopolitical poles—is more readily accessible in its cultural and interpretive depth than in the core regions of the liberal West, where there is a strong tendency to impose an abstract political template on global realities. Mainstream contemporary liberal thought, as it predominates within Western knowledge institutions, readily equates idealism with liberal ideals historically rooted in the Western world, thereby paying insufficient attention to the interpretive depth of politico-cultural Others. The Other, in this case, consists of mainland Chinese theories and ideals surrounding the pursuit of reunification.

To be clear, it is entirely understandable that many Taiwanese and Western observers attach a strong sense of idealism to the Taiwan issue, expressed in a principled commitment to Taiwanese self-determination, liberal-democratic governance, and the preservation of a pluralistic way of life under conditions of political freedom. These commitments are reinforced by concerns about coercion, authoritarian encroachment, and the broader implications for the international order if a charming, liberal-democratic, and Western-aligned polity were forcibly incorporated into the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Nothing in what follows should detract from the genuine idealism and attachment to freedom among Taiwanese and their Western sympathisers, who hope that their governments—and particularly that of the United States—will act politically, and if necessary militarily, to prevent a forcible absorption of Taiwan into the PRC.

Yet there is another side to the story: In today's multipolar or bipolar world, the ability to situate oneself within the Other's perspective is an indispensable skill. After all, many mainland thinkers, oriented towards eventual reunification, have developed their own ideals and conceptual frameworks around this objective. It is important to understand these ideals and frameworks, both for reasons of intellectual and ethical enrichment and for what is often termed “strategic empathy”. You cannot act strategically in international politics if you do not know anything about the interpretative traditions of intellectuals and politicians in powerful states outside of the West. So, even those who regard the PRC as a systemic rival or even an enemy (I reject both those designations) must still seek to understand what motivates it.

The analysis that follows, therefore, seeks to explicate mainland perspectives. Again, note that explaining mainland ideas must not be mistaken for endorsing them, even if making visible the idealisms that remain largely hidden from Western audiences may unsettle more rigid good-versus-evil framings in which the mainland appears as the unambiguous villain.

A final caveat is that the analysis below does not aim to provide a comprehensive topography of mainland thinking on Taiwan. Rather, it highlights a number of key elements within an intellectual and idealistic framework that remains largely inaccessible to Western readers, and seeks to render these, in a concise manner, more intelligible.



Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) plant in Hsinchu Science Park, Taiwan (Shutterstock)

Mainland Millenarianism

Millenarianism refers to the belief that history is moving towards a transformative, redemptive end-state, an era of ultimate harmony, justice, or salvation. In the more philosophically elevated mainland discourses, such millenarian hopes can attach themselves to reunification with Taiwan, in a manner that Westerners will likely find absurd. Can humanity truly flourish only if the PRC succeeds in incorporating Taiwan into its governing structure? This proposition will be completely unfamiliar to most Westerners, yet it occupies a significant place in Chinese political thought, at the highest academic levels and within the ideology of the Communist Party of China (CPC). In China, the planned future incorporation of Taiwan—officially the Republic of China (ROC), a *de facto* but not *de jure* polity separated from the rest of China—has become associated with a powerful strain of idealism, even a millenarianism.

This may surprise many in the West, who tend to assume that elevated idealism attaches only to the cause of Taiwanese independence. Western-centric, liberal views risk assuming that the only idealists in the story are Taiwanese and Western sympathisers who praise liberal values and liberal-democratic self-governance and therefore fear unification with the mainland. Accordingly, on the pro-unification side, by contrast, one would find only a lust for power, nationalism, and soulless authoritarianism.

However, for reasons of strategic empathy and political self-awareness, it is essential to understand the idealism inherent to the pro-reunification perspective, which means taking seriously the ideas that underpin it.

The PRC's body of intellectual thought surrounding Taiwan, which further heightens the island's political status, can and probably will serve as preparatory work for reunification. China prefers that reunification be peaceful and voluntary. However, should this prove unattainable, reunification may be pursued through coercive means, potentially including military force. If the PRC were to resort to such measures in the Taiwan Strait, the intellectual arsenal, i.e., the resources of political justification, is already prepared. This arsenal has been readied to support the probable future reunification of Taiwan, whatever form that reunification may take. In the event of an invasion, an entire library stands ready to explain that what is unfolding is, in fact, not an invasion at all, but liberation, national healing, or even a step towards the salvation of humanity as a whole.

An entire field of legitimising narratives propagates, in a multitude of ways, that the very future of humanity—global harmony itself—depends on the CPC establishing control over Taiwan. Keywords include “the China dream of the great restoration of the Chinese nation”, *tianxia*, “the Century of Humiliation”, the West's “Roman spirit”, and the “community of common destiny”.

It follows that we already know what China will tell us when it will concretely move toward reunification, regardless of what form that may take. The script of the propaganda programme—the philosophy of China's coming war, if one were to be overly cynical—has been written and promulgated. Let me explain the narrative, starting with Taiwan's place in Xi Jinping Thought.



*People attend a Chinese Nationalist Party rally in Taipei, Taiwan
(Shutterstock)*

Taiwan in Xi Jinping Thought

Taiwan's place within Xi Jinping Thought suggests that an eventual "Taiwan scenario" is likely. That is, Taiwan is likely to be integrated into a version of the "one country, two systems" model. This is the constitutional model under which the PRC allows certain regions to retain their own economic and legal systems and a high degree of self-rule outside of the central hierarchy of the PRC's party-state, while ultimate sovereignty remains with Beijing under the leadership of the CPC. "One country, two systems" was designed to incorporate Hong Kong and Macau as benignly as possible in 1997 and 1999, respectively, and is now being advanced as the model for Taiwan's future incorporation.

Reunification has been an official objective since the founding of the PRC, but under General Secretary Xi Jinping, it has moved to the very core of Xi Jinping Thought, the state doctrine. Consider the conceptual logic. "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era" (习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想) is the CPC doctrine that powerfully guides China's political thought, also in its academic extensions. This doctrine places at its centre the ideal of "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (中华民族伟大复兴). A central component of this rejuvenation is the restoration of territorial integrity, which, in turn, centrally includes the incorporation of the island of Taiwan into the PRC.¹

In summary, taking Taiwan is key to the main objective ("great rejuvenation") of the official state doctrine (Xi Jinping Thought). In terms of ideology, there is little room for manoeuvre. The Taiwan claim seems set in stone.

This means that General Secretary Xi leaves himself little room to back out of his commitment. The imperative of reunification lies at the heart of the CPC's overarching narrative of national revival and has only become more pronounced under Xi's leadership. Taking Taiwan is framed as necessary to fulfil China's political mission, rendering it an undertaking that cannot easily be abandoned. At the same time, the Party retains the option of deferring action, which brings us to the question of timing.

Intent Clear, Timeline Unclear

That Taiwan will likely be incorporated by the PRC in the end does not mean the timeline is clear. On the contrary, the timeline remains deeply uncertain. China may well continue to believe that time is on its side, holding out for a historical turn in which Taiwan might move towards accommodation voluntarily. This uncertainty is crucial, since the key variables in the equation – such as the balance of power between China and the United States, and the broader orientation of the international order – can shift significantly over longer periods.

One important indication that Beijing is unlikely to take escalatory steps in the near term is the recent upheaval within its military leadership. At present, the Vice-Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), China's highest military body, is under investigation. Of the seven members originally comprising the CMC under Xi's current term, five have now been removed or are under investigation, leaving only Xi himself and the chief of discipline oversight in place. Such far-reaching measures, which inevitably affect morale and cohesion within the armed forces, are unlikely to be undertaken if imminent military action were being planned.

Xi's disciplinary measures, like the current one targeting the CMC, are typically misunderstood in Western discourse as manifestations of raw power politics. Western observers, unfamiliar with Chinese strands of idealism and the "spiritual" side of Chinese politics, usually interpret these purges speculatively as signs of factional conflict, coup prevention, or personal power consolidation. However, what can be established more reliably is that the anti-corruption drive has been consistent, sustained, and highly ambitious since Xi came to power in 2012, seemingly serving a genuine will to cleanse the party and the state. It has targeted party and state officials at all levels – both senior "tigers" and minor "flies" – across civilian and military institutions, and has not spared individuals with close ties to the leadership or even Xi personally. The campaign is marked by strict enforcement of discipline and exacting expectations regarding competence and moral conduct.

Behind the campaign stands a culturally specific idealism and a distinct sense of moral-spiritual mission. The severity of the sanctions – whereby even relatively minor violations can result in significant penalties – reflects the imperial (Neo-)Confucian tradition of thinking about politico-moral order. Far predating the communist era, this tradition of political thought understands order as grounded in the wholesomeness of the political centre. The centre thus carries a comprehensive moral, spiritual, even metaphysical responsibility.

The relevant sociological context here is that political and spiritual authority have historically been less sharply differentiated in China than in the West. The Western tradition of differentiation, powerfully emerging from the Holy Roman Empire, is built on distinctions between pope and Caesar, the City of God and the City of Man, and the two swords (*doctrina duorum gladiatorum*). These distinctions were further radicalised during the Enlightenment, giving rise to the separation of church and state and to a clearer division between theology, on the one hand, and secular scholarship, science, and philosophy, on the other.²

In China, by contrast, politics and religion (and philosophy) have been much less differentiated from each other, their relatively undifferentiated character embodied in the figure of the Mandarin scholar-official and, in the present, in the Party leadership. Like the imperial court in dynastic China, the Party is the all-encompassing political, moral, and spiritual teacher of the people, with Xi, in a sense, functioning as both Caesar and pope. Accordingly, the Party leadership assumes responsibilities that Western observers, socialised within a more differentiated conceptual framework, would place in the “religious” sphere. In the less differentiated Chinese perspective, political and moral order – a form of legitimacy that transcends the Western separation between politics and religion – radiates outward, concentrically, from the political centre represented by the CPC leadership: to the rest of the Party, to the state, to Chinese society, and ultimately to the world beyond.

Because the political centre is thus held to uphold (world) order in the comprehensive sense, even minor failings among political and military elites are deemed unacceptable and must be eliminated. Hence, Xi’s enduring campaign, which has recently extended to incapacitating the military leadership.

Long story short: for now, Xi’s campaign of moral and disciplinary rectification, the impetus for which roots in millennia of Chinese history, appears to take precedence over any concrete preparation for a Taiwan scenario, at least in the short term.

An additional purpose of the above excursus into the relatively undifferentiated relationship between politics and “religion” in mainstream Chinese political thought is to provide crucial background for the analysis that follows. It helps explain why intellectual discourses calling for reunification are often couched in such lofty, spiritual, even semi-religious language. Note that political concepts such as the “community of common destiny”, *tianxia*, the “new era”, the “kingly way”, and the “rejuvenation of the nation” – all of which feature in discourses on reunification – carry a semi-religious resonance. This is because they indeed occupy a space that, for Western observers accustomed to a sharper distinction between politics and religion, would appear to lie somewhere halfway within the religious domain.

Yet, before turning to those more elevated intellectual and spiritual concepts and justifications, let me begin with the more immediate, more mundane political motives behind the push for reunification.



*View of the Forbidden City, Beijing
(Shutterstock)*

Political Justifications for Reunification

As noted, reunification occupies a central place within Xi Jinping Thought – and not without reason. For Beijing, Taiwan is the final unresolved legacy of China’s modern fragmentation, tied to the historical trauma of the Century of Humiliation (1839–1940s; 百年国耻) and the incomplete process of national reunification following the civil war.

Its incorporation is therefore understood as a necessary step in restoring China’s territorial integrity and achieving the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Beyond this historical dimension, Taiwan, i.e., the Republic of China, also carries symbolic weight: its continued separation challenges the CPC’s claim to represent China as a unified political and moral whole.

Finally, Taiwan’s geopolitical position – at the centre of the first island chain and embedded in U.S.-aligned security structures – makes it strategically significant for regional power projection. Even more importantly, Taiwan occupies a pivotal role in the global semiconductor supply chain: through TSMC, it produces over 90 per cent of the world’s most advanced chips. Nothing less than the material foundation under Silicon Valley and a sizable part of America’s stock markets, this makes the island central to the technological and industrial competition of the twenty-first century.

How different things used to be. The pre-eminent strategic and ideological relevance of Taiwan is a new development, emerging in the second half of the twentieth century, and even more so in the twenty-first. For much of history, Taiwan lay at the periphery of the Sinosphere and was long neglected by imperial China. It was only under the Qing dynasty in the late seventeenth century that Taiwan was incorporated into the empire, and even then, governance remained partial.

Following defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War, the Qing ceded Taiwan to Japan in 1895 under the Treaty of Shimonoseki. Taiwan then remained under Japanese colonial rule for fifty years. After Japan’s defeat in 1945, control over Taiwan was transferred to the Republic of China under the Guomindang.

The subsequent Chinese Civil War, however, resulted in Communist victory on the mainland in 1949, while the Guomindang retreated to Taiwan, where it maintained the Republic of China as a separate political entity. During the Cold War, Taiwan’s position was consolidated through American military and political support, embedding it within a broader U.S.-aligned security architecture in East Asia.

One of the main reasons Taiwan remains politically sensitive, and why the CPC cannot easily set aside its claim for pragmatic reasons, is that the island’s unresolved status is closely tied, in the political imagination, to China’s territorial and spiritual wholeness, its rise, and, in an extended sense, to the final and full reckoning with the Century of Humiliation (1839–1945/1949).

First popularised by the Guomindang, the term Century of Humiliation referred to the period from the Opium Wars in the mid-nineteenth century to the end of Japanese occupation in 1945. Indeed, it was the Guomindang government that played a decisive role in bringing this period to a close. Under the Guomindang, China recovered several concessions and restored sovereignty over key territories previously subject to foreign control, including the end of extraterritorial rights, the retrocession of Taiwan in 1945, and the recovery of areas such as the international settlements in Shanghai and other treaty-port cities long held by European powers.

As one of the Allied victors of the Second World War, the Republic of China re-emerged as a sovereign state, bringing to an end the most acute forms of foreign domination that had defined the century of humiliation.

The CPC, however, has reinterpreted the notion of the century of humiliation in a way that places itself at the centre and extends its endpoint. In this narrative, the Century does not conclude with Japan’s defeat, but with the founding of the PRC in 1949.

Moreover, its legacies – or the lingering traces of those legacies – are understood to be fully overcome only with the completion of China's rise under CPC leadership. From this perspective, the recovery of lost territories and the overcoming of external domination remain incomplete processes, still unfolding in the present.

Perhaps only the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, projected in official CPC timelines to be realised by 2050, will invert the century of humiliation. In any case, within this framework, reunification with Taiwan must be completed by mid-century as an integral component of said national rejuvenation.

Implicit in the CPC's historical narrative, or deducible from it, is that Taiwan would be the last main unresolved legacy of the Century of Humiliation.

As with the case of Hong Kong, which was reintegrated in 1997 as part of a decolonisation process, reunification with Taiwan is similarly associated with decolonisation.

Having been ceded to an expansionist Japan in 1895 and subsequently shaped by the geopolitical realities of the Cold War, including sustained American influence, Taiwan is often viewed by mainland intellectuals as a lingering product of European, Japanese, and then American imperial domination in East Asia.

Its eventual incorporation is therefore a matter of historical closure: the final step in undoing the legacies of foreign domination and completing China's long transition from subjugation to restored sovereignty and dignity.



*Taiwan President Lai Ching-te
(Shutterstock)*

What the Intellectuals Say

A substantial body of intellectual production has emerged over the decades around the status of Taiwan, both within Party doctrine and within a broader mainland intellectual field that interacts closely with it. In a manner characteristic of China's socio-structural legacy, politics, religion, and philosophy here combine. The incorporation of Taiwan into the PRC is seen as enabling China to deliver its uniquely constitutive, material and spiritual contribution to the global formation of a community of common destiny, as envisaged in Party doctrine, or even to a *tianxia* harmony, as some philosophers and Party thinkers hope. Without wholeness, without reunification—with a fractured China—the country would be unable to render this service to the world, and the world itself would remain fractured: a “non-world” (非世界), as *tianxia* philosopher Zhao Tingyang (赵汀阳) puts it.³

The official CPC master concept for the global order in the “new era” (新时代) is the “community of common destiny”, an international order in which states are bound together by a shared future, as well as shared interests and responsibilities, and coexist harmoniously. China is deemed to play a particularly crucial role in fostering this order. China entered this new era at the “moderately prosperous” stage of development (*xiaokang*, 小康): This is a classical Confucian concept denoting a condition of modest yet solid societal flourishing, economically, morally, and spiritually. China is now expected to advance domestically from this intermediate *xiaokang* level towards the full realisation of national rejuvenation at which point China will be a “great modern socialist country that is rich, strong, democratic, cultured, harmonious, and beautiful”⁴. Meanwhile, on the international level, China will assume a shared responsibility for lifting global governance toward a true community of common destiny. In fact, it is through its national rejuvenation that China will be able to most powerfully contribute to the formation of that better world. In General Secretary Xi's words, “China's development is itself the greatest contribution to the world.”⁵

That Taiwan's incorporation plays an important role in the formation of the community of common destiny is, in official speeches by Party leaders, largely implicit, but can nevertheless be inferred.

As the political scientist Hsu Chia-hao has shown, “the origin of the Mandarin term *mingyun gongtongti* came from Taiwan”, referring to the shared community of destiny formed by the mainland and Taiwan before the term's meaning was expanded to a global context. Hsu further found that “the CPC's use of the ‘community of common destiny’ prior to Xi was usually about Cross-(Taiwan) Strait relations”. Xi's Politburo began to use the concept systematically to denote a harmonious coexistence worldwide.⁶

In their systematic account of Xi Jinping Thought, Steve Tsang and Olivia Cheung posit that the exact origin of the phrase is former CPC-leader Hu Jintao's 2007 speech at the 17th National Congress of the CPC, in which Hu asserted that mainland China and Taiwan formed “an entity of common destiny linked by blood.”⁷

In the current, official and mainstream view on the Mainland, China has a special civilisational responsibility toward the community of common destiny, grounded in its uniquely potent capacity for harmonisation.

This view derives, in the first instance, from the widespread common-sense impression of China's relative historical “peacefulness”, which stands out sharply in contrast to Western ideological aggression. Western aggression expresses itself in anything from French-style revolutionary self-universalisation and Christian and liberal missionary zeal, to the recurring fantasies of regime changing out of existence all other major political systems and civilisations. Chinese political thought has no equivalent expansionist inclination. In a caricatured depiction of the contrast, Xi argues that:

*“The Chinese people have always celebrated and striven to pursue the vision of peace, amity and harmony. China has never and will never invade or bully others, or seek hegemony. China is always a builder of world peace, contributor to global development, defender of the international order and provider of public goods.”*⁸

The contrast was succinctly captured in 1991 by Wang Huning (王沪宁), then still an academic and today a member of the Politburo Standing Committee and the CPC's chief ideological architect. He wrote: "American culture is an aggressive culture and Chinese culture is a defensive culture."⁹ At present, this way of thinking is commonplace in Chinese intellectual and educational circles. For instance, a staff member at the Confucius Institute in Miskolc, Hungary, told me in a similar vein that China, throughout its history, "has never fought a war of aggression". To be sure, her claim was not entirely factually correct, but it nonetheless touches upon a striking truth: China lacks the kind of fervent, ideologically charged impulse towards self-universalisation that chases Western powers over the whole surface of the globe.

The philosophers take this general, vague, yet commonsensical insight and extrapolate from it systematised doctrines of Chinese exceptionalism. These exceptionalisms cast China as a "world-patterned state" (天下型国家) or a "world nation" (世界民族), in the words of Zhao Tingyang (赵汀阳) and Xu Jilin (许纪霖), respectively.¹⁰ Zhao and Xu both belong to the new *tianxia* school, a contemporary current of thought that seeks to revive and reinterpret the classical concept of *tianxia*, "all under heaven", as a model for a future global order grounded in harmony-in-diversity.

Combining philosophy, political polemic, and religious vision, the new *tianxia*-ism prophesies the imminent coming of a post-Westphalian world that will uplift people's hearts worldwide by erasing selfishness and rivalry from politics and society, all without abolishing national, cultural, and civilisational plurality. The new *tianxia* will be all-inclusive, possessing an "unlimited compatibility" with the world's many different forms of life, like the *tianxia* imagined to have existed in East Asia in China's ancient history, but without centring on China and while covering the whole globe equally.

Tianxia-ists such as Zhao and Xu are Sino exceptionalists, however, in that they hold China to an exceptionally high standard: it must bring the true world spirit of *tianxia* into the world, though, as Zhao and Xu admit, it does not yet possess the moral qualities required to fulfil this world-historical mission. Xu warns in his manifesto-like essay "The New *Tianxia*-ism" (新天下主义) of 2015 that "China ... must assume responsibility for the world and for the 'world spirit' it has inherited."¹¹



*View of the Presidential Office Building, Taipei
(Shutterstock)*

War of the Worlds

Accordingly, an influential thesis in Chinese political philosophy holds that the world is marked by a struggle between two fundamentally antagonistic principles of world ordering: on the one hand, a Chinese civilisational inclination towards creating an inclusive world in which the Other is granted space; on the other, a Western – and particularly American – civilisational drive towards power and domination. “The world order has two traditions”, Zhao Tingyang posits: “imperialism invented by the Romans and the *Tianxia* system invented by China.”¹² By “the Romans”, he also refers to contemporary Westerners, understood as inheritors of a Roman imperial logic that seeks to dominate others and to construct a world by universalising itself at the expense of political and cultural difference. By contrast, the Chinese spirit is said to build a world of inclusion, in which differences are rendered complementary, like the distinct instruments of a symphony orchestra. The metaphysical struggle between these two visions thus turns on “the distinction between a unilateral universalism and a compatible or inclusive universalism.”¹³

Yet, this motif of a struggle between Chinese harmony and Western hegemony – and the accompanying notion that Chinese harmony must prevail for the well-being of the world as a whole – recurs across myriad political and academic discourses and extends far beyond the New *Tianxia* School in contemporary Chinese political philosophy. We recall Xi’s insistence, cited above, that “China has never and will never invade or bully others, or seek hegemony.”

The polemical contrast also appears, for instance, in interpretations of “socialism with Chinese characteristics”. Take the interpretation by Jiang Shigong (强世功), the prominent public intellectual, legal philosopher, and president of the Minzu University of China, specialised in issues pertaining to national unity and ethnic minorities. Jiang defines the elusive “Chinese characteristics” (中国特色) in question as those of a “Chinese culture” (中国文化). Yes, he deems that culture to be geared to harmonising-in-diversity the world’s nations and civilisations.¹⁴ Chinese culture, he claims, can “absorb all positive elements from throughout the world,” in contrast to Western culture, which is something particular and limited.

Hence, according to Jiang, it is not the faux universalism of the West, but Chinese culture that can bring the world together. It can “ultimately create a new order for human civilisation that both transcends and absorbs Western civilisation”.¹⁵ But a battle must be waged against hawkish “American liberals” who resent that “the CPC leadership and socialist system with Chinese characteristics became a stumbling block in the United States’ construction of a ‘New Roman Empire’ for the entire world”.¹⁶ This line of thought implicitly belongs to a pan-Asian intellectual tradition that traces back to the beginning of the twentieth century, even if contemporary Chinese authors rarely make this lineage explicit. Pan-Asianism, which at various times and in varying forms was influential in China and Japan, outlines an opposition between a harmonious Asian East and a hegemonic West. Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925), founder of the Republic of China, channelled his Pan-Asianism through a classical conceptual pair from Mencius. Reapplying Mencius’s terminology, Sun posited a world-spanning conflict between *wangdao*, i.e., the East’s benevolent “kingly way” (王道), and *badao*, i.e., the West’s “hegemonic way” (霸道). The eastern *wangdao* must assert itself in its struggle against the western *badao* by first uniting Asia in brotherhood and then establishing a morally elevated world, liberated from European colonialism and American capitalism.

Yet, speaking in Kobe in 1924, Sun famously warned his Japanese Pan-Asianist peers to remember to uphold *wangdao* over *badao* in pursuing inner-Asian unity, knowing that the rapidly industrialising Japanese empire would be tempted to exploit its newfound material and organisational superiority against its Asian brothers. Tragically, Japan went the way Sun feared, unleashing war upon its Asian neighbours in the 1930s and 1940s, and even abusing Pan-Asian ideology as a vehicle for imperial propaganda. This propagandistic abuse culminated in the project of the “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere,” which invoked Asian solidarity and liberation from Western imperialism while in practice legitimising Japanese military domination over East and Southeast Asia. Yet, despite this darker history, the dualistic pan-Asian conception has returned with force in contemporary mainland China, albeit under new names and in subtly modified forms. In various iterations, it plays a prominent role in CPC doctrine, education, and academic political philosophy.

Liberating Taiwan in the Name of Global Harmony

The application of the Pan-Asian duality to Taiwan is readily apparent, even if Chinese thinkers are typically too discreet to spell it out: China must liberate Taiwan in the name of global harmony, freeing it from the grip of Western hegemony – a hegemony that, by separating Taiwan from China, seeks to obstruct the emergence of a world of harmonious coexistence.

In Jiang Shigong’s application, “The Taiwan question is a contest between two civilizational forces in Asia whose outcome will influence the future of human civilisation.”¹⁷ For Jiang, China carries a harmonious socialist culture into the world, while the resistance comes from the United States, the “new Roman Empire”, with its imperialist spirit of domination.¹⁸ Thus, according to Jiang, the PRC must incorporate Taiwan into its sphere of governance and culture for the sake of humanity as a whole.

This style of East-West thinking about Taiwan is highly polemical and readily lends itself to use as a resource of legitimation in the event of a concrete, perhaps even coercive incorporation of Taiwan by the mainland, which is probably precisely its intended function.

At the same time, the ideas involved are profoundly idealistic in many respects, which only makes the situation more dangerous. Given that theorists such as Jiang are sincerely idealistic, as are the notions of an all-inclusive Chinese harmonising spirit, the community of common destiny, and *tianxia*, an escalation over Taiwan risks producing two camps that each construe the conflict as an ultimate struggle between good and evil, making compromise impossible.

Many Western observers, and Western-oriented Taiwanese, will interpret a Taiwan scenario as a survival struggle. On one side stands a small, fragile liberal democracy. On the other stands an authoritarian goliath. By extension, the fight is for freedom in a world where Might Makes Right. In contrast, ideologues on the pro-reunification side will understand themselves to be resisting the spirit of hegemony, in the name of global harmony and human flourishing. Such a configuration—in which both sides believe themselves to represent the Good in a fight between Good and Evil—is a recipe for disaster. It will require considerable wisdom to avert the worst outcomes.

Endnotes

¹Steve Tsang and Olivia Cheung, *The Political Thought of Xi Jinping* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 179.

²For the Enlightenment secularism's rooting in the Western Christian tradition, see: David Lloyd Dusenbury, *I Judge No One: A Political Life of Jesus* (London: Hurst, 2022). I spell out the implications in terms of the socio-structural legacy in my review of the book for *Telos* journal. Eric Hendriks, "The Early Christian Origins of Secularization", *Telos* Spring 2023 vol. 2023 no. 202, pp. 155–157.

³Zhao, Tingyang (赵汀阳). 天下的当代性：世界秩序的实践与想象 [The Contemporary Relevance of Tianxia: Practice and Imagination of World Order] (Beijing: CITIC Press, 2016) p. 161.

⁴Tsang and Cheung, *The Political Thought of Xi Jinping*, 28.

⁵Ibid, 183.

⁶Hsu Chiahao, "The Community of Common Destiny", address at the China Keywords conference of the Telos-Paul Piccone Institute, The John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, Queens College/CUNY, New York City, 21–22 March 2025.

⁷Tsang and Cheung, *The Political Thought of Xi Jinping*, 170.

⁸Xi Jinping, "Xi Jinping Attends the General Debate of the 76th Session of the United Nations General Assembly and Delivers an Important Speech," translated from Mandarin Chinese and published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 22 Sept. 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng//zy/jj/GDI_140002/xw/202109/t20210923_9580033.html, cited on 22 Mar. 2026. The original Chinese reads in full: 中华民族传承和追求的是和平和睦和谐理念。我们过去没有，今后也不会侵略、欺负他人，不会称王称霸。中国始终是世界和平的建设者、全球发展的贡献者、国际秩序的维护者、公共产品的提供者，将继续以中国的新发展为世界提供新机遇。

⁹Wang Huning (王沪宁), *America Against America* (美国反对美国) (1991). The English translation I cited did not have page numbers, nor did it mention the translator or publishing house.

¹⁰Zhao, Tingyang 天下的当代性, p. 161. Xu, Jilin (许纪霖). "新天下主义: 重建中国的内外秩序" [The New Tianxia-ism: Restructuring China's Inner and Outer Order], *Aisixiang*, 26 Aug. 2015.

¹¹Xu, "新天下主义".

¹²Zhao Tingyang, *Redefining A Philosophy for World Governance*, Tao Liqing trans. from Mandarin (Singapore: Palgrave 2019) p. 11.

¹³Ibid., *All Under Heaven: The Tianxia System for a Possible World Order* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press 2016) p. 217.

¹⁴Jiang, Shigong (强世功), "Philosophy and History: Interpreting the 'Xi Jinping Era' through Xi's Report to the Nineteenth National Congress of the CPC." *Open Times* (开放时代), January 2018, David Ownby trans. from Mandarin, *Reading the China Dream* blog, 11 May 2018. <https://www.readingthechinadream.com/xu-jilin-the-new-tianxia.html>.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Jiang Shigong, “中‘美关键十年’: ‘新罗马帝国’与‘新的伟大斗争’” [The ‘Critical Decade’ Between China and the U.S.: The ‘New Roman Empire’ and the ‘New Great Struggle’]. *Guancha* (观察者网), 9 May 2020, https://www.guancha.cn/Qiang-ShiGong/2020_09_05_564144.shtml, cited 29 March 2026. Quote: “由此，在他们的逻辑中，将中国共产党的领导和中国特色社会主义制度看作美国建构“新罗马帝国”统治世界的绊脚石。”

¹⁷Jiang Shigong, “台海变天?” [A Change in the Taiwan Strait?], *Weixin* (微信), 7 augustus 2022, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/FECyUI0aMi2zj9gv3qb0fw>, cited 29 March 2026. Quote: “台湾问题涉及到两种文明力量在亚洲的较量，其结果影响着人类文明的未来。”

¹⁸Jiang Shigong, “中‘美关键十年’ [The ‘Critical Decade’ Between China and the U.S.].



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