



## Book Review

*American Tianxia: Chinese Money, American Power, and the End of History.*

Salvatore Babones. 2017. Bristol, UK: Policy Press. 88 pages, ISBN 978-1-4473-3680-8. Cloth (\$56.00)

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*Tianxia* (天下) is the Chinese word for ‘all under heaven’ but the historical meanings and implications have changed over time. The Chinese ethicist who popularized the concept in the wake of China’s spectacular rise was Tingyang Zhao in his book *Tianxia Tixi: Shijie Zhidu Zhexue Daolun* [The *Tianxia* System: A Philosophy for the World Institution]. For Zhao (2005), the *tianxia* system involves the marrying of the geographic (all of the physical earth), the psychological (all of the hearts of all of the people in the world), and the institutional (a world political system and institution). It is all-encompassing. All three aspects of *tianxia* are necessary and interdependent and ensures the primacy of the world over nation-states. This is the opposite of the current Westphalian world-order in which the nation-state and its interests take center stage in international relations. *Tianxia*, steeped in Confucianism, also involves *datong* (大同), which implies caring for all of humanity, much in the same way one cares for one’s parents.

In his provocative book, *American Tianxia: Chinese money, American power, and the end of history*, Salvatore Babones argues that this very Chinese concept is most apt not for describing contemporary China’s role on the world stage, but rather the tremendous influence of the United States. Unlike many world-systems scholars, Babones suggests that the United States is not truly in decline and points to its “powerful overarching force... ordering and stabilizing the



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contemporary world-system” (16). Simply put, China will not ‘rule the world’ (to borrow the words of Ho-Fung Hung) since the United States already dominates it. Babones argues that America is at the top and center of a system of distinction hierarchies which it itself defines. He describes the American *tianxia* as a global networking club that elites from countries across the world want to join (18).

More than anything, Babones is offering an alternative to the world-system concept of hegemony. If the United States is not a hegemon as defined by world-systems scholars, how do we describe and understand this current global state of affairs? In several places in the book, Babones take issue with scholars who see China as a potential hegemon destined to surpass the United States (see, e.g. pp. 30-35). He points to China’s excessive net capital outflows, which are almost 1/3 of its gross domestic product (GDP), its declining economic growth rate, and its overextension in development initiatives. While world-system scholars, such as Leo Panitch (2010), John Gulick (2011), Ho-Fung Hung (2016), to name a few, have also been pointing to the limits of China’s rise for some time now, these authors also contend that American hegemony is in decline. Babones disagrees.

The relatively short book (69 pages, not including a short preface and bibliography) consists of four chapters. The first chapter, “Right Concept, Wrong Country,” is a concise and informative explanation of the concept of *tianxia*. Explaining how it has evolved throughout China’s history, Babones takes a holistic approach to defining what *tianxia* truly means and why it should be applied to the contemporary United States. To develop this argument, he compares the heavily Confucian-influenced Ming Dynasty China (AD 1368-1644) to the United States. Babones’ use of *tianxia* as a conceptual tool to understand the US in today’s world-system is premised on attributing a universality to this Chinese concept. In the subsection on *tianxia* revival (the period typically seen as post-publication of *Tianxia Tixi*), Babones notes that Zhao’s model of *tianxia* does not necessarily imply a Sino-centric world, claiming there is no geographical specificity to Zhao’s description of *tianxia*. While technically the concept of *tianxia* can be deployed anywhere in the world, Zhao’s writing is undoubtedly pointing to the use of *tianxia* as an alternative to the existing Western forms of global political economic organization, and he implies that this push for a more harmonious world order must come from China.

However, for the comparative exercise that is Chapter 2, “One master, one sovereign,” we can put this issue aside. The comparison is made across seven dimensions, the first six of which are ideology, network type, stance, acquiescence, surplus flow, and human flow. We are not told how these specific dimensions were derived or the logic behind them. Table 2.1 (22) provides a quick summary of how the two *tianxias* (American and Ming) compare to one another across these dimensions. And to clarify, although the American *tianxia* is centered around the United States, Ming *tianxia* and American *tianxia* are both universal terms but not nation-states (63).

Compared to Ming China’s strict adherence to policies and actions based on Confucian principles, Babones contends that the American *tianxia* is based on an ideology of individualism. But, this American individualism allows the nation-state to take specific actions and practices that may be orthogonal to that of its citizens. On the other hand, Ming China’s *tianxia* relied on state

to state relations even with respect to its citizenry. For Babones, the American *tianxia* is buttressed by the significant and systematic rewards it receives from the centrality of the U.S. dollar in the global financial market. Those benefits, or positive externalities--“spillover effects generated by actions that are taken for some other purpose” (20)--that are received by the American government, its citizens, organizations, and businesses make the American *tianxia* self-sustaining and expansionary. He notes that Ming China’s hierarchical tributary system was top down as opposed to the American bottom up. As far as economic benefits and surplus, in Ming China, it flowed from the center to the periphery, since Ming emperors made a point to bestow valuable gifts unto their vassals that illustrated the power differential and helped maintain the strict top down hierarchy. The American *tianxia* on the other hand, attracts global capital and talent, and caters to the individual rather than state interests.

The final dimension of *tianxia* employed in the comparative exercise is the traditional Chinese ‘five zones’ in which the world (system) is organized around five concentric circles with the emperor (one can read core, or hegemon) at the center of the ring. Each ring represents its proximity to the symbolic and temporal power at the center. With the Ming *tianxia*, Babones proposes: the royal domain, subsidiary domains, internal barbarians (these three are “internal civilized zones”), the tributary barbarians and the “wild barbarians” (which make up the external zones). This configuration appears to be based largely on the work of Yü Ying-Shih (1986).

The American version of the five zones, starting from the center is, DC-NY-Boston axis, the remainder of the United States, Anglo-Saxon allies (these are the “internal zones”), the other allies and aligned states, and nonaligned states and enemies (which make up the external zones). The justification for this internal configuration is that the ruling center of United States “runs along the east coast of the United States from Washington DC through New York to Boston” and the “remainder of the United States is a culturally and politically unified zone comparable to the ethnically Chinese component of the Ming empire, clearly part of the central state but not at the center of the center” (27). Why not just Washington D.C. as the ruling center, and why incorporate New York and Boston, is not exactly clear. And, one could hardly argue that Nebraska or Louisiana are culturally and politically the same as California. The Anglo-Saxon allies are in the internal zone particularly because their internal elites are welcomed in the American global governance club. The other allies and aligned states fall into the fourth ring and are characterized by their non-antisystemic orientations. Those that fall into the fifth zone lack a functional state apparatus and have leaders that are staunchly anti-American. This argument would generate interesting discussions in an upper division or graduate class in Political Science or Sociology.

The third chapter, “One Belt, One Road to Nowhere,” takes a highly critical view of China’s ability to maintain its early 1990s growth patterns and surpass the United States in economic and military power. Emphasizing the limitations of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Babones notes that China is not as well-liked in the Eurasian region, the levels of Chinese subsidies are not sustainable, and above all, “no amount of Chinese economic assistance will transform Central Asia into the new hub of the global economy” (45). He also dismisses China’s 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road as largely aspirational and dependent on China’s continued financial incentives doled

out to potential challengers in the South China Sea. While Babones' main focus is on the Eurasian portion of the BRI and the Maritime Silk Road, the BRI is ill-defined, ever expanding, and ambiguous in scope, which makes the kind of narrow assessment Babones offers rather limited.

The fourth and final chapter, "The Hiatus of History," starts by reminding readers of Henry Luce's claim that the twentieth century was the first 'American' century. Babones points to America's longevity and continued domination in global international relations. Extrapolating fertility trends, he argues that China's current demographic advantage, as well as its economic growth rate cannot be sustained. Furthermore, people continue to enter into the orbit of the American *tianxia* via migration, through employment in global value chains, or through an American or European education, thus re-entrenching and expanding it. Extending Francis Fukayama's *end of history* thesis to elucidate the zeitgeist of contemporary international relations, Babones argues for the democratic nation-state as the ultimate end, since "only nation-states (or entities approximating them) have ever been known to be democratic" (62). Although he is quick to point out that democratic nation-states can also be illiberal, the most important takeaway is that the democratic state is founded and committed to the primacy of the individual and freedom of opportunity.

This picture that Babones has painted of the current global state of affairs looks suspiciously like Gramscian hegemony-making, but he names it the millennial world-system, a world-system on a global scale, which began on September 11, 2001 (65). He boldly predicts that the "millennial world-system and its governing mechanism, the American *tianxia*" is highly likely to be a more stable, more peaceful and orderly one compared to the previous world-systems (69).

Babones makes thought-provoking arguments in the book but they deserved to be more thoroughly explicated. The most interesting parts of the book are the first two chapters comparing Ming dynasty China and present-day America. The book would have been benefited from more detailed information such as the basis for the dimensions used for the comparative exercise. There are other issues that needed to be addressed in discussing the U.S.' influence on the global stage. As an example, Babones rightly points to the primacy of the U.S. dollar in global financial markets but does not adequately confront the military aspect of its continued global dominance. The overinflated military budget of the United States and the potential limits of the U.S. military to maintain dominance have been widely noted by scholars of the world-system (Denemark 2018; Arrighi and Silver 1999). Another example would be the influence of transnational corporations. In the book, major corporations are portrayed as part of the American *tianxia* but their role in expanding and entrenching it is not thoroughly fleshed out.

Finally, in the last chapter of the book, Babones points to the analytical problem of "width of a time point" in discussions about the decline of the United States. It does seem that the U.S. has been 'in decline' for quite some time but does that necessarily invalidate that the decline is happening? I wonder if this 'slow decline' is indicative of the level of integration in this iteration of the modern capitalist world-economy. What if, with each successive accumulation cycle, the world was more thoroughly integrated and the current global order has more to do with the changing nature of capital accumulation and is beyond China and America?

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