The Underlying Philosophy and Impact of the New Silk Road World Order

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It was not too long ago when China started to rise, people were talking about how China must seek to be accepted by the world and merge itself into the existing world order “as a responsible power.” Just a couple of decades later, many have started to talk about how China is playing an active and even a leading role in creating a new world order. China’s bold initiative known as “One Belt and One Road” presents a grand scale blueprint of the future geo-political landscape. With reference to this initiative and China’s overall role in it, some people have created a new expression called the “Silk Road World Order,” or simply the “Silk World Order.”
It is well-known that centuries ago when China was at its most glorious periods, there was a trading route linking China’s ancient capital Xian westward all the way to Europe, through which commerce and cultural exchanges took place. In addition to the land route traveled with camels, China also had taken ocean voyages from its east coast to South China Sea, Indian Ocean, and all the way to Africa, bringing Chinese artifacts and culture to these regions. These were known as the Silk Roads. Now the Chinese government has announced its development strategy to revive these ancient routes. In September and October 2013, China’s new President Xi Jinping, in his visit to Central Asia and Southeast Asia, proposed to build the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “21st-century Maritime Silk Road.” The former calls for integration and cooperation of the countries on the original Silk Road through Central Asia, West Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, forming a cohesive belt through building infrastructure, increasing cultural exchange and broadening trade. The latter is a parallel plan to foster collaboration in Southeast Asia, Oceania, and North Africa through contiguous bodies of water. Since then, China has taken numerous solid steps to implement these initiatives, including setting up a $40 billion U.S. dollars Silk Road Fund, reviving the plan for a Free Trade Area of Asia Pacific (FTAAP), and more importantly, the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB). Set to become operational in 2016 with $100 billion U.S. dollars initial capital, the bank will be a rival to the financial system dominated by developed countries like the United States and Japan.

There is no question about how vast is the scale of the One Belt One Road strategy—it involves 26 countries, 4.4 billion people, which count for 63% of the world’s entire population, and roughly 1/3 of the world’s economy. There is also no question that the genie is already out of the bottle, with a huge momentum. The AIIB plan has gained support from 37 regional countries and 20 non-regional members, including some of the closest allies of the U.S., such as Australia, France, Germany, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, and even the United Kingdom—despite Washington’s pressure to dissuade them not to join. And there is no question that this vast, non-stoppable trend is not merely an economic phenomenon. Economic development is always accompanied by other changes. With the new trend, people
are waking up to the realization that the dominance of the U.S. led West is waning and a new world order is emerging.

What is the major characteristic of this new world order? Will it be just changing of the guard or will the new order be different in substance? Although no answer can be definitive until the new order unfolds fully, based on what we have seen, I think we can reasonably expect it to be drastically different from the old order. The main difference, as Professor Yuri Tavrovsky puts it, is that the new order is “not vertical, but horizontal.” Unlike the old model which is structured on the basis of economic and military power with the ones who have the strongest muscle at the top of the pyramid, the new world order is multilateral. It will be based on integration and cooperation, ideally to the benefit of all involved. For example, we notice that despite the fact that China is taking a leading role in the establishment of the AIIB and it holds an overwhelming 30% of voting share, it offered to forgo veto power at the AIIB to ensure that no single country can dictate decision-making at the new bank. This is in stark contrast to the long-standing practice at World Bank and IMF (International Monetary Fund), in which the U.S. retains the only veto power despite holding less than 20% of voting shares (16.75% in IMF and 17.13% in World Bank, to be more exact). Indeed, we find China has been so cautious that it avoids using words like the “China model” or “Beijing Consensus.” They don’t want to create an impression that it is creating a rival to compete with the West, or that it has a model for the rest of the world to follow. They also stayed away from terms like “leadership” and “alliance;” instead they prefer words like “dialogue,” “partnership,” and “cooperation.” It is interesting that a country tainted with the reputation of lacking democracy is advocating a trend of global democracy, while the country proud of its democracy is now haunted by the image of being hegemonic in the world.

Of course, China’s One Belt One Road strategy is not an operation of philanthropy or charity, nor are the countries that it collaborate with simply getting a favor from China. While China has accumulated a lot of experience in building infrastructures (e.g. high speed railways) and a huge foreign fund reserve, it needs to balance its underdeveloped western regions with its more advanced east coast; meanwhile the countries in Central and West Asia, Middle East, and East Europe
can use China’s help to speed up their modernization process. It is logical for China to shift its focus from the east coast toward the west. But I think there is a deeper philosophical realization behind China’s move toward this direction. There are two phrases used frequently by China’s new President Xi Jinping. One is mingyun gongtongti 命运共同体— “community of shared destiny.” The phrase contains the insight that the world has increasingly become a community in which we share our destiny with each other. No country can be better off by itself. If you want to live well, you must let others live well! In just two years since Xi stepped into China’s top leadership position, he has mentioned the phrase over 60 times in various contexts, including his recent visit to the U.S., urging the international community to abandon the zero-sum game mentality, and think in terms of our shared common destiny. 

The second phrase is hezuogongyin 合作共赢— “cooperation and co-prosperity.” If we are a community of shared destiny, then we have no option but to cooperate with each other. There is no zero-sum game! It is either zero-zero, if we fight against each other, or win-win, if we cooperate!

This philosophical insight is deeply rooted in the traditional Chinese culture, which the new generations of Chinese leaders have been trying to revive. As China’s main spiritual tradition, Confucianism holds the belief that “Great heaven has no affections; —it helps only the virtuous.” Confucius advocated “human-heartedness” which he variously described as “to love people” (Analects, 12.22) and to “not impose on others what you would not wish for yourself” (Analects, 12.2). He taught that “Exemplary persons have self-esteem but are not contentious; they socialize but do not form cliques” (Analects, 15.22). They “seek harmony but not conformity” (Analects, 13.23). Confucius’ major successor Mencius added to this a contrast between the way of sage kings and the way of hegemons. The way of sage kings attracts people toward them through moral influence, and the way of hegemons make others submit to their forces (Mencius, 2A3). These Confucian teachings, if well implemented, will provide a basis for a responsible government that seeks to have a pluralistic world in which differences are not just tolerated for political correctness but cherished for their unique contributions to the harmonious whole, very much in the same way that each and every different note in a piece of music makes the entire music beautiful. Confucians are well-known for their sense of seeing tianxia 天下, “all under heaven,” as a community of shared destiny. As
contemporary Chinese political philosopher Zhao Tingyang points out, the term “tianxia” represents an underlying philosophy totally different from the philosophy behind the notion of nation-state. *Tianxia* entails a sense of seeing all under the heaven as interconnected, while the notion of nation-state is based on the sharp distinction between what is mine and not-mine. The individualistic philosophical foundation of nation-state explains the irony of the current world order which allows one country to force a destiny on the entire world on the basis of its narrowly defined national interests. The government of such a country may be democratically elected, but its leaders are not rewarded by the system for thinking beyond pleasing their own voters, even when the vital interests of other nations are at stake.

Although Confucian ideas have never been followed perfectly in the history of China, it played a significant role in shaping the Chinese mind. If you ever wondered why the Chinese territory goes far beyond the Great Wall, history will tell you that it was not because the Chinese conquered these regions; to the contrary, it was the result of China’s being invaded by the people of these regions (notably the Mongols and the Manchurians), which consequently brought these regions into the map of China. China has never colonized other countries. In the early fifteenth century, a huge fleet led by China’s Admiral Zheng He took voyages across the oceans down to South-East Asia, the Indian Ocean, reaching as far as the east coast of Africa. The size of Zheng’s ships and the scale of the fleets were by far the most advanced in the world, which predated and dwarfed the voyages taken by Vasco da Gama and Christopher Columbus. Yet unlike the latter which marked the beginning of the colonial era, Admiral Zheng’s voyages did not result in occupying an inch of foreign land nor enslaving a single person of the places he went.

One may say that Xi and his colleagues are probably more communists than Confucians. But one thing people often forget today is that inherent in communism is a global *tianxia* vision also. Despite the unfortunate fact that the communist movement resulted in huge disasters and oppressive regimes, the original vision of communism held by Karl Marx was to emancipate people from exploitation and oppression. The famous principle entailed in the *Communist Manifesto* is “Only in
emancipating the world can the proletariat emancipate himself.”\(^5\) It was this original vision, rather than the later image of totalitarianism, that inspired millions of Chinese people to join the cause of communism in the first place, including Xi Jinping’s father, one of the veterans of the Chinese communist revolution. They saw in this communist vision what the early Confucians called *datong* 大同, or Grand Harmony. It was no surprise that the communist Chinese government did what a Confucian government would do during the 1997-98 financial crisis: China resisted the temptation to devalue the RMB against its own immediate interest in keeping its export sectors competitive; instead it extended its financial support to its distressed neighboring countries. China’s way of handling the return of Hong Kong through the “one country, two systems” policy, and China’s aid to other developing countries with no strings attached also show the government’s willingness to embrace plurality. If some communist leaders turned out to be narrow-minded nationalists, power-thirst dictators, or corrupted bureaucrats, that only means they had betrayed the real spirit of communism.

Now everyone is talking about China’s rising economic power and global influence. In my view, the real strength and significance of China’s rise is not in its increasing economy or rapid growth of military capability which would make it a strong rival to the United States. Its real strength and significance is in its reappropriation and implementation of the Confucian philosophy and the best parts of the communist ideal! The reason is simple: With the *tianxia* vision, the vision of the global community as a community of shared destiny, it will be able to overcome the narrowness of a typical nation-state and become a leading force in the world toward a much more peaceful world order. And exactly because of this, it is able to bring prosperity to its own people. As the ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Zi puts it, “The sage stays behind, thus he is ahead. He puts himself outside his person, thus he retains his person. Through overcoming selfishness, he attains self-fulfillment” (*Daodejing*, 7).

Of course I can be wrong. Anyone who has studied philosophy will know that we can never have absolute certainty on anything. Maybe I have too much confidence in the current Chinese leadership. But I don’t believe so. Instead, I hear the Chinese leadership calling for the international community to “work together to
forge a new partnership of win-win cooperation and create a community of shared future for mankind.” This call is so central to its vision that it was featured prominently as the title of Xi Jinping’s recent address at the UN. I also see demonstrations of such a philosophy in China’s practice of implementing the One Belt One Road strategy. Philosophy teaches us to maintaining reasonable degree of skepticism, but it also teaches us that doubting is not a suspension of action; it is itself an action. Reading China from a cold war mentality can become itself an action of nurturing a cold war. Reacting to China’s rise as a threat and trying to contain China not only runs the risk of missing a historical opportunity to join the emerging world of peaceful co-prosperity, but also the risk of becoming the very force against global peaceful co-prosperity.

“To be or not to be—that is the question.” This is a famous line in Shakespeare’s Hamlet. Today, we are facing a similar situation: to survive through implementing the philosophy of horizontal win-win cooperation or to clash and parish through holding on the vertical pyramid model of domination. That is the question.

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1 Although the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs puts it as a “supplement” rather than a “rival,” for the reason that I will mention later.


5 This is a summary of the original statement in the Preface to the 1888 English edition of the Communist Manifesto, which says: “‘the exploited and oppressed class—the proletariat—cannot attain its emancipation from the sway of the exploiting and ruling class—the bourgeoisie—without at the same time, and once and for all, emancipating society at large from all exploitation, oppression, class distinction, and class struggle” (Karl Marx & Frederick Engels, the Communist Manifesto, New York: International Publishers, 1948, p. 6.)