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Hero vs. The Dragon Emperor: Discursive Struggle over China's Place in the World

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Abstract: *The present paper explores some themes presented in the films Hero and The Return of the Dragon Emperor such as China's place in the world and its future. The concept of Tianxia, meaning "all under heaven", is introduced as an autochthonous alternative to Western theories of international relations and world order. Moreover, the revival of the concept of Tianxia is linked to other recent developments such as the reinterpretation of China's history and of its relationship to the West. Finally, the finale's of the two films are presented as possible outcomes of the discursive struggle over China's place in the world while at the same time stressing the myriad range of outcomes possible.*

Hero and the *Return of the Dragon Emperor* are two of the most popular recent films dealing with China. Both films share some striking similarities. Jet Li is one of the lead actors in both movies. The defining historical period in both films is the forceful unification of the country in ancient times. Nevertheless, there are also several striking differences, some more important than others. In *Hero*, Jet Li plays the peasant turned rebel who finally saves China through his sacrifice. On the other hand, in the *Return of the Dragon Emperor* Jet Li plays the role of the Emperor whose insatiable quest for power leads to the suffering of his people and subsequently to his eventual downfall. Finally, there is another minor yet symbolic difference. In *Hero* the "good" and the "bad guys" are both Chinese while in the *Return of the Dragon Emperor* the "bad guys" are Chinese and the good guys are a diverse group that includes Chinese and several Westerners. It is also important to note the backgrounds of the Westerners. Three of them were archeologists, one of them was a former member of the French Foreign Legion, and the fourth was a Club owner in Shanghai.

By now the reader is probably wondering about the significance of the differences and similarities between the two films. A simple yet incomplete answer to the previous query is that the movies represent a larger debate over the

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position and role of China in the International Community. Moreover, they both represent a simplified version of contending macro-narratives about the past, present, and future of China in the world. Before entering the clear skies of theoretical abstraction it is important to give a simple overview of the messages conveyed by the two movies. *Hero* ends with the peasant turned warrior giving up his lifelong effort to kill the emperor and instead accepts his own death. Why did he give up revenge? The movie shows a long conversation between him and the Emperor regarding the future of China and the Emperor's philosophical meanderings regarding harmony and order. In summary, the "Hero", is convinced by the Emperor that the Emperor must live to bring unity and order to China, and that that mission is more important than individual suffering and also justifies the means. Thus, the message of the movie is that the individual sacrificed himself for the future of the entire community, which in Chinese can include everything from a village to "all under heaven". Therefore, the sacrifice made by the "Hero" was the greatest of all even if his reward was death.

The *Return of the Dragon Emperor* is less historically accurate than *Hero* but makes equal use of symbolism. In this film the Emperor is depicted as a ruthless warlord who simply seeks power at any cost. At this initial stage the emperor shown in the *Return of the Dragon Emperor* is shown as equally ruthless as the one in *Hero*, but with one important difference. The ruthless Emperor shown in *Hero* is depicted as devoted to the goal of unifying China at all costs. Nevertheless the ideals held by the Emperor in *Hero* are harmony and order for the good of the entire "nation". On the other hand the Emperor in the *Return of the Dragon Emperor* is shown as equally ruthless and war-prone but with less lofty ideals. The movie gives this message by showing an Emperor who is not satisfied with complete control over the country but who rather seeks immortality. Once the scriptures containing the secret to that immortality are brought to him, he is shown as still not satisfied and disregards the wish of the witch who brought the secret to marry one of his generals. At this point the witch curses the emperor. When the Emperor is revived by a Nationalist Chinese Warlord in the 1940s, both the Emperor and the

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Warlord seek the same thing, bringing order and greatness to China. However, the ending of this movie is very different. In summary, the movie ends with the Western good guys allied with a Chinese girl, who by the way ends up marrying the young Western Archeologist, fighting together with the zombies of all of the peasants, soldiers, and villagers who died at the hands of the Emperor in Ancient times against an alliance of the Emperor's zombie army and the army of the Nationalist Chinese Warlord. The rebel army is shown as holding farming utensils as weapons while the Emperor's army is well organized and holding formal weapons. Furthermore, to make the message even clearer, the rebel army yells "freedom" as their battle cry. The message of this film is the complete opposite of *Hero*. Individual rights are all important as shown by the peasant zombies shouting "freedom" and the Chinese heroine marrying a Western Archeologist.

The two previously discussed movies send divergent messages regarding China's past. Issues such as the ones touched by the movie are currently being debated both inside and outside of China with possible repercussions for the future. It is by now a widely known fact that China's economic and military power is growing but there is little agreement regarding the possible direction it might take. In other words, what role will a stronger China play in the world. After more than 200 years of slumber the giant is slowly awakening. China is awakening in a world system not of its making and more integrated and interconnected than ever before in history. It is important to note that both Chinese policy makers and scholars are searching for answers to those very complex questions. They ask questions such as: What is China's destiny? Once economic and military power is achieved what will be our relationship to the rest of the world? All of those questions are connected to answers that are influenced by the cosmologies and epistemologies of those who seek to answer them. The situation is further complicated by the constraining factors brought about by globalization in both its normative and economic forms. Thus Chinese policy makers find themselves floating in a normative pond created by a foreign epistemic community and reflecting a vastly different cosmology and philosophical tradition. Things are further

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exacerbated by the relative isolation of China throughout the 20th century due to the Cold War and its communist regime.

China was bypassed by the holy ghost of the enlightenment. Thus modernization in China took the distorted form of pure state-led industrialization in the late 20th century. However, it is important to stress that China was not left in a philosophical vacuum. As one of the great ancient civilizations it is social receptacle of the teachings of Taoism and Confucianism. Moreover, there is a philosophical counterpart to the West's Kantian Globalism dating back to the early years of the Empire. "*Tianxia*", usually translated as "all under heaven", is a Chinese paradigm of World Order (Callahan, 2008). This ancient paradigm of international, or rather global, relations dates back thousands of years. *Tianxia* is a very loose and ambiguous concept that has been interpreted in many ways throughout history. In very broad and general terms *Tianxia* includes everything except the gods in heaven. Thus, it can be interpreted to include all living and inanimate things on earth in an interconnected and interdependent relationship based on harmony and hierarchical order. *Tianxia* is a relational concept and thus extends the concept of community to the entire earth. At this point one may find some similarities with some strands of radical environmentalism, but there is a big difference between the two (Khong, 2006). *Tianxia* places emphasis on order and harmony as emanating from a center, the Middle Kingdom (China). Moreover, all relationships are based on a hierarchical principle similar to the precepts of Confucianism. Thus harmony and order can only be achieved through the guidance of an elite. Therefore, while *all under heaven* are interconnected and depend on each other, everyone and everything has different responsibilities depending on their roles. At the domestic level this means the legitimacy of the Communist leadership to make policy and the duty of the rest of the population to follow those rules. Extending this to the international level, it means unequal relationships with other nations placed on a descending continuum centered on Beijing. This follows the former imperial sphere of influence based on con-centric circles. Influence was exerted both normatively and physically. Tribute and the pull of Chinese culture emanated from the Middle Kingdom in the manner of ripples in a pond.

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However, *Tianxia's* hegemonic nature does not include territorial expansion. Diffuse borders represent the liminal area between Civilization and anarchy. The rule being, that the more a nation/people resembles the ways of the Middle Kingdom that more civilized they are supposed to be.

A reformulation of the ancient concept of *Tianxia* recently surfaced in the People's Republic of China (Callahan, 2008). While there is some internal debate over the term, the reformulated Paradigm is basically a watered down version of the original. In other words, the new version stresses the relational and all inclusive aspect of the original but remains ambiguous regarding the international application of its hierarchical nature. Nevertheless, the new version maintains the value of an elite leading the world in a harmonious path (Wang, 2008). The importance of the resurfacing of the concept of *Tianxia* is that it offers an autochthonous paradigm for a new world order. It is a paradigm that contrasts with both the Westphalian anarchic system of sovereign nation-states and with the Chinese Leadership's concept of a Peaceful Chinese rise (Cordoba, 2005). *Tianxia* does not present a realist view of the world but neither does it represent the PRC's plan to join the international community as a responsible and active member. China's Peaceful rise refers to the PRC's willingness to join existing international organizations and becoming a respected member of the international community. Therefore, this concept is embedded in liberal institutionalist conceptions of world order (Shani, 2008). On the other hand a traditional Maoist foreign policy resembles an ideal type of realist behavior (Guilhot, 2008). Both previously mentioned paradigms are based on foreign concepts and consequently on alien historical experiences (Ashizawa, 2008).

Tianxia is an attempt to reframe the debate over China's awakening as an economic and military power. By proposing an alternative view of the world, Public Intellectuals behind the revival of the concept of *Tianxia*, are attempting to escape the cage built around China's foreign policy by Western international relations theories. The loose nature of the term and its many interpretations is actually very important strengths. *Tianxia* has the potential to reconcile China's growing global participation with the concomitant rise in nationalism. And thus can serve a

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double purpose, one domestic, and one international. In this respect it is similar to recent Japanese attempts to make a contribution to international security (Feigenblatt, 2007a, 2007b, 2009). Japan's pre-war discourse about the liberation of Asia and the construction of an East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere centered on Japan slowly evolved in the post-war flying geese model of economic development and arguably influenced Japan's version of Human Security (Bix, 2000; Dore, 1997). Both theoretical threats are based on collectivist philosophies with a high content of Confucianism (William T. Tow, 2000). Furthermore, both concepts claim to provide an alternative to Western paradigms of International Relations (Kolodziej, 2005; Kornprobst, 2009).

The recent revival of *Tianxia* and other autochthonous paradigms in Asia reflects a rise in nationalism in the region (Yu-tzung Chang, 2007). Wang's study of recent changes in China's history curriculum shows how the Chinese government has organized a massive campaign to reinterpret its history (Wang, 2008). The former Communist interpretation of China's history as a struggle against reactionaries and the capitalist class is now the struggle against foreign invaders and Western depredation (Wang, 2008, p. 784). Similar steps have been taken in Japan to revise history textbooks playing down Japanese wartime aggression in Asia (Sakamoto, 2008; Smith, 1997). Thus China, and other regional nations, are attempting to reassert their values and world view, in order to defend them from the relentless advances of Western culture and world views (Patcharawalai Wongboonsin, 2006).

Hero and the *Return of the Dragon Emperor* deal with many of the important issues currently debated in China and the region. Collectivism vs. individualism, *Tianxia* vs. a Neo-liberal world order, and finally, the end of history vs. the return of history are some of the issues in contention. The films show two possible outcomes to the struggle but there are an infinite number of possibilities. However they both show that the struggle is being waged at many levels including popular discourse.

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