

## Tianxia and Its Decolonial Counterparts: “China” as Civilization, Not Ethnicity\*

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### Abstract

This article argues that there are important similarities between Zhao Tingyang’s conception of *tianxia* and the decolonized, post-racial world envisioned by decolonial thinkers of the global south. Defined in terms of “internalization,” “relationality” and “amelioration,” the logic of *tianxia* that Zhao describes is comparable to the vision of a non-racialized world order of mutual, cultural synthesis of which decolonial thinkers have also spoken. Understanding *tianxia* in this way also allows us to better articulate the nature of “Chinese-ness.” Traditionally China or “huaxia” was identified with civilization per se and Civilization as “huaxia” was not defined through ethnicity and so not the preserve of any one group of people. Under this understanding of “huaxia,” to be(come) “Chinese” is merely to be civilized and civilization, in turn, is the ability to embrace the world in its totality. This paper expands on Zhao’s definition of *tianxia* by arguing that culture (*wen*) should also be included as a non-reducible component of *tianxia*. This article ultimately argues that being “Chinese” should mean the ability to embrace and actively synthesize world cultures. This is the true meaning of “huaxia,” a meaning that overlaps with important strands of decolonialism, and thus has more universal significance.

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\* I would like to thank Jacob Bender for reading previous drafts of this article and for his always helpful advice. I would also thank Daniel Bell for inviting me to the conference and his comments on an earlier version of this article.