

From Friction to Acceleration: China's Ambition for a Post-Pandemic *Tianxia* World Order

Demas Nauvarian; Filasafia Marsya Ma'rifat

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Department of International Relations,
Universitas Airlangga, Indonesia
Department of International Relations,
Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel, Indonesia;
demasnauvarian@gmail.com

This paper explores the relation between the Covid-19 pandemic and China's peaceful rise. In March 2020, the Covid-19 virus outbreak was declared by World Health Organization (WHO) as a global pandemic that knows no boundaries. While China received an enormous spotlight for being the ground-zero of the pandemic, China has managed to control the pandemic effectively. Not only that, China has also even been able to help other countries by providing Covid-19 assistance to other countries in need. More significantly, however, China was in a unique position when the pandemic hit—it was in a critical period for its rising era. China's rise has been framed as a 'peaceful rise' (heping jueqi). On the other hand, the pandemic forced China to re-think its national power usage while still striving to achieve an idealized order of Tianxia—all-under-heaven. This research analyses how China's pandemic cooperation is utilized in a greater framework of peaceful rise to accelerate the establishment of Tianxia world order. This research argues that the pandemic served as a critical juncture for the status-quo liberal international order, and China took the opportunity to indirectly disrupt the order. This is evident through two main pillars of China's pandemic cooperation: (1) asserting self-reliance by strengthening national response; (2) establishing cooperation to put China as a 'middle kingdom.' This research concludes that China, in some ways, successfully transform the pandemic from friction to an acceleration factor for its peaceful rise.

Keywords: covid-19; post-pandemic world order; tianxia; peaceful rise; international cooperation

Introduction

The global outbreak of the Coronavirus disease (Covid-19) started in Wuhan in December 2019. Then, in March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak as a global pandemic that had proliferated worldwide. The Covid-19 pandemic has caused a wave of prolonged suffering as has been felt altogether. As of 6 April 2022, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that the Covid-19 virus had killed

more than 6 million people (WHO, 2022), weakening long-term health and worsening economic and social conditions. Departing from the crisis, the need to immediately end the pandemic became a top priority for all countries. As time goes by, while China received an enormous spotlight for being the ground-zero of the pandemic, China has managed to control the pandemic effectively. Not only that, China has also helped other countries by providing Covid-19 assistance

to other countries in need. In other words, China had attached great importance to international cooperation, such as the knowledge-sharing on the pandemic with the international community and providing bilateral and multilateral assistance to other affected countries (Song, 2020).

More importantly, however, the pandemic hits China in a critical period during its rising era. The rise of China has become a concept to represent China's overall national power increase over the last decade. As an official discourse, China's rise has been framed by its government as a peaceful rise (*heping jueqi*), which promotes cooperative developmentalism approach as its grand strategy. An important figure that shaped this strategy, Zeng Bijian (2005), argues that China did not seek dominance among other states. Rather, it is trying to become a destined great power that would advocate for other third world nations.

The pandemic has affected China's rise in two ways. **First**, China's long-built image as a regional leader and benevolent great power is threatened by its status as the origin of Covid-19. The existence of anti-China sentiment in a few countries due to the pandemic's impact on many sectors of life evidence this. A major example was the sentiment happened in the US during President Donald J. Trump's administration, much shaped by identity politics, partisan rivalry, and the president himself. **Second**, China's rise was mostly revolved around its increasing economic growth and development, which was achieved by the aforementioned cooperative developmentalism approach,

as underlined by its peaceful development white paper (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2021). The pandemic has created severe impacts on both domestic and international mobility of people and goods, causing damage to trade and other economic activities. Either way, the pandemic sure started as friction for China's rise.

However, two important developments happened in China during the early pandemic period. **First**, China succeeded in mitigating the domestic impact of the pandemic. China came out as one of—if not the earliest—countries to manage the pandemic's impact (Cheng et al., 2020; Xu, 2020). **Second**, while still focusing on domestic development and Covid-19 survival, China has also been trying to fulfill its international role perception by assisting other developing countries in need. The provision of international assistance has been done by China since the 1950s by providing economic aid and technical assistance to other countries and gradually expanding the scope of this assistance (State Council the People's Republic of China, 2011). Until now, China has always done its best to provide foreign aid, help countries strengthen their capacities, improve people's livelihoods, and promote economic growth and social progress (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2011).

This research analyses how China's pandemic cooperation is utilised in the framework of peaceful rise. This research found that a particular world order element of the peaceful rise strategy, namely the idealised *tianxia* world order, motivates China's actions

in the pandemic era. This research argues that the pandemic served as a critical juncture for the status-quo liberal international order, and China takes the opportunity to indirectly disrupt the order. The discussion of this research is divided into six main parts. At first, this research will present a literature review to survey previous explanations to the research question, as well as to find novelty. A part on the research methodology will follow. In the third section, this paper will discuss the concept of *tianxia* as a world order theory and how it relates to policy-making. It then will be followed by two sections on the empirical discussion about China's Covid-19 policies and responses from various countries. The last section of the discussion will be the analysis section to correlate this research's theoretical and empirical portions.

Literature Review

Some previous research has analysed the intention behind China's Covid-19 diplomacy and assistance. Just as the debate on China's rise is, the previous literature is well-divided into two main paradigms, although both have intersecting analyses. In the first category, some researchers focus on the landscape of great power politics. These neorealist, systemic researches, such as that of Rusli (2021), focused on how China is utilising Covid-19 as a moment to bolster its 'superpower status'. In the research, the researcher assumed that China's Covid-19 assistance and diplomacy are affected by the hegemonic struggle with the US and is an instrument to win it.

On the other hand, more research is categorised into the second explanation set. These researchers, mainly assuming peaceful rising, are conceptualizing diplomacy and assistance as a soft-power play of China. For instance, Lee (2021) focused on how these assistances are a measure for China to lever its nation branding as not only a great power who is able to manage the pandemic and produce vaccines, but also a benevolent one that is helping others. Similarly, Baruah (2021), Vannarith (2021), and Rudolf (2021), saw the assistance as a part of China's developmentalist foreign policy project under the Health Silk Road of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

However, the two paradigms converge in conceptualising these assistances as soft power. For instance, Gauttam et al. (2020) research belongs to the first camp, as it tried to conceptualise diplomacy and assistance under the framework of geopolitical competitions. However, it still conceptualises them as a soft power play for China to achieve a hegemonic status.

This research tends to converge with the second paradigm. It starts from the paradigm of peaceful rise, which is implicated in the assumption regarding China's vision of the international role and overall world order. However, compared to the first camp, the research on the second one lacks a more grandeur theorisation to link China's massive Covid-19 diplomacy and assistance with its grand strategy. While research such as Gauttam et al. (2020) has linked them to China's hegemonic vision, the same logic has not been applied in the peaceful rise paradigm.

This research, thus, tried to fill the gap in linking these assistances as a soft power instrument to China's overall vision of peaceful rise.

Methodology

In accordance with the type of research classification as written by Neuman (2014), this research is an explanatory research that seeks to explain the reasoning behind a certain policy and seek the relations between two concepts. This research required qualitative-deductive logic as it tries to apply a theory to explain a particular empirical phenomenon. It gathers secondary qualitative data from secondary sources through library studies. The data used in this research are primary and secondary data, focusing on data coming from publicly-available official publications from the Chinese government. This includes white papers, official statements, and other official ad-hoc publications.

The methodology of this research takes into account the ideas of global international relations as developed by Acharya (2014) and Acharya & Buzan (2019). This is applied by using indigenous, constructivist political theory to explain a state's policy. In this case, this is operationalized through the usage of *tianxia* and indigenous Chinese political thinking to explain its Covid-19 policies.

Theoretical Framework—*Tianxia* and Chinese Idealized World Order

While the Covid-19 pandemic's impact extended to various aspects of life, an interesting research agenda related to it in

the realm of International Relations is how it affected the current world order. This research adopts a definition of world order developed by Georg Sorensen as a starting point. Sorensen (2006) defines world order as "a governing arrangement among states, meeting the current demand for order in major areas of concern." He developed this definition from the writings of John J. Ikenberry (2001), while trying to take out the 'liberal bias' and extend the dimensions of world order in his definition. In short, the current popular understanding of world order relates to a set of mechanisms that explains interactions between states or other political entities within an international system. Sorensen argues that there are four main dimensions to look for while analysing a world order: (1) security dimension, related to how states provide security for themselves; (2) governance and institution dimension, related to the rule of sovereignty and global governance; (3) ideas and ideology dimension, related to the accepted common values that is basing states' behaviour; and (4) political economic dimension, related to the distribution of resource pattern among states and entities.

It has been widely understood—mainly as a prescription of those of rise-and-fall-realists such as Gilpin (1981)—that the post-Cold War world order is a liberal international order. This is an impact of the emergence of the US as the sole global great power after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It was only natural for the US to rank up as a hegemonic power that would define the future of world order, thus the liberal international order, often equiva-

lent to *pax Americana* was born. While we can use the variables of world order above to define this order, an interesting, simpler, and more deterministic conception of world order by Mazarr et al. (2016) could also be used. Mazarr et al. explain that an international order is developed from some ordering mechanisms, such as alliances, treaties, and other informal rules, often determined or controlled by the hegemonic power. These mechanisms would produce an output of regularised state behaviour. Then, the graduality of the world order would be defined by how much states are free to behave in contrast to the set of rules in the existing order.

The interesting thing about the world order theory is that states have the choice to adhere to or deviate from the existing order. While the state might receive punishment or other social sanctions from the adhering global community, states are free to have their idealised version of world order. The main question that arises then would be how compatible the idealised world order is with the *status-quo* world order, and how the state acts on it. There are three possible scenarios regarding a state's idealised world order with the *status-quo*. First, when the two are compatible with each other. In this case, the objected state often has similar political ideology or values with the hegemonic power. States in this scenario will adhere to the existing ordering mechanisms and even promote them, while trying to reach their national interests through those mechanisms. The second and third mechanism exists when the objected states have a different vision of world order than the *status quo*. In this

scenario, states who are willing and capable have two choices. The state can become a revisionist power and overthrow the existing order by becoming a hegemonic power. The alternative prescribes that the state could gradually transform parts of the existing order and create separate spaces—for example, regionally—and apply their idealized order in these spaces.

An emerging theory that explains China's idealized world order is *tianxia*—all-under-heaven. The political philosophy has emerged as an alternative concept to explain China's vision of its and other countries' roles in the world. The theory is much excavated by Tingyang Zhao, a Chinese political philosopher. Godehardt (2016) explained that, citing Edward Wang (1999), the concept of *tianxia* is an extension of how China sees the world—its worldview. It is an extension of the pre-excavated concept of China as *Zhongguo*—Middle Kingdom, and tries to explain what revolves around it. Godehardt also mentioned that the idea highly valued the principles of rites (*li*) and virtues (*de*) as the main variables of the order.

Zhao (2019) mentioned that the core concepts of *tianxia* were excavated from the 'international' politics thinking in the era of Zhou dynasty. *Tianxia*, as a world order theory, mainly prescribed two main features. **The first feature** is a definition of the actors in the order. *Tianxia*, should it be compared to contemporary western political thinking, would correlate to the idea of 'a cosmopolitan world', to the sense that the *tianxia* order goes beyond the conception of the traditional nation-state. However, it does not necessari-

ly mean that this order wishes to eliminate the idea of a state. Rather, as prescribed by Zhao (2019), *tianxia's* theory explains three tiers of political units in its order: *tianxia*, state, and family. The main difference with the Westphalian nation-state order is that the power distribution in this order is centralized heavily, almost entirely, to the *tianxia*. States, therefore, exist as an extension of the power of *tianxia*, while *tianxia* holds the supreme power of moral high ground that legitimizes its control.

The question that arose after the hierarchy as mentioned earlier would be on who holds the legitimacy in the *tianxia* world order? What gave it legitimacy? Zhou (2016) elaborated that the center of the *tianxia* world order would be *tianzi*—the son-of-heaven. As Godehardt (2016) explained, the authority based on virtue and morals surpasses territorial boundaries. It is important to note that another distinguishing feature of this theory compared to contemporary Western theories is the inclusion of a metaphysical dimension. While by no means is the theory a religious one, the historical socio-religious context that shaped the theory builds the conception of 'heaven'—a higher being interpreted in many contexts. However, in all of these contexts, the 'heaven' mandates a certain actor to 'rule *tianxia*'. While this 'son-of-heaven' is interpreted as the emperor in the Imperial China era, modern interpretations have also included the interpretation of *tianzi* as an institution. The basis of this mandate is what makes *tianxia* very close to the philosophy of Confucianism, whose basis of legitimacy is moral. *Tianzi's* rule is legitimised as a benign

rule that brings goodness to the world. It is not surprising to see that the current interpretations of the theory puts China (and in some cases, Xi Jinping) as *tianzi*. One important point to note in this case, however, as explained by Zhao (2019), is that the middle kingdom ruled by *tianzi* can be changed and that the order might collapse should the *tianzi* does not act in accordance with moral virtues.

The second feature of *tianxia* revolves around the rule on inter-entity interactions—the international relations in the order. Zhao (2019) prescribed that there are two main interactions ruled out in *tianxia*. First, how the *tianzi* should interact with other states. Zhao mentioned that while, at a glimpse the *tianxia* system looks like the hegemonic stability theory proposed by realists and neorealists, it argued a different proposition. *Tianxia* suggested that the leader of the system did not exist from coercion or conquest, but rather legitimised from the consent and the occupation of moral high ground. Second, how the rest of the states should act. The state's national sovereignty is not eliminated, but rather is supervised and limited by the *tianxia* sovereignty. Zhao (2019) mentioned that this 'conscious submissiveness is a product of Confucian thinking of relational virtuosity. Furthermore, this relation is enhanced by a proposition in *tianxia* theory: no-outsider (*wuwai*). As the *tianxia* world's scope is the whole world, the system should include all nations with no exceptions. The combinations of the features above would result in a 'heavenly invoked order' (*tianming*), visioned to bring peace to the world.

China's Covid-19 Diplomacy and Assistance

China is a developing country that is still trapped in the middle-income trap situation. However, while still focusing on domestic development, China also strives to fulfill its international obligations by providing development assistance to other developing countries. Since China adopted reform and openness systems in the late 1970s, the Chinese economy has grown rapidly, and its national forces have increased significantly. However, China is still classified as a developing country with medium per capita income, and some populations are still hit by poverty. Even so, China continues to do its best to provide foreign assistance, help various countries to strengthen their capacity, improve community livelihoods, and promote economic growth and social progress (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2011).

On the sustainability in providing assistance in the Covid-19 pandemic, it can be observed that even though China is battling its own Covid-19 problems, Chinese leaders have also placed a high value on international cooperation in the anti-pandemic policy. In this regard, China always strives to reaffirm that it is ready to assist responsibly, based on sympathy for the countries affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. According to Song (2020), up until mid-May 2020, President Xi Jinping had attempted to exchange views with nearly 50 foreign leaders and heads of international organisations via "telephone diplomacy" or face-to-face discussion in two months. On March 26, 2020, President Xi

Jinping also actively participated in the G20 special summit on the epidemic, emphasising the importance of the international community stepping up efforts to carry out joint prevention and control measures effectively.

China generously shared information about the Covid-19 pandemic with the international community in terms of information-sharing and knowledge-sharing. Regarding this, China established an academic sharing platform and a communication mechanism to facilitate the exchange of genomic information and capacity building (Song, 2020). For example, China has provided information about the Covid-19 virus and its treatment guidelines to Fiji. This assistance enabled Chinese medical experts to hold video conferences with the Fijian side to share China's experiences in preventing, diagnosing, and dealing with the pandemic, as well as exchanging views on other issues of mutual concern (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic Fiji, 2020).

Furthermore, at the opening ceremony of the WHO's 73rd World Health Assembly, President Xi Jinping declared a package of humanitarian and development aid to the least-developed countries and other countries seriously infected (Song, 2020). Based on the latest data released by the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Fiji (2020), China had sent workers and medical supplies to 28 Asian countries, 16 European countries, 26 African countries, nine countries in America, and 10 countries in the South Pacific. Not only bilaterally, China has also actively participated in inter-

national cooperation within the multilateral framework. Overall, China has sent medical supplies to more than 150 countries and 13 international organisations, providing more than 280 billion masks, 3.4 billion protective suits, and 4 billion testing kits to the world (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2021). Furthermore, China has also contributed to the WHO, the United Nations, and the G20. China has contributed \$55 million to the WHO (Song, 2020) and has been supporting the role of WHO in the coordination of international action against the Covid-19 pandemic (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Fiji, 2020). In addition, China has also made significant progress in the China-UN joint project to establish a global humanitarian response. China has also fully implemented the G20 Debt Service Suspension Initiative for Poorest Countries, deferring debt repayment of over \$1.3 billion—the highest deferral amount among G20 members (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2021).

The other type of assistance that can be the game-changer in this Covid-19 pandemic is the presence of vaccines. Vaccines have become the most desirable item by many countries since vaccines had been proven to be an extremely effective means of dealing with epidemics. As a result, many parties seek to develop Covid-19 vaccines—including China. Although China generally lags in non-Covid-19 vaccine R&D compared with other developed countries, in this Covid-19 pandemic the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST) of China quickly initiated

the emergency response research projects to accelerate vaccine R&D and rollout (Hu & Chen, 2021). China has been trying to develop vaccines through five technological routes involving international collaboration: inactivated vaccines, live attenuated influenza vaccines, recombinant protein vaccines, adenovirus vaccines, and nucleic acid-based vaccines. After a long development process—including several pre-clinical tests—two Chinese vaccines are exported globally, namely Sinopharm and CoronaVac. Both are proven 50% to 79% effective in preventing symptomatic Covid-19 infection (Wong, 2021).

China's efforts to continue leading the Covid-19 vaccinations and vaccines export then became known as China's vaccine diplomacy, which began in July 2020, with the first Chinese vaccine trial outside of China in Brazil (Lee, 2021). As early as November 2020, China's vaccine companies signed agreements to supply Chinese-made vaccines to many countries, the majority of which are low and middle-income. To date, China has directly provided vaccines to four geographical regions—a total of 104 countries worldwide (Bridge Consulting, 2021). Out of these four regions, Asia Pacific has received the most significant number of Chinese vaccines, with 38 countries receiving the vaccines. Then, the second-highest number of Chinese vaccines went to Latin America, and the last one was Africa. Even though Africa is experiencing a slowdown in receiving Chinese vaccines, China remains the largest supplier of vaccines to Africa. Not only that, China has also helped African countries with

localised vaccines production. In this case, Egypt started producing China's CoronaVac vaccine and became the first country in Africa with a Covid-19 vaccine production capacity (Hui & Aixin, 2021). The authors further emphasised that China's enthusiasm to continue developing and exporting vaccines was also motivated by China's ambitions to win the Covid-19 vaccine development race so that China can be seen as part of a responsible and reliable global community (Kobierecka & Kobierecki, 2021).

On May 21, 2021, President Xi Jinping participated in the Global Health Summit via video conferences in Beijing and made important remarks on "Working Together to Build a Global Community of Health for All." He suggested boosting countries' solidarity confidence to combat Covid-19 and pointed the way forward for international anti-pandemic cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2021). President Xi also stated that China will continue its support for global solidarity against Covid-19 by providing an additional \$3 billion in international aid over the next three years. The aid is to support Covid-19 response and economic-social recovery in other developing countries as well as to provide more vaccines to the best of China's ability (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2021). Related to the provision of vaccines, this year, China's government has pledged to supply more vaccines that protect against Covid-19 to other countries, with a target of two billion exports and a call for greater international cooperation as the Delta variant spreads (Aredy, 2021).

Responses to China's Covid-19 Diplomacy and Assistance

Through the amount of aid that China has poured out to various countries and international organisations, the authors noted that every party who has received assistance had undoubtedly made good use of the assistance. In other words, the Covid-19 assistance provided by China is always well-targeted and following the needs of the recipient. The authors will underline some examples that can illustrate and strengthen the statement regarding this.

First, in the aspect of medical equipment and experts, the authors noted that around 150 countries and 13 international organisations have received medical supplies from China. As some evidence, in mid-March 2020, Indonesia received Covid-19 assistance provided by China based on the list of the assistance agreed upon by the Minister of Defense of the Republic of Indonesia, Prabowo Subianto. In this case, Indonesia openly accepted medical supplies assistance from China, such as portable ventilators, Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) test kits, medical masks, surgical masks, and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) (Yasmin, 2020). Covid-19 assistance from China to Indonesia did not just stop there. Covid-19 assistance for Indonesia continues to date following President Xi Jinping's commitment to helping Indonesia fight the pandemic. This certainly makes China a strong partner for Indonesia (Rakhmat, 2020). The authors also look upon how China concentrates its efforts on African countries. In this case, a cooperation mechanism has been established for

Chinese hospitals to pair up with 41 African hospitals, and construction for the China-assisted project of the Africa CDC headquarters officially started at the end of last year (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2021).

Second, in providing vaccine assistance, China received many positive responses from various countries. For example, Asia has been a critical linchpin in China's vaccine diplomacy strategy as the region that has received the most significant number of Chinese shots (Wong, 2021). More than 30 Asian countries have purchased or received the donated vaccine, and Indonesia is one of the largest buyers of Sinovac vaccines, with a total order of around 125 million doses. Slightly shifted to the Pacific region, Fiji is one of the countries in the Pacific islands that have received Covid-19 vaccine doses from the COVAX Facility, but remains open to becoming one of the recipients of vaccines assistance from China. Ambassador Qian Bo said that China would cooperate with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Prime Minister's Office, and Ministry of Health in preparing for the arrival of vaccines from China (Embassy of The People's Republic of China in The Republic of Fiji, 2020). The favourable response given by Fiji to the offer of vaccine assistance from China has strengthened the strategic partnership between the two countries. China and Ethiopia have also made significant progress in solidarity against Covid-19 and fruitful achievements in health cooperation. Despite capacity constraints and high domestic vaccination needs, China became the first and only country in March

2020 to make ongoing vaccine donations to Ethiopia through inter-government bilateral channels. This is part of an active effort to fulfil President Xi's pledge to make African countries the first recipients of Chinese vaccines (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2021).

Finally, while providing aid, China has also received material assistance and moral support from many countries, such as Iran, Israel, Pakistan, South Korea, Japan, Cuba, Russia, and some European countries (Song, 2020). In return, China continues to assist the international community by providing medical materials and knowledge-sharing. By so doing, many countries will be able to adopt some strategies based on China's experiences in preventing, diagnosing, and dealing with the pandemic as well as exchanging views on other issues of mutual concern.

China's Self-Image and Intention in Pandemic and Post-Pandemic World Order

Departing from the various types of assistance provided by China during the pandemic, the authors examine the reasons for solidarity to profitability that motivate cooperation and consistency in providing assistance. In this context, solidarity talks about aspects of sympathy that motivate good relations between China and other countries. Solidarity also has implications for stronger coordination and mutual trust between the two countries to share common interests. In contrast to solidarity, profitability talks about the interests of making profits, such as achieving a good international image, profits

at the economic field, to efforts to win the vaccine development race.

In the context of solidarity, the authors argue that China's ambition to continue providing assistance during the pandemic is in line with China's new white paper entitled *China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era* (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2021). President Xi Jinping further stated China's responsibility in the international order and proposed a global Community of Common Destiny and Belt and Road Initiative visions in the white paper. Furthermore, China is also committed to pursuing an interest in joint cooperation by upholding the principles of sincerity, closeness, and good faith, and upholding the principle of friendship, solidarity, mutual benefit, and inclusion to expand relations with neighbouring countries. Referring to the commitment, President Xi Jinping seeks to take advantage of many international opportunities to carry out various steps of cooperation. This includes solving the problem of global development, implementing the United Nations Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development Goals, and increasing foreign aid to be an international development cooperation model (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2021).

Noting that China upholds multilateralism, Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi said the country will raise the banner of a community with a shared future for humanity, uphold the principle of extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits, protect the international order based on the United Nations Charter,

and improve the global governance system (Huaxia, 2021). Moreover, at the Global Health Summit on May 21, 2021, President Xi Jinping emphasised that the world should work together through thick and thin and build a global community of health to fight the Covid-19 pandemic:

Colleagues, the ancient Roman philosopher Seneca said, "We are all waves of the same sea." Let us join hands and stand shoulder to shoulder with each other to firmly advance international cooperation against COVID-19, build a global community of health for all, and work for a healthier and brighter future for humanity. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2021)

In contrast to solidarity, the authors also underline that China took advantage of an early opportunity to use soft power by launching a comprehensive and well-targeted humanitarian response. Furthermore, all of China's assistance in the pandemic also brought diplomatic interests referred to as Coronavirus diplomacy and were part of China's public diplomacy (Kobierecka & Kobierecki, 2021). Through Coronavirus diplomacy and efforts to provide aid, China seeks to show off as a reliable partner. On the other hand, as one of the largest exporters globally, China also feels responsible for providing solutions to prevent global economic collapse. Furthermore, the obscurity when the Covid-19 pandemic will end makes China continue to take advantage of this moment

for diplomatic purposes. More specific on China's vaccine diplomacy, Modak (2021) argues that China's vaccine diplomacy is motivated by geopolitical motivations because most of the countries to which China pledged doses were participants in the BRI. In another sense, that could be one of China's ways of ensuring that those countries will remain indebted to Beijing and continue supporting and allowing Chinese infrastructure and connectivity projects on their territories.

Towards *Tianxia*: Covid-19 and China's Peaceful Rise Acceleration

The authors argue that the use of Chinese soft power—such as providing assistance—is closely related to the sustainability of China's peaceful rise ambitions. Related to this, the peaceful rise ambition motivates China to be friendly with various countries by conducting exchange and cooperation with other countries based on equality and mutual benefit principles and contributing to peace efforts. In addition, the ambition also made China's foreign policy tend to emphasise the importance of the implementation of harmonious diplomatic relations that could support China's national development (Dugis, 2015). Furthermore, efforts to establish good relations with various countries also encourage China to play more active and responsible, which relates to efforts to build a good international image. The authors understand that China seeks to frame itself as a responsible force to encourage China to be involved in international affairs and provide assistance to more developing countries (Guixia, 2015).

According to Ambassador Zhang Ping's speech (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2016), basically China has a foreign policy based on an assessment of the international environment and seeks to serve the overall goal of nation-building. Therefore, China strives to stick to the path of peaceful development without having to give up national rights and interests. The spirit of internationalism and the path of peaceful development was then re-emphasised in China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era, China's latest white paper. The document emphasises that China would continue to uphold the vision of the global community and a shared future so that China will continue to strive to advance its interests. With the vision of the global community and efforts to establish good relations with various countries, China has become increasingly compelled to play an active and responsible role which has implications for efforts to build a good international image. This research found two main characteristics that China showcase during the Covid-19 pandemic era as a challenge to the liberal world order. These characteristics showed similarities with the principles of the *tianxia* theory.

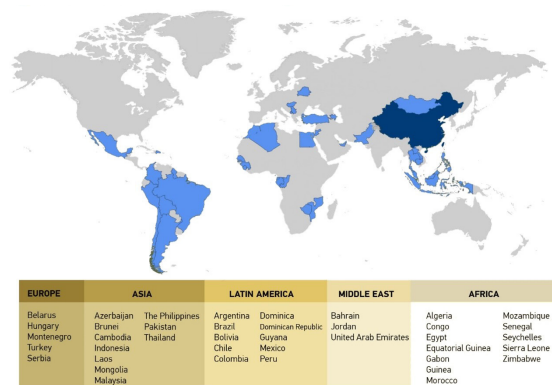
First, China's victory against Covid-19 has been glorified by its government as a success story. As reported by its Covid-19 white paper (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2020), China has intoned on the use of "centralized and efficient command" and a "total war" paradigm in mitigating the impacts of the pandemic. China's success in managing the virus

at home allowed it to claim the superiority of its authoritarian system. Even more timely, as Zhao (2020) found, China used the opportunity to boost its international image by managing a number of diplomatic propaganda campaigns that compared itself to the US and its non-existent Covid-19 strategy, then led by President Donald Trump. Zhao (2020) also found traces of some Chinese scholars who created a comparative discourse on the effectiveness of the Chinese authoritarian political system in handling the pandemic. A good example of this propaganda campaign could be seen in the *Global Times*—a Chinese government media—editorial that underlined the unpreparedness of the US and other western democratic states in handling the virus' spread: As a typical Western democracy, the US apparently had a huge loophole in its understanding of the early COVID-19 situation. Its strategy has also shown surprising mistakes. (*Global Times*, 2020).

China's propaganda campaign for authoritarianism superiority is a combination of imperial political values such as those of *tianxia* and Confucianism and the internationalism spirit under Marxism-Maosim (Tatlow, 2018). The propaganda campaign is a media for China's rise to the higher moral ground with better governance than many other countries, supported by clear scientific evidence. By doing this, China establishes its position as the 'good force' that is destined to shape the world order. Most importantly, however, China seems to be mainly engaging its vaccine diplomacy with third-world states, ensuring its position as an advocate and lead-

er for developing countries (for quantitative data, see Karaskova & Blablova, 2021). This shows China's outreach to ensure the principle of no-outsider in the *tianxia* theory.

Map 1. Countries that Have Received or Used China's Covid-19 Vaccines by 23 March 2021



Source: CGTN 2021

Second, as Lee (2021) underlined, China's various diplomacy and assistance during the Covid-19 pandemic is a clear sign of its soft power usage towards countries. The different assistance and diplomacy, specifically in medical assistance, are a clear means to reverse its previous branding as the ground-zero of the pandemic and shaped its image as both a savior and a humanitarian power in the world. Vaccine diplomacy would be significant evidence for this argument. Anholt (2008) came up with a great concept that helped to explain this phenomenon—competitive identity. The idea argued that certain identities and roles in the international order are often contested. China's gamble for vaccine development and its massive distribution indicated two strives for a superior identity. First, this shows China's generosity to other states without undermining its capability to provide public goods for

its people. Second, this shows China's advancement in research and technology, as vaccines are considered only to be produced quickly by those with enough technological capability and capital. Lawler (in Lee, 2021) found that China is currently the biggest producer of Covid-19 vaccines in the world.

The previous analysis has shown how much China benefited from the Covid-19 pandemic. While the liberal international order has been built as a network of mechanisms ranging from institutions to regimes, power distribution is still important. The system's main support still has to provide public goods. This is evident especially in a crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the US' failed response to the Covid-19 pandemic in its early years left a considerable disadvantage for future policies. As Wardhana (2020) underlined, the US under President Trump's administration adopted a "willful ignorance" strategy that deepened its decline of national image and impacted its foreign policy. This condition, combined with pre-existing 'America First' doctrine echoed by the administration, created a notion of 'American decline' in the current world order.

However, China does not necessarily and hastily take up the opportunity to stage a power transition. Most notably, China benefited from the current liberal international order. China's rise, specifically in economic growth and development, is a combination of globalisation forces and a mercantilist economy that shaped a large network of trade and diplomatic ties. China has no interest in becoming a hegemonic power, yet is

striving to become a great power to fulfill its destiny. The two differ in the idea that China did not wish to take the obligations to become a hegemonic power, such as to provide public goods. This correlates to the concept of *tianxia*, which, as Zhao (2016) underlined, is very different from hegemonic stability. China, in this case, attempted to become a moral force in this world by proving that it is more capable than the US in terms of governance and helping other states. However, in a post-pandemic idealized *tianxia* order, the idea of state and nationalism still exists and is well-running, but in a much more cosmopolitan interaction. China is hoping to establish a world order where no one needs to take a systemic burden, yet is living in a peaceful, cooperative development, exactly operationalized in its Peaceful Development white paper (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2021).

Conclusion

In the beginning, the Covid-19 pandemic is seen as friction towards China's rise. Not only that much of its containment measures become a challenge to China's thriving economic activities, but China's position as the ground-zero of the pandemic left a bad national image. However, China managed to mitigate the effects of the pandemic well, and came out as the first country to manage the virus in its jurisdiction successfully. Furthermore, China strategically takes this opportunity to step up its international engagement. On the other side, the current liberal international order received a massive disruption from the pandemic. The US—China's main

rival in the global great power competition and the pre-existing hegemonic power—seems to be declining in its role in the international order. This left the international community of states to decrease its confidence in the US. China then offered some assistance through diplomacy around the world. The diplomacy and assistance cover several sectors related to Covid-19 management, such as those of medical staff, medical equipments, and ultimately, vaccine diplomacy. China expected to reverse a pre-existing image as the cause of the pandemic and become a saviour and humanitarian actor of the world.

This paper explains China's policies amid the Covid-19 pandemic era through the theory of *tianxia*, conceptualising it as an idealized world order. This paper has highlighted the moderation between China's *tianxia* vision and the current world order in the discussion. China, already benefitting from the liberal international order, does not show any intention of becoming a hegemonic power in the post-pandemic world order. It does, however, show a huge interest in becoming a great power. China's gradual penetration and fixation on the liberal international order increase its position in the international hierarchy of power and build a more positive image of itself. This is very much related to the strong intonation for the use of soft power in *tianxia* theory, as a hierarchy in this system is built on the basis of moral power.

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