

Chinese Just War Theories? Three Examples and Their Implications

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Abstract

The article provides a new perspective for interpreting and criticising the reactions within the People's Republic of China (PRC) to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, namely the Chinese conception of just war. By reviewing the formation of norms regarding armed conflicts in the writings of Mao Zedong, Zhao Tingyang, and Bai Tongdong, the article argues that there is a Chinese version of just war theory that is very different from the Western tradition regarding just cause and the resolution of conflicts. The article concludes that the PRC's support for Russia could be very conditional, if not entirely impossible, from the perspective of Chinese just war theory.

Keywords: Chinese just war theories, *tianxia*, Mao Zedong, Russian invasion of Ukraine, Confucian ethics

With the Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022), the question of whether China, that is, the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC), will support Russia has been at the centre of academic and journalistic discussion. China watchers and international relations specialists have focused their attention on firstly, the position that China would prefer to maintain with regard to relations between Russia, China, and the NATO allies (Leonard, 2022); secondly, the historical trajectory of Sino-Russian relations (Garcia & Modlin 2022, 23-24); and lastly, what factors, intra- and beyond the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), may influence President Xi Jinping's decision-making on the Russian invasion (Kuhrt & Kaczmarek, 2022).

As fruitful as these contributions are, they do not take into consideration the advancement of Chinese international relations (IR) theories, which have also provoked numerous scholarly debates (Wang & Buzan, 2014; Hui, 2018; Callahan, 2008, 2010). Generally speaking, Chinese IR theories have argued for the difference, particularity, and even the supremacy of the traditional Chinese approach to the world order. Based on, or inspired by, the conceptual resources provided by Chinese intellectual history, promoters of Chinese IR theories have theorised world politics at the ontological, methodological, and analytical levels. This is best represented by Zhao Tingyang's 赵汀阳 (2011) theory of the '*tianxia* system', Qin Yaqing's 秦亚青 (2018) relational theory of world politics, and Yan Xuetong's 阎学通 (2011) theory of moral realism, respectively. Building on their contributions, Chinese philosopher Bai Tongdong 白彤东 (2020) proposed a Chinese just war theory based on Confucian ethics. The works of Bai and his predecessors remind us to take into account cultural elements when analysing China's intentions and behaviours towards war.

This article therefore seeks to provide key examples of Chinese just war theories, namely those of Mao Zedong 毛泽东, Zhao Tingyang, and Bai Tongdong, as a lens to better understand

China's position on the warfare in Ukraine. In the Western tradition, just war theories prescribe the conditions for waging, engaging in, and resolving wars in a just fashion (respectively *jus ad bellum*, *jus in bello*, and *jus post bellum*, see Bass, 2004). All such conditions are based on theories of legitimation derived from Christian doctrine and Roman Law, which emphasise the role of individual actors, including the sovereign, the state, and warriors (see Bass, 2004). As scholars of Chinese IR theories have argued, such a mode of thinking is different to that found in the Chinese tradition. The three authors selected here have each developed their justifications for wars on the basis of China's experience in modern times, the traditional Chinese worldview, and Confucian ethics. Their views can help us delimit the conceptual parameters in which China treats the norm of wars.

Mao Zedong's just war theory has not attracted as much scholarly attention as his thoughts on strategy. However, his justification for war continues to supplement Chinese political and diplomatic rhetoric to this day. Historically, it was applied to justify the PRC's military actions in Korea, Kinmen, and Vietnam (Lovell, 2019). Theoretically, it provides the foundation of Zhao's and Bai's just war theories.

Mao's just war theory was largely developed in his writings from 1937 and 1941, during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) and the Chinese Civil War (1945-1949). Mao distinguished just and unjust wars first by identifying just and unjust nations (Mao 1991a [1937], 383-384, Mao 1991b [1938], 449). According to Mao's deliberation of Marxist-Leninist theory, states are either imperialist and their governments wage 'imperialist wars', or counter-imperialist, whereby the people respond to the former with 'revolutionary wars'. For example, the USSR or China were just nations, fighting to liberate victim states (Mao 1991c [1939], 599), or to overcome the humiliations inflicted upon them by imperialist states (Mao 1991b [1938], 449). Based on this distinction of states, Mao justifies the conduct and resolution of wars waged by just states, asserting that ultimate victory in the counter-imperialist wars will be the true realisation of perpetual peace (475).

According to Mao's just war theory, the first aspect that needs to be determined in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is which state is engaging in a 'revolutionary war'. If China were to portray the situation whereby Ukraine sought to join NATO as 'imperialist', then the Russian characterisation of its invasion as 'self-defence against NATO expansion' could be more acceptable as a 'counter-imperial war'. On the other hand, if Russia were viewed more as an imperialist power, it would be more difficult for China to take a supportive stance towards Russia. However, Russia has been seen as the successor state to the USSR, both in China and in the United Nations (UN). Since Mao's time, the USSR has been depicted as among the preeminent forces of the just states, China cannot easily take the second approach and describe Russia as an imperialist state. The middle way lies in acknowledging the imperialist characteristics of Russian actions, while defining NATO allies as even more imperialistic in nature (Zhang, 2022). Thus, China can justify its ambiguous stance, restraining itself from openly supporting Russia, while insisting on not siding with the NATO allies.

Mao's justification of war relies on a communist ideology that claims universal validity. It is the universality of this (non-Chinese-originated) ideology that links Mao's just war theory to that of Zhao. In his monograph on the *tianxia* system, Zhao, following Mao, attributes large scale wars to modern (i.e. Western) imperialism. He understands this as the "world-ruling of one state", and the states dividing the world are thus seen as Western inventions (Zhao, 2011: 24, 50). Zhao therefore proposed an embracement of the traditional Chinese worldview of *tianxia* (天下; All-under-Heaven), which prioritises the world over any level of individual

collectives, on the basis that such a worldview precludes any justification for conflict. His argument therefore transcends Mao's justification, in the sense that Zhao does not see the correct subject (classes or peoples) as a just cause for war. On the other hand, he maintains the criticism levelled against wars waged by imperialist states. By insisting on classifying Western states as unjust states as concerns the waging of wars, while providing no criteria for just states to do so, Zhao effectively negates the possibility of just wars.

Zhao's *tianxia* system could therefore lead to two paradoxical assessments of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. On the one hand, as Zhao prioritises the sovereignty of the world over all states, it would be difficult to justify Russia's action as it initiated the conflict and has caused the damage for the interests of one state alone. On the other hand, this also implies that the resistance of Ukraine and the interventions of other states are not necessarily permissible unless the intention is for the benefit of the world. As a result, in Zhao's conceptualisation of *tianxia* system, apart from the exercise of the world sovereignty that precludes warfare, there is not a clear justification for either self-defence or intervention. China's self-positioning during the Russian invasion of Ukraine could therefore be justified through Zhao's theorisation of *tianxia*.

If Zhao's transcendence of Mao's justification for war is made by replacing Mao's Marxist thinking with traditional Chinese thought, Bai Tongdong restored the justification for war exactly through reinterpreting traditional Chinese thought. In his *tour de force* on Confucian political philosophy, Bai explained how wars could be just according to *Analects* and *Mencius*. In accordance with the Confucian ethics, which centre on *ren* 仁 (humaneness), Bai argued that, in the Confucian tradition, a war is just when there is the right subject, the right cause, and the right procedural condition, namely, a state with humane governance, a tyrant in another state, a manifested lack of will among the people under tyranny to resist the military force of the humane state, and the endorsement of international society (Bai, 2020: 219). Bai's just war theory thus revived Mao's separation between just and unjust states but replaced the ideological foundation with Confucianism. Furthermore, Bai supplemented the lack of a procedural condition for just wars in Mao's thinking. On the other hand, Bai's procedural stipulation for just war creates a procedural problem; that is, since the people's will to defend their state (however tyrannical) cannot be attested until the force of the invading state (however humane) is present, the war cannot be justified or condemned before the invasion. As a result, any state that self-claims to be the right state to wage war can attempt military advances against any state it considers tyrannical, and it can justify such action by ensuring a lack of resistance.

Bai's just war theory could therefore help explain the rationale that Russia provides for invading Ukraine, which is that it is an attempt to 'liberate' the Ukrainians who were 'under a Nazi regime'. However, as the Ukrainians have demonstrated their will to resist, according to Bai's theorisation, it will be impossible for China to interpret the Russian invasion as a case of a just war. Finally, Russia has also failed gain a comprehensive international endorsement of its act of 'liberation'. Thus, Bai's theory could further be used to disapprove of the Russian invasion.

The three cases above are provided as examples to illustrate how Chinese IR theories could contribute to generating insights on China's reactions to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This said, some qualification of their utility is necessary, since policy-making does not always follow normative theory. This article is limited to the clarification at the normative level, and shows how China could justify its ambiguous position through the theorisation of just war based on Chinese experimental and cultural resources. It associates the theorisations of Bai and Zhao to those of Mao, and elucidated how their just war theories differ from Western just war

theories. Chinese just war theories place more emphasis on the moral standing of relevant subjects, and less on the procedural criteria. The prioritisation of the moral standing of subjects also highlights the significance of the ideological foundations of moral judgement. None of the examples provide an unquestionable justification for the Russian invasion. However, these Chinese just war theories serve as reminders of the particular perspectives that China may adopt in interpreting international events and acting accordingly. This may help us gain a more nuanced understanding of China's rhetoric and decisions in future wars, in which it may or may not be involved.

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