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From Tianxia to a Global Norm? The Limits of Diffusing China's Community of Shared Future for Mankind

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Abstract

China presents the Community of Shared Future for Mankind (CSFM) as a universal response to fractured global governance. However, it remains unclear how ideas associated with Tianxia are rearticulated in CSFM and whether repetition in international institutions demonstrates norm acceptance. This article uses an interpretive qualitative case study and directed content analysis of a purposively bounded corpus of 13 documents from 2013 to 2023, triangulated with critical scholarship and three expert interviews. It identifies thematic resonances that the contemporary Tianxia literature associates with relationality, harmony, and moral responsibility, selectively rearticulated in a vocabulary of sovereignty, development, and multilateralism. Across the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and United Nations (UN), the strongest observable mechanisms are discursive coupling and negotiated textual inscription; material cooperation does not, by itself, establish normative adoption. Fragmented BRI implementation, negotiated AIIB design, heterogeneous SCO interests, and a divided UN Human Rights Council vote indicate selective and contested uptake. The article adds to this by separating norm promotion, institutional inscription, external uptake, and internalization. CSFM is therefore best assessed as a broad normative frame under sustained state-led promotion, rather than as a norm that has entered an established cascade.

Keywords—*China, Community of Shared Future for Mankind, Constructivism, Norm Diffusion, Tianxia*

1. Introduction

In October 2017, the Community of Shared Future for Mankind (CSFM) initiative was cited six times in the report of the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The report also affirmed the CSFM as a major element of China's diplomacy. China's dedication to fostering international cooperation based on peace and shared development is reflected in the CSFM, which was subsequently included in the 2018 Constitution (G. Zhang, 2021; X. Zhao, 2018).

A rational review of global developments suggests that the formation of a community of shared future is becoming increasingly significant (X. Zhao, 2018). Within contemporary global dynamics, the CSFM concept has assumed a prominent role in Chinese diplomacy. As worldwide challenges such as the climate crisis, social inequality, and geopolitical conflicts intensify, collaborative approaches have proven essential. The CSFM provides a conceptual framework for dealing with these issues through multilateral cooperation and intergovernmental dialogue. With growing

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international engagement, the CSFM has become an essential element in global initiatives aimed at promoting peace and shared prosperity (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2023).

CSFM makes a universal claim: states with different systems and civilizations can organize security and development around consultation, shared benefits, and a common future. Its intellectual presentation is nevertheless historically particular. Chinese official discourse associates the proposal with traditions of harmony and relational order, while scholarship links parts of that vocabulary to Tianxia, which literally means "all under heaven" (Ouyang, 2021; T. Zhao, 2009).

Tianxia emphasizes harmony, moral order, and togetherness (Liu, 2006). Tianxia has a vision of unity and harmony, often depicting a united and peaceful world under moral leadership. The idea of Tianxia has been revived in contemporary times with the hope of a harmonious world, particularly by Chinese philosopher Zhao Tingyang, who provided it a normative definition with three dimensions: geographical, psychological, and institutional (world government) (Bell, 2017). This produces the article's central puzzle: How can a civilization-situated repertoire resonate in a putatively universal normative frame, and what evidence would show that actors outside China have accepted rather than merely repeated it?

The formulation did not begin out of nothing. Related language appeared under Hu Jintao, while Xi elevated it into a global diplomatic proposition in Moscow in 2013 and at the United Nations (UN) in 2015 (Nathan & Zhang, 2022; Xi, 2013, 2015). It was subsequently written into the CCP Constitution in 2017 and the Constitution of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 2018 (Wei & Hu, 2018; Xinhua, 2017). These steps establish domestic political salience. They do not, by themselves, establish international acceptance.

Existing research already examines CSFM's meanings, motives, and implications. Some accounts treat it as a reformist contribution to global governance or international society (Wang & Yi, 2021; X. Zhao, 2018). Others identify a tension between egalitarian language and an expectation of Chinese leadership, or ask whether the concept selectively revises the existing order (Ahl, 2022; Nathan & Zhang, 2022; D. Zhang, 2018). The novelty of this study therefore does not lie in claiming the first connection between CSFM and Tianxia. It lies in testing how Tianxia-associated resonances are rearticulated across institutionally different platforms and in distinguishing promotion from uptake.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the UN are useful arenas for this test. These four were chosen for their institutional diversity and for the distinctive roles they play in Chinese global engagement. The BRI represents a flexible network of agreements and projects that foregrounds China's narrative and practical outreach; the AIIB operates as a treaty-based development bank requiring formal multilateral negotiation; the SCO is a consensus-oriented regional security organization that predates CSFM and demonstrates regional adaptation; and the UN offers a global, multilateral forum where Chinese initiatives must compete and interact with diverse international

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actors, frequently resulting in contested outcomes. These arenas were selected over other possible organizations or initiatives to provide a balanced comparison between bilateral, regional, and universal platforms, and to focus on cases where CSFM has been explicitly invoked or debated.

Alternative platforms such as BRICS and the G20 were not prioritized because their agendas, institutional forms, and degrees of CSFM articulation vary. For example, BRICS operates primarily as a loose coalition for dialogue among emerging economies and has made less frequent formal reference to CSFM concepts, while the G20 is a broader global economic forum with diffuse leadership and limited space for explicit norm contestation linked to China's normative proposals. By focusing on BRI, AIIB, SCO, and UN, the analysis concentrates on arenas where both the Chinese initiative and the recipient or partner response are clearly documented in institutional texts. The differences among these institutions are significant. Coding all participation as endorsement risks circular reasoning, as material cooperation alone does not constitute evidence of normative diffusion. By examining recipient agency, institutional compromise, and contestation, these arenas reveal the mechanisms and limitations of China's norm promotion (Jones & Zeng, 2019; Wilson, 2017; Yuan, 2023).

Thus, this article asks: "How, and with what limits, are ideas associated with contemporary Tianxia rearticulated in CSFM across the BRI, AIIB, SCO, and UN, and what do the resulting institutional traces indicate about the frame's diffusion status?" It argues that the texts exhibit selective resonances of relationality, harmony, and moral responsibility in the modern diplomatic language of sovereign equality, shared development, and UN-centered multilateralism. The BRI, SCO, and UN provide evidence of persuasion, negotiated textual uptake, and organizational repetition, while the AIIB is a comparative case of thematic compatibility and negotiated constraint. The available evidence supports sustained state-led promotion and partial, contested institutional inscription, not a demonstrated norm cascade or internalization.

The article offers three contributions. Empirically, it compares institutional carriers rather than listing projects. Conceptually, it separates four evidentiary levels: norm promotion, institutional inscription, external uptake, and internalization. Theoretically, it combines constructivist norm research with localization and Global International Relations (Global IR), allowing ideas associated with China to be analyzed without treating either "China" or "the West" as a single, fixed tradition (Acharya, 2004, 2014). Overall, the main contribution of this article is to demonstrate that the internationalization of a Chinese normative project cannot be inferred solely from the international circulation of its language; norm promotion, institutional inscription, recipient localization, and normative internalization are analytically distinct outcomes. The next section synthesizes the relevant debates and specifies the analytical framework, followed by the methods, findings, discussion, and conclusion.

2. Literature Review and Analytical Framework

2.1 Literature Review

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A first cluster of scholarship presents CSFM as a response to interdependence and deficits in global governance. In these accounts, the proposal combines peace, development, civilizational exchange, and environmental accountability, and the BRI supplies incentives and practical cooperation through which a revised international society might be built (Wang & Yi, 2021; X. Zhao, 2018). Chinese policy texts similarly describe an open, inclusive, and mutually beneficial future (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2023). These sources are important evidence of official self-presentation, but they cannot independently verify reception or behavioral effects.

A second cluster examines ambiguity, strategy, and hierarchy. Zhang (2018) shows that the proposal combines normative aspirations with status and foreign policy motives. Nathan and Zhang (2022) argue that its rhetoric positions China simultaneously as an equal developing country and as a major leader. Ahl (2022) and De La Rasilla and Hao (2024) identify consequences for international law and global constitutionalism, but do not reduce the concept to a settled alternative order. Taken together, this work shows why official articulation must be compared with institutional practice and external responses.

A third cluster concerns Tianxia. Zhao Tingyang (2009, 2021) reconstructs it as a world-centered philosophy in which relations and all-inclusiveness take priority over rivalry among separate states. Bell (2017) finds resources for moral leadership and graded attachment but cautions against treating historical Tianxia as a single blueprint. Callahan (2008) warns that claims to transform difference into harmony can reproduce hierarchy or cultural assimilation. Ouyang (2021) and Chu (2022) likewise question whether a cosmopolitan vocabulary escapes Sinocentric assumptions. The debate therefore concerns selective rearticulation, not a simple line of descent from an ancient idea to present policy.

A fourth cluster shifts from ideas to carriers and recipients. Studies of the BRI reveal fragmented domestic motives, commercial implementation, and limited normative influence in some recipient settings (Comerma, 2025; Jones, 2020; Jones & Zeng, 2019; Ye, 2021). Research on the AIIB shows that China accepted partners' demands and established multilateral development practices to secure legitimacy (Wilson, 2017). SCO scholarship identifies sovereignty and non-interference but also regime-security practices and institutional balancing (Ambrosio, 2008; Yuan, 2023). These findings challenge one-way accounts of diffusion.

Studies on the BRI have also generated a significant debate over whether China's development finance constitutes a form of economic statecraft or a mechanism that creates structural dependence. The "debt-trap diplomacy" narrative views lending and infrastructure projects as tools that could potentially allow China to turn economic asymmetries into political leverage. Conversely, subsequent empirical research has questioned the general validity of this interpretation and placed greater emphasis on commercial interests, borrower agency, domestic political incentives, and the diversity of BRI projects. This debate is relevant to this study because participation in BRI projects cannot automatically be interpreted as acceptance of CSFM norms.

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If recipient governments participate due to infrastructure needs, commercial interests, or domestic political considerations, then material participation may occur even if the norm is not adopted. Therefore, this analysis views participation in the BRI as an indication of the potential for a transmission channel, rather than as evidence of norm acceptance.

Existing scholarship has thus examined CSFM's intellectual pedigree, rhetorical ambiguity, legal implications, and projection through the BRI. Less clear is how selective Tianxia resonances are rearticulated in a sovereignty-centered normative frame across the BRI, AIIB, SCO, and UN, and how external repetition should be distinguished from localization, pragmatic participation, or resistance. Addressing that unresolved analytical problem, not asserting that no prior research exists, defines the gap filled here.

2.2 Constructivist Norm-Diffusion Framework

Constructivism treats identities and interests as constituted through social interaction rather than as fixed before it (Wendt, 1992). In this study, CSFM is treated as a broad normative frame. It links several prescriptions under one political formula: consultation, shared development, sovereign equality, and common security. This is more precise than assuming that CSFM is already a single norm with an unambiguous behavioral rule. The framework therefore asks how China defines an appropriate international role, how it rearticulates that identity claim, and how other actors respond.

Table 1. Norm Life Cycle Stages

	Stage 1:	Stage 2:	Stage 3:
	Norm Emergence	Norm Cascade	Internalization
Actors	Norm entrepreneurs with organizational platforms	States, international organizations, networks	Law, professions, bureaucracy
Motives	Altruism, empathy, ideational, commitment	Legitimacy, reputation, esteem	Conformity
Dominant Mechanisms	Persuasion	Socialization, institutionalization, demonstration	Habit, institutionalization

Source: Finnemore & Sikkink (1998, p. 898)

As shown in Table 1, Finnemore and Sikkink's (1998) norm life cycle provides stage-specific benchmarks. During emergence, a norm entrepreneur uses an organizational platform and persuasion to secure initial support. A cascade requires a critical mass of relevant states to adopt the prescription, after which socialization, legitimacy, and conformity accelerate diffusion. Internalization means that compliance becomes habitual and relatively unquestioned. The sequence is used here as an evaluative heuristic, rather than a predetermined chronology; norms can remain contested, change meaning, or fail to advance (Krook & True, 2012).

The authors apply constructivism, which does not require material explanations to be disregarded; rather, this approach highlights how identity, norms, and shared meanings shape the interpretation and legitimization of material interests and practices. Thereby, constructivism offers a broader scope for capturing normative roles in global politics, such as challenging and localizing Western norms as well as creating new

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norms to reform and strengthen the world order. Although it is a Western theory, constructivism's emphasis on culture and identity offers a valuable bridge between popular studies in non-Western international relations literature and centers of international relations research in the West (Acharya & Buzan, 2007, pp. 3–4).

Recipient agency is added through Acharya's (2004) concept of localization. Local actors may reconstruct an external idea so that it fits prior identities and institutional practices. Repetition can therefore indicate endorsement, diplomatic compromise or selective borrowing. This qualification is particularly important for the BRI and SCO, where partners possess their own development, security, and status interests. It also avoids treating the "Global South" as a unitary audience and connects the analysis to Global IR's emphasis on plural sources and regional agency (Acharya, 2014).

The operational sequence is as follows: identity repertoire → selective rearticulation → organizational platform → diffusion mechanism → external response → stage assessment. Resonance is coded when official texts echo Tianxia-associated themes identified in the critical literature. This indicates conceptual affinity, not a causal genealogy. Mechanisms include persuasion, negotiated textual inscription, and routinization, while policy coordination and material incentives are evaluated as contextual or alternative explanations.

To clarify coding thresholds, each analytic code is defined operationally. For example, "endorsement" is coded when an actor explicitly expresses support for CSFM principles in formal organizational texts or official statements, using language that aligns with the key concepts of the normative frame. "Localization" is coded when recipient actors adapt CSFM-linked language to fit pre-existing local practices or institutions, resulting in a reinterpretation or selective reworking of the original meaning. "Pragmatic participation" involves material or policy engagement motivated primarily by practical considerations rather than acceptance of the normative frame. "Contestation" is recorded when actors publicly dispute, oppose, or seek to amend the CSFM language or its application within an institutional context. Only independent reproduction and sustained implementation, where external actors autonomously incorporate CSFM principles into their own practices and norms, justify claims of adoption; attendance, finance, or a bundled vote alone do not.

3. Methods

This study adopts an interpretive qualitative single-case design to examine CSFM as a state-sponsored normative project. It uses four embedded institutional arenas to compare how a common frame travels through different organizational forms: the BRI, AIIB, SCO, and UN. The main method is purposive, bounded qualitative document analysis, understood as a transparent process of selecting, appraising, coding, and interpreting documentary evidence (Bowen, 2009), combined with directed qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

The core corpus comprises 13 purposively selected public institutional texts published between 2013 and 2023: an official extract from Xi's 2013 Moscow address and his 2015 UN speech; the 2017 CCP constitutional resolution; the 2018

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PRC constitutional amendment; the 2023 CSFM white paper; the 2017 and 2019 BRI Forum joint communiqués; the 2015 AIIB Articles of Agreement; the SCO's 2018 Qingdao summit information report and 2022 Samarkand Declaration; UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2344; UN General Assembly Resolution 72/250; and Human Rights Council (HRC) Resolution 37/23. Selection was guided by two main criteria: documents were chosen when they explicitly defined CSFM, connected it to a practice at the organizational or policy level, or documented responses such as multilateral uptake, negotiation outcomes, or contestation by participating states. The aim was to capture a representative cross-section of both Chinese state articulation and multilateral engagement across the main institutional platforms where CSFM is promoted and debated. This approach increases methodological strictness by enabling transparent coding and clarifying the link between evidence and inference. Duplicative news reports and texts without links to institutional development, endorsement, or resistance were excluded to avoid redundancy and preserve relevance to the diffusion analysis.

The coding process was carried out in two stages. *First*, deductive codes derived from the theoretical framework, which include the promotion of norms, institutional embedding, localization, contestation, pragmatic participation, and internalization, are applied to the corpus. *Second*, inductive coding is used to identify recurring themes and mechanisms not anticipated by the theoretical framework.

Supplementary expert interviews were selected purposively to provide information-rich interpretations of Chinese political thought, East Asian development, and China-led institutions. They involved Klaus Heinrich Raditio, lecturer in Contemporary Chinese Political Thought at the Driyarkara School of Philosophy (13 June 2025); Nur Rachmat Yuliantoro, Professor of International Development in East Asia at Gadjah Mada University (20 June 2025); and Veronika Saraswati, researcher at the Indonesia-China Partnership Studies Institute (11 July 2025). The interviews were conducted online via Zoom, lasting approximately 30-60 minutes each. Two interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, while one was documented through detailed notes due to technical recording issues.

The interview data were analyzed thematically by identifying recurring patterns. Insights from these interviews were used to contextualize and interpret textual findings, offering supplementary perspectives on the themes of harmony, continuity, and strategic calculation in CSFM and Tianxia. However, because all interviewees are based in Indonesia, their perspectives may be affected by specific regional experiences, diplomatic outlooks, and geopolitical considerations unique to the Indonesian and Southeast Asian context. As a result, the analysis may reflect priorities or assumptions salient in this regional setting, such as an emphasis on non-alignment, development cooperation, or particular interpretations of Chinese engagement. This limitation is acknowledged in interpreting how interview evidence is integrated within the argument.

Analysis proceeded through a theory-guided codebook. First-cycle deductive codes were: identity and Tianxia resonance; norm entrepreneur and organizational platform; persuasion and framing; institutional inscription; policy coordination; material incentive or

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demonstration; recipient endorsement or localization; contestation; and routinization. Inductive subcodes were added when recurrent mechanisms or counterevidence appeared. To illustrate the application of these codes, for example, the code "institutional inscription" was applied to the 2017 and 2019 BRI Forum joint communiqués, in which negotiated language on the "community of shared future for mankind" was included as an official expression of organizational endorsement, as well as to Security Council Resolution 2344 and HRC Resolution 37/23, both of which formally incorporated shared-future language into authoritative multilateral documents. A comparison matrix linked each coded claim to its actor, date, arena, mechanism, source type, and evidentiary status. The BRI, AIIB, SCO, and UN were then compared against the thresholds (see Table 2).

Triangulation compared Chinese official texts with negotiated multilateral documents, voting records, independent scholarship, and expert interpretations. It was used to locate convergence and divergence, not to treat repetition as proof (Natow, 2020). Negative cases, such as institutional compromise, fragmented project motives, and contested votes, were retained. The design cannot reveal private intentions, measure all recipient-state beliefs, or infer behavioral compliance from participation. Translation variants including "common destiny", "shared future", "mankind", "humankind", and "humanity" were treated as related only when their institutional context supported that interpretation.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 CSFM as a Strategic Normative Frame

Chinese official documents present CSFM as a response to common risks and as an organizing vision for lasting peace, common security, shared prosperity, openness, and ecological protection (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2023). Analytically, this is evidence of framing: it identifies global problems, assigns China the role of responsible major country, and proposes consultation and development as appropriate conduct. It should not be restated as neutral proof that the resulting order is equal or non-hegemonic.

Domestic institutionalization strengthens the frame's durability within Chinese foreign policy. The CCP's 2017 constitutional resolution joined CSFM to the BRI, while the 2018 state constitutional amendment placed it beside peaceful development, sovereignty, and mutual benefit (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2019; Xinhua, 2017). These changes convert a leadership slogan into an authoritative state objective. They also reveal that CSFM is not external to strategic interest: identity, legitimacy, and material policy are politically joined.

This combination differs from, but overlaps with, several adjacent traditions. Liberal internationalism places greater weight on rules, reciprocal institutional constraints, and liberal rights, although its practice has also been hierarchical (Ikenberry, 2018). English School pluralism similarly values sovereign coexistence and international institutions, but does not require a civilizational center (Buzan, 2014). The ASEAN Way shares consultation and non-interference, yet developed through regional bargaining among formally equal members (Acharya,

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2004). Confucian and relational diplomacy supplies a broader vocabulary of roles and harmony; Tianxia is a more ambitious claim about ordering the whole (Qin, 2016).

The result is neither a simple replacement for the liberal international order nor continuity without revision. CSFM retains the UN Charter, state sovereignty, and development cooperation, while seeking to recalibrate whose values, priorities, and leadership are legitimate. Nathan and Zhang (2022) identify the central ambiguity: China is represented as one equal participant and as a major actor entitled to guide reform. Hagström and Nordin (2020) further show that harmony discourse gains attraction partly by contrasting a virtuous self with allegedly confrontational others.

Yuliantoro's expert consultation similarly stressed the coexistence of traditional moral language and great-power calculation (personal communication, June 20, 2025). This observation is used as an interpretive prompt rather than proof of motive. The documentary evidence supports a more bounded finding: CSFM is a strategic normative frame through which Chinese actors connect identity, reform claims, and material cooperation, while leaving the equality-leadership tension unresolved.

4.2 Tianxia, Selective Rearticulation, and Contested Universalization

The contemporary Chinese worldview cannot be separated from the classical concept of Tianxia. In the Sino-centric tradition, Tianxia is understood as a world order that unites humanity, morality, and nature as a whole. It rejects material-moral and center-periphery divisions and stresses harmony as the main principle of governance and international relations (Karmilawaty, 2024; Søndergaard, 2016, p. 124).

Historically, since the Zhou Dynasty, Tianxia has evolved from the thoughts of Confucius and Mencius, who emphasized moral discipline, virtue (*ren yi*), and benevolent government (*ren zheng*), to the Mandate of Heaven (*Tianming*). In its development, the meaning of Tianxia shifted from merely a territory of power to belonging to all people. Entering the modern era, clashes with Western values gave rise to new reinterpretations (Søndergaard, 2016).

Zhao Tingyang revived Tianxia by formulating it as a "world theory" to address the failure of the nation-state-based international system. He offers three main principles. *First*, the internationalization of the world, which eliminates the concept of "enemy" in global politics. *Second*, relational rationality, which stresses the maximization of collective benefits and the minimization of mutual losses. *Third*, compatibilistic universalism, which combines universal values with local diversity. These principles aim to transform conflict into harmony, emphasize "service as power," and promote inclusive and sustainable global governance (T. Zhao, 2009, 2019, 2021).

However, this concept attracted criticism. Some scholars argue that Tianxia tends to be top-down, prioritizes stability over individual freedom, and gives more space to elite rule than democracy. William Callahan, for example, argues that this idea has the potential to become a form of Chinese cultural hegemony rather than a truly inclusive world order (Callahan, 2008; Bell, 2017, p. 134).

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Tianxia is also not a unitary Chinese worldview that can be mapped directly onto current policy. Historically, the term has carried territorial, cosmological, and political meanings. Zhao Tingyang's contemporary reconstruction turns it into a philosophy for a world not adequately governed by relations among separate nation-states. World-centeredness, relational rationality, and all-inclusiveness, as its central claims, seek to remove the category of an absolute political enemy and to evaluate order by the quality of relations it produces (T. Zhao, 2009, 2021).

Bell (2017) is sympathetic to the recovery of traditional resources but does not equate harmony with undifferentiated equality. Historical Tianxia accommodated graded responsibilities and attachments. Callahan (2008), by contrast, asks whether a common language of inclusion converts legitimate difference into a renewed hierarchy centered on China. Chu (2022) extends this concern by identifying the paradox of a supposedly world-centered theory articulated through a Sinocentric subject. These disagreements make hierarchy an empirical question, not an assumption that can be settled by official claims.

Acharya offers a different route into the debate. Localization explains how actors reconstruct travelling ideas to fit prior institutions and identities, while Global IR requires engagement with non-Western intellectual resources without replacing one civilizational essentialism with another (Acharya, 2004, 2014). Applied here, the approach asks which Tianxia-associated resonances persist, which are transformed by the sovereign-state system, and how partners reinterpret them.

The textual comparison indicates selective rearticulation. CSFM repeats relational interdependence, harmony, and moral responsibility, but embeds them in the vocabulary of sovereign equality, non-interference, development, and UN-centered multilateralism. It does not adopt Zhao's proposal for a world institution above states. Nor does official language acknowledge the hierarchy identified by Callahan. CSFM is therefore better understood as a contemporary rearticulation that uses Tianxia as one intellectual repertoire alongside Marxist, developmental, and Westphalian elements (Ahl, 2022; Ouyang, 2021).

Saraswati described this relationship as continuity adapted to modern conditions (personal communication, July 11, 2025), while Raditio linked the two through the theme of harmony (personal communication, June 13, 2025). These consultations are treated as expert interpretations, not evidence of causal genealogy. The analysis accepts the possibility of continuity but rejects stronger historical claims that peaceful rhetoric proves the absence of imperial or coercive practices. Ideas do not erase material power or determine behavior. Instead, they do analytical work by making some roles and policies appear appropriate. This article's position between Zhao, Bell, Callahan, and Acharya is thus selective rearticulation and contested universalization.

4.3 Mechanisms and Evidence Across the BRI, AIIB, SCO, and UN

Tianxia stresses the importance of global institutions. China actively promotes the reform of international institutions to better represent the developing nations' interests, strengthens the UN's role, and builds regional institutions that reject hegemony and

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prioritize deliberation (Nguyen, 2024). China has been actively building security ties with several Asian countries and playing a more proactive role in various multilateral institutions (Saputro, 2016). Thus, multilateral cooperation is the main channel for the application of Tianxia in global politics. This concept not only serves as a cultural heritage but also as an ideological and strategic instrument for China in shaping an inclusive, fair, and just world order.

The BRI, AIIB, SCO, and UN do not simply "embody" CSFM. The core corpus directly records discursive coupling, negotiated textual inscription, and organizational repetition. Material incentives and policy coordination are examined as contextual mechanisms or alternative explanations, not treated as self-evident diffusion. A unilateral speech shows promotion; a negotiated communiqué shows textual uptake; recurring procedures show institutionalization; and independently sustained behavior is needed to infer adoption.

In the BRI, discursive coupling links connectivity to "extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits". The 2017 BRI Forum Joint Communiqué described a prosperous and peaceful community of shared future as a common aspiration, and the 2019 communiqué connected a shared future to policy, infrastructure, trade, financial, and people-to-people connectivity (Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, 2017; Xinhua, 2019). Because these texts were negotiated among participating leaders, they constitute stronger evidence than a Chinese speech. They still do not show that each state accepted CSFM as a behavioral norm.

The broader BRI literature identifies policy coordination and material incentives as plausible contextual mechanisms, but the two joint communiqués in the core corpus do not by themselves demonstrate project-level socialization. Infrastructure finance gives partners practical reasons to participate, while implementers may follow commercial or bureaucratic incentives that diverge from leadership rhetoric (Jones & Zeng, 2019; Ye, 2021). Jones (2020) accordingly finds that the BRI's challenge to the liberal international order is less systematic than a coherent alternative-order thesis implies. Material participation is not a valid proxy for normative belief.

Recipient evidence confirms selective uptake. Comerma's (2025) comparison of BRI memoranda in Europe finds little normative influence even where the documents produced some soft-power gains, alongside growing skepticism. This is a localization and contestation pattern: partners may accept connectivity or prosperity language while resisting a Chinese account of its political meaning. It contradicts any claim that "the West" responds uniformly and shows why reception in the Global South must be tested independently rather than presumed.

The AIIB is a comparative case of thematic compatibility and negotiated constraint, not evidence of institutional translation. Its Articles of Agreement legally routinize infrastructure, sustainable development, regional cooperation, partnerships, voting, and project appraisal, but do not mention CSFM or the BRI (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, 2015). Wilson (2017) shows that China accepted partner demands and existing multilateral development practices to obtain legitimacy. The bank therefore shows that compatible development

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principles can coexist with partner influence without establishing CSFM adoption.

The SCO operates through post-hoc alignment and organizational repetition. Founded in 2001, the organization could not have been created to implement a concept globalized in 2013. Through the SCO, China presents a model of multilateralism that prioritizes regional stability and joint development (Lain et al., 2018). Cooperation between Central Asian nations and China through the SCO will provide the governance of the common political and security system with a new impetus by incorporating Russia as a regional power in Eurasia (Anggraini et al., 2023). The SCO's official information report on the 2018 Qingdao summit nevertheless recorded a common vision of a community of shared future, and the 2022 Samarkand Declaration repeated those objectives alongside sovereignty, non-interference, and independent development paths (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, 2018, 2022). Consensus declarations and recurring official meetings can socialize vocabulary, but members' heterogeneous interests limit any inference of ideological convergence (Yuan, 2023).

Within the SCO, there are power asymmetries that cannot be resolved through formal consensus: China and Russia possess far greater economic, diplomatic, and military capabilities than the smaller Central Asian member states, which limits the extent to which institutional consensus can be interpreted as evidence of equal agenda-setting power (Lain et al., 2018). These asymmetries are influential because the norm distribution within the SCO may reflect both socialization processes and inequalities in bargaining power.

Critical SCO research supplies counterevidence. Ambrosio (2008) finds that the "Shanghai Spirit" has also supported authoritarian and regime-security norms in Central Asia. This does not prove that every SCO practice is authoritarian; it shows that the same platform can carry norms other than CSFM's benign official presentation. The mechanism is thus institutional availability: China can attach CSFM language to an established organization, while other actors retain their own security rationales.

The UN record shows formal inscription with visible contestation. UNSC Resolution 2344 and General Assembly Resolution 72/250 used shared-future language in specific issue contexts (United Nations General Assembly, 2017; United Nations Security Council, 2017). The General Assembly text was adopted by 108 votes to five with 47 abstentions. HRC Resolution 37/23 included a similar formula but was adopted by 28 votes to one with 17 abstentions (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2018). Entry into authoritative documents demonstrates diplomatic access and partial institutionalization. The divided vote and bundled subject matter prevent it from being coded as universal endorsement or a tipping point.

4.4 A Theory-Guided Assessment of CSFM's Diffusion Status

Applied as a diagnostic rather than a forecast, the norm life cycle framework produces a more cautious assessment than the original claim of a cascade beginning in 2021. China clearly acts as the principal norm entrepreneur, and the CCP-state diplomatic apparatus supplies sustained organizational support. Speeches, constitutional inscription, and a dedicated

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white paper provide strong evidence of articulation and domestic consolidation.

International evidence is strongest at the level of partial inscription. BRI and SCO communiqués repeat shared-future language, while several UN texts incorporate variants of the formula. The mechanisms include persuasion, negotiated wording, and organizational repetition. Counterevidence is equally material: BRI implementation is fragmented, AIIB design reflects partner influence, SCO interests remain heterogeneous, and the HRC vote was divided.

Table 2. Theory-Guided Assessment of CSFM's Diffusion Status

Stage	Threshold and Observed Evidence	Assessment
State-led promotion	Entrepreneur articulation and domestic consolidation: 2013/2015 speeches; 2017 CCP and 2018 PRC constitutional inscription; 2023 white paper.	Strong
Inscription	Negotiated international wording and routines: BRI 2017/2019; SCO 2018/2022; UNSC 2344; UNGA 72/250; HRC 37/23. AIIB embeds compatible development practice but does not name CSFM.	Partial and contested
Cascade	Requires independent adoption and socialization. No systematic critical-mass count; fragmented BRI motives, partner-influenced AIIB designs, and the HRC vote of 28-1-17 are counterevidence.	Not established
Internalization	Requires habitual, relatively unquestioned compliance across law and bureaucracy. CSFM remains actively promoted, variably rearticulated, and debated.	Not reached

Source: Compiled by the authors based on various data sources

Table 2 explicitly assesses each diffusion threshold. It separates evidence that China promotes the frame from evidence that external actors independently adopt its prescriptions. This prevents institutional presence from becoming a self-confirming indicator of diffusion.

The verdict is sustained state-led frame promotion with partial, contested institutional inscription. A cascade is not established because the study has no systematic critical-mass count of states independently adopting a stable CSFM prescription, and material or diplomatic participation has plausible alternative explanations. Internalization is still less plausible: CSFM remains actively promoted, variably rearticulated, and openly debated. The assessment may change if future research demonstrates autonomous uptake and sustained behavioral implementation beyond China-led platforms. The evidence of internalization would therefore require that the principles of CSFM be applied by the recipient government without pressure from China, integrated into domestic or regional policy practices, and adopted as a legitimate standard for appropriate

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behavior, even in the absence of material incentives from China.

4.5 Discussion: Theoretical and Global IR Implications

In international relations, constructivism views global politics as the result of social construction through the interaction between structures and agents, in which identities, norms, and interests are formed and transformed through social processes. From a constructivist perspective, national identity is shaped by social, cultural, and historical backgrounds and develops through intersubjective interactions with other actors. Social norms are essential in shaping actors' identities and guiding their behavior in accordance with common expectations (Hopf, 1998; Theys, 2018).

Within the framework of constructivism, international structures are determined not only by material power but also by normative and ideological structures shaped through social interactions among states. This emphasis on normative and ideological structures is important because they are considered to shape the political actors' social identities. Constructivism emphasizes that an actor's identity is a key determinant of a state's interests and actions. Non-material structures such as norms and ideas shape identity, which in turn informs how actors will behave. As social structures, norms influence actors' identities and interests in addition to their behavior (Rizkiyah et al., 2023).

In this article, the findings show why constructivism must be used as an inference framework rather than as a vocabulary for declaring ideas important. China's identity claim is observable in the roles and prescriptions articulated through CSFM. Its international effect, however, depends on organizational carriers, recipient interpretation, and contestation. The analytical move from identity to mechanism and response explains both the persistence of the frame and the unevenness of its diffusion.

The distinction between promotion and acceptance is the article's principal theoretical contribution. A state can successfully place language in communiqués without producing a cascade; an institution can routinize compatible practices without adopting the sponsoring state's ideology; and recipients can localize a term for instrumental or normative reasons. These are not failed versions of one linear process but different outcomes that norm research should code separately (Acharya, 2004; Krook & True, 2012).

The evidence also qualifies material and strategic alternatives. Infrastructure finance, status competition, and regime security can explain participation in the BRI, AIIB, and SCO. Constructivist analysis adds value where actors publicly justify those interests, negotiate shared language, and reproduce it in institutions. It should not claim that rhetoric caused projects or votes when the necessary behavioral comparison is absent. Ideational and material explanations are therefore complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

For Global IR, selective rearticulation avoids two symmetrical errors: treating Chinese ideas as derivative additions to a Western canon, and treating Tianxia as an internally uniform civilizational essence. Zhao, Bell, and Callahan disagree about inclusion and hierarchy, while BRI and SCO partners reshape what shared future means. Recognizing those disagreements makes

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non-Western thought analytically consequential without insulating it from critical scrutiny (Acharya, 2014).

Consequently, these findings position CSFM neither as a total rejection of the liberal international order, nor as a mere cultural variant of existing regionalism. Unlike liberal internationalism, CSFM places less emphasis on liberal political rights and reciprocal institutional constraints; unlike the English School pluralism, it incorporates stronger elements of civilization and development; unlike the ASEAN Way, it was developed in the context of significant power asymmetry rather than within a framework of regional equality; and unlike Confucian and relational diplomacy, it puts forward a more ambitious vision for the organization of global society. Its distinctive theoretical significance lies precisely in this hybrid nature: CSFM combines elements of existing international norms with the Chinese intellectual tradition and seeks to reshape the hierarchy of legitimate values and leadership within the existing international order.

Nevertheless, the study's scope remains bounded. Its 13-document core captures key acts of articulation and inscription but not every bilateral agreement or recipient debate. The three Indonesia-based experts provide interpretive depth but do not represent perspectives from China, the wider Global South, or international society. As such, the findings are most robustly applicable to the specific institutional platforms selected and the timeframe covered. While the mechanisms and limits identified here may correspond to similar multilateral arenas or issue areas, they should not be assumed to generalize straightforwardly to all instances of Chinese norm promotion or to the wider landscape of international diffusion without further empirical examination. A stronger test of cascade and transferability would construct a multilingual dataset of independent state statements, trace whether CSFM prescriptions alter policy over time, and compare adopters, localizers, and resisters throughout regions. The results presented here should therefore be understood as bounded by case selection, document scope, and regional focus, demonstrating the need for broader comparative research before more sweeping conclusions can be drawn.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This article asked how Tianxia-associated ideas are rearticulated in CSFM across four institutional arenas and what the resulting traces reveal about diffusion status. The answer is selective resonance with clear limits: relationality, harmony, and moral responsibility are recast in a sovereignty-centered language of consultation, shared development, and multilateralism, but the evidence does not establish a causal genealogy. The BRI, AIIB, SCO, and UN create channels for promotion and inscription, but they do not erase partner agency, strategic incentives, or contestation.

Empirically, the study replaces project lists with differentiated evidentiary mechanisms. BRI forums couple narrative with negotiated communiqués; the AIIB provides a negative case of thematic compatibility under partner constraint; the SCO repeats shared-future language through an organization that predates CSFM; and UN texts provide formal but sometimes divided inscription. These pathways show partial institutionalization,

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while external uptake remains selective and ambiguous.

The theoretical contribution is to distinguish norm promotion, institutional inscription, external uptake, and internalization. That distinction disciplines constructivist inference and integrates Acharya's recipient-centered localization with Finnemore and Sikkink's stage benchmarks. It also contributes to Global IR by analyzing a Chinese intellectual repertoire as contested and relational, rather than as either a decorative cultural label or a coherent substitute for the liberal international order.

The most defensible present classification is sustained state-led promotion of a normative frame with partial, contested institutional inscription, not an established cascade. Future research should test autonomous recipient adoption and behavioral implementation with multilingual documents, partner-country interviews, and longitudinal comparison. For policy analysis, the immediate implication is modest but important: participation in a project, membership in an institution, or support for a bundled resolution should not be treated automatically as acceptance of the normative frame attached to it.

Future research should prioritize several directions to extend these findings. Regionally, examining cases in Africa, Latin America, Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East would provide a broader understanding of how CSFM is promoted, localized, resisted, or ignored beyond Southeast Asia. Institutionally, further analysis of blocs such as BRICS, the G20, ASEAN, and the African Union could clarify differences in how the frame travels through different multilateral environments. Methodologically, employing mixed-method approaches, including large-scale quantitative text analysis, fieldwork in recipient countries, and expanded multilingual interview programs, would enrich the evidence base. Tracing CSFM references across national policy statements, legislative debates, and civil society responses could offer a more granular view of norm uptake and resistance within recipient societies. These extensions would help map the global trajectory of CSFM and offer a firmer empirical foundation for evaluating its significance and limits.

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