

## **Histories of International Law in China: All Under Heaven?**

### **Background**

The historical study of international law has witnessed growing global interest, leading to the emergence of an expansive body of literature chronicling its development. Prominent works, such as the *Series in the Theory and History of International Law* by Oxford University Press and *Studies in the History of International Law* by Brill, have contributed to this flourishing discourse. However, much of this scholarship remains entrenched in Eurocentric perspectives, limiting a holistic understanding of the global forces shaping international law.

This gap highlights the critical need to incorporate diverse narratives, particularly those rooted in China's historical, political, and cultural experiences. Responding to this imperative, the Centre for Chinese and Comparative Law (CCCL) at the City University of Hong Kong School of Law (CityUHK SLW) partnered with Wuhan University Law School and Fudan University Law School to organize the Histories of International Law in China: All Under Heaven? conference, held from 10–11 November 2023.

The conference is the first in a series of events aimed at exploring the intersection of China's history and international law. The second conference in this series was successfully hosted by Fudan University Law School in mid-2024, continuing the momentum of the first event and broadening the scope of research and discussions. These conferences collectively serve as a platform for fostering interdisciplinary dialogue and advancing scholarship on China's unique contributions to the history of international law.

This initiative underscores the significance of integrating Chinese perspectives into global legal discourse, challenging entrenched historical paradigms, and promoting a deeper understanding of the diverse forces shaping international law in the modern era.

### **Introduction to the Engaging Parties**

Wuhan University Law School:

The Wuhan University Law School is one of China's most prestigious law faculties, with a long-standing reputation for excellence in legal education and research. Renowned for its

expertise in international law, Wuhan University has consistently been at the forefront of advancing scholarly discourse on China's role in the global legal order.

The law school is home to the Institute of International Law, recognized as a national key research institute by the Chinese Ministry of Education. This institute has played a pivotal role in shaping China's participation in international legal systems, making significant contributions to academic research, legal practice, and policymaking. Wuhan University Law School's focus on historical and comparative studies provided the conference with deep insights into China's legal history and its evolving relationship with international law. By participating in this collaborative effort, Wuhan University enriched the academic discussions with its extensive experience in both theoretical and practical dimensions of international law.

Fudan University Law School:

The Fudan University Law School located in Shanghai, is a leading institution recognized for its cutting-edge research and innovative approach to legal education. With a strong emphasis on interdisciplinary studies, FDU SLW has emerged as a key player in advancing the understanding of China's legal systems and their interaction with global legal norms.

Fudan University Law School has built a distinguished reputation for its work in legal history and international law, fostering research that bridges traditional Chinese thought and modern legal principles. The law school is particularly committed to promoting dialogue between Chinese and Western legal traditions, making it an ideal partner for the *Histories of International Law in China: All Under Heaven?* conference series.

In mid-2024, Fudan University hosted the second instalment of this conference series, expanding the scope of research and discussions initiated by the first conference. This event further cemented Fudan University's role as a leader in the study of China's historical engagement with international law, contributing new perspectives and fostering academic exchange on a global scale.

Together, CCCL, Wuhan University Law School, and Fudan University Law School brought their respective strengths to the conference, ensuring a rich and diverse exploration of China's role in the history of international law. Their collaboration highlights the importance of

interdisciplinary and cross-institutional partnerships in addressing complex legal and historical questions.

## **Conference Highlights**

The Histories of International Law in China: All Under Heaven? conference was an intellectually rich event that sought to address the absence of diverse perspectives in the historical study of international law, with a particular focus on China's unique contributions to the field. By bringing together a distinguished group of scholars, the conference explored the complex interplay between China's historical experiences and its evolving role in shaping international law.

At the heart of the conference was the effort to challenge dominant Eurocentric narratives in the study of international legal history. Scholars critically examined how China's interactions with the Western-dominated international legal order were shaped by key historical moments, such as the Hague Peace Conferences, the Tokyo Trials, and the early 20th-century diplomatic engagements. These discussions went beyond the surface-level exploration of events, delving into how China's political, cultural, and intellectual context influenced its responses to international legal norms.

A major emphasis of the conference was on the intellectual contributions of Chinese legal scholars and diplomats who played pivotal roles in shaping China's legal identity on the global stage. Figures such as Zhou Gengshen, Li Haopei, and Wang Tieya were discussed in detail, not just as contributors to China's legal history but as important actors in the broader development of international law. Their influence was positioned within the context of China's legal reform and modernization, highlighting how their work bridged traditional Chinese values with emerging global legal principles.

The conference also examined the role of ideology in shaping China's approach to international law, particularly during transformative historical periods such as the interwar years, the Cold War, and the Cultural Revolution. Presentations explored how Marxist-Leninist ideas, combined with China's own historical and cultural traditions, informed its engagement with concepts like sovereignty, non-intervention, and territorial integrity. These discussions provided deep insights into how China's political and ideological priorities influenced its stance towards international law during periods of both cooperation and conflict.

Another significant theme was the historical process of translating international legal norms into the Chinese context. This involved an exploration of how Chinese jurists and intellectuals adapted Western-origin concepts of international law to align with Chinese political philosophies, such as Confucian ideals and the concept of Tianxia (“All Under Heaven”). This unique process of adaptation underscored the creative and dynamic nature of China's engagement with the global legal order, presenting it not as a passive recipient of international norms but as an active participant in their reinterpretation and evolution.

The conference moved beyond historical analysis by emphasizing the continuing relevance of China's historical experiences for contemporary international law. Discussions explored how China's legal history informs its current role as a key player in global governance. Issues such as China's approach to multilateralism, its participation in international organizations, and its strategies for addressing global challenges like trade disputes and environmental governance were framed within the broader historical context presented during the conference.

By combining historical inquiry with contemporary relevance, the Histories of International Law in China: All Under Heaven? conference underscored the importance of integrating diverse perspectives into the study of international legal history. This event was not merely a retrospective exercise but a forward-looking initiative that sought to illuminate China's evolving legal identity and its potential contributions to the future development of international law. The insights generated during the conference will not only serve as a foundation for future research and dialogue, but also deepen the understanding of China's role in international law. By challenging entrenched Eurocentric narratives, the event fostered a more inclusive and balanced approach to global legal history. These contributions are expected to inspire further exploration of China's unique historical trajectory and its broader implications for the future of international law and governance.

### **Collaborative Synergies**

The Histories of International Law in China: All Under Heaven? conference series exemplifies the power of collaboration among some of the most prestigious institutions in the field of legal research. This initiative brought together CCCL at the CityUHK SLW, Wuhan University Law School, and Fudan University Law School, creating a robust intellectual network that bridges geographical, cultural, and institutional divides.

The synergy between these leading institutions reflects their shared commitment to advancing a more inclusive understanding of international legal history, one that moves beyond traditional Eurocentric narratives. Each institution contributed its unique strengths and expertise, creating a dynamic and interdisciplinary environment for the exploration of China's historical engagement with international law.

The collaboration between the Centre for Chinese and Comparative Law (CCCL) at CityUHK, Wuhan University Law School, and Fudan University Law School demonstrated the remarkable potential of academic synergy in advancing the study of international law from a more inclusive and diverse perspective. Each institution brought its unique strengths to the table, creating a dynamic partnership that bridged expertise, methodologies, and perspectives.

CCCL at CityUHK, as the host of the first conference, played a pivotal role in initiating this critical dialogue. With its strong emphasis on comparative legal studies and fostering cross-border collaboration, CCCL provided a platform for scholars to engage in meaningful discussions that extended beyond academic inquiry into practical and global legal challenges. Its interdisciplinary approach allowed the conference to address complex questions about China's historical engagement with international law within a broader global context.

Wuhan University Law School, home to the Institute of International Law, a national key research centre, brought unparalleled expertise in international law and historical studies. With its long-standing reputation as a leader in examining China's role in the global legal system, Wuhan University enriched the conference by offering deep insights into China's interactions with Western legal traditions during transformative historical periods. Its focus on historical and comparative approaches highlighted key moments when China actively engaged with, resisted, or adapted international legal norms, providing a nuanced understanding of China's evolving relationship with global governance frameworks.

Building on the foundation established by CCCL and Wuhan University, Fudan University Law School hosted the second conference in mid-2024, further expanding the scope and depth of the discussions. Known for its innovative and interdisciplinary research, Fudan emphasized the importance of bridging Chinese and Western legal traditions, fostering a dialogue that explored how historical lessons can shape contemporary legal practices. The university's contributions shed light on how China's historical experiences, including its unique political

philosophy and cultural values, inform its modern legal identity and approach to international governance.

The collaboration of these three leading institutions exemplifies the power of academic partnerships in addressing complex legal and historical questions. Together, they created a platform that not only enriched the understanding of China's historical role in international law but also pointed to the relevance of these insights for contemporary global legal challenges. This partnership stands as a model for future interdisciplinary and cross-institutional collaborations, advancing research that is inclusive, innovative, and globally significant.

### **International and Regional Impact**

The Histories of International Law in China: All Under Heaven? conference series has had a profound regional impact by fostering a deeper understanding of China's role in shaping international law. By addressing China's unique historical trajectory and its interactions with global legal norms, the series has expanded the discourse on international legal history within Asia and beyond. This initiative has strengthened the region's academic network, encouraging collaboration among scholars and institutions across East Asia.

The conference also highlighted the relevance of China's legal history to contemporary regional issues, such as sovereignty, multilateralism, and cross-border governance. It provided a platform for scholars to engage in critical discussions that resonate with the challenges faced by countries in the region, including the balance between tradition and modernity, the reinterpretation of historical legal norms, and China's evolving role in global governance. Ultimately, the series has helped to establish the region as a hub for innovative and inclusive research into international law, ensuring that Asia's perspectives are better represented in the global discourse.

### **Research Outcome**

The Histories of International Law in China: All Under Heaven? conference series has generated groundbreaking insights into the intersection of China's historical experiences and the development of international law. By challenging long-standing Eurocentric narratives, it has illuminated how China has not only engaged with but also contributed to the evolution of international legal systems. The research underscored the intellectual contributions of Chinese

jurists, diplomats, and scholars, while also revealing the influence of traditional Chinese philosophies, such as Tianxia on shaping global legal norms and frameworks.

A pivotal outcome of the series is the forthcoming publication of the book *Histories of International Law in China: All Under Heaven?*, co-edited by distinguished scholars. This volume represents a transformative step in the study of international legal history, shifting the focus from Western-centric perspectives to a more inclusive and diverse understanding of global legal development. By highlighting China's unique historical trajectory and its interactions with international law, the book will provide ground-breaking insights into how China's political, cultural, and historical experiences have influenced its engagement with international legal norms, offering a more balanced and comprehensive view of the forces shaping international law.

Beyond documenting the scholarship presented during the conference series, the book will serve as a foundational resource for researchers, policymakers, and academics. It aims to promote interdisciplinary dialogue, challenge established paradigms, and inspire further exploration of diverse global perspectives in international law. As a milestone publication, the volume will not only advance the academic discourse on China's role in international law but also encourage a broader reimagining of international legal history in its global context.

## **Conclusion**

The *Histories of International Law in China: All Under Heaven?* conference series has redefined the study of international legal history by integrating diverse perspectives and emphasizing the importance of China's historical and cultural context. This initiative not only deepened the understanding of China's contributions to international law but also catalyzed a shift toward a more inclusive and balanced global narrative.

What sets this series apart is the close collaboration among CCCL at CityUHK, Wuhan University Law School, and Fudan University Law School. This partnership goes far beyond co-organization, representing a cohesive effort to pool intellectual resources, regional insights, and diverse methodologies. Together, these institutions cultivated a dynamic and interdisciplinary platform that enabled a comprehensive and nuanced exploration of China's role in international law.

The series has also underscored the growing importance of academic partnerships in addressing global legal challenges. By fostering collaboration, it has elevated the discourse on China's legal history and set a precedent for future partnerships across Asia and beyond. This tight-knit synergy offers a model for similar initiatives that prioritize inclusivity, diversity, and interdisciplinary research in the study of international law.

As the series continues through its second conference and forthcoming publications, it promises to enrich the global discourse on international law and China's evolving role within it. By bridging historical inquiry with contemporary relevance, the Histories of International Law in China: All Under Heaven? conference series highlights the transformative potential of academic collaboration, setting a benchmark for how institutions can work together to advance global understanding and challenge outdated paradigms in law and governance.



