

# A Metaphorical Narrative of Outer Space in China's Diplomacy: Toward a Heavenly 'Community of Common Destiny'

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**Abstract** Conceiving metaphors as communication tools used to frame international strategic issues, the present paper focuses on Xi Jinping's metaphorical narrative of humanity as a community with a shared future, one of the core tenets in the current PRC's diplomatic discourse. Specifically, the essay tries to shed light on a new context in which this metaphor has recently begun to be used, that is China's space diplomacy. In doing so, the essay briefly presents the concept of 'community of common destiny for humankind'; then it focuses on how this formula is being associated with outer space, seeking also to decipher its strategic function, aimed at challenging the US space leadership.

**Keywords** Metaphorical narrative. Community of shared future for humankind. Common destiny. China. Space diplomacy.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 The Metaphorical Narrative of a 'Community of Common Destiny'. – 3 Projecting the 'Community of Common Destiny' into Outer Space. – 4 Deconstructing China's Strategic Narrative of Outer Space.



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## 1 Introduction

Under the classical Aristotelian tradition, which remained dominant for many centuries, metaphors were regarded as mere linguistic acts, belonging exclusively to rhetoric and poetry (Eco 2004; Guastini 2005; Travaglini 2009).<sup>1</sup> It has been only very recently that the analysis of metaphorical statements has been moved away from the mere level of language, becoming the object of study of various disciplines, including social sciences. This happened thanks to cognitive linguistics, which reconceived metaphors as a way of carrying out thoughts and conceptualizations. At the beginning of the Eighties, indeed, Lakoff and Johnson introduced the notion of 'conceptual metaphors' ([1980] 2003), interpreted not as mere rhetorical figures but as 'a way of thinking', as analytical tools for structuring reality. In their view, "the locus of metaphor is not in language at all, but in the way we conceptualize one mental domain in terms of another" (Lakoff 1993, 203). Since then, metaphor studies within the larger field of humanities and social sciences have increasingly developed, with several scholarly researchers acknowledging the central role that figurative language plays in constructing the socio-political reality (see Barnden 2006; Grayling, Wuppuluri 2022; Pikalo, Carver 2008).

Drawing on this interpretation, analysts of political communication also examined metaphors' performative function in public discourse: some authors focused on their persuasive nature, by which politicians can either gain or keep power (Musolff 2004; Otieno, Owino, Attyang 2016); others analysed their use for ideological purposes, highlighting how they can activate unconscious emotional associations that contribute to the creation of national myths (see Charteris-Black 2005; Zinken 2003).

Regarding the case of the People's Republic of China (PRC), numerous studies have emphasised the significance of figurative language in the country's political discourse, particularly for the Chinese leaders' appeal to rhetorical strategies that combine the use of *tifa* (political formulations, slogans) with metaphors or other allegorical figures, used to stimulate imaginative glimpses that fuel the patriotic pride of the population.<sup>2</sup> Chinese politicians indeed have always made use of metaphorical expressions in addressing domestic audiences. At the same time, however, they have recognised their effectiveness also in China's external communication. As several scholars have highlighted, metaphors are very common in the PRC's diplomatic language, where they are employed to convey particular

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<sup>1</sup> The author wishes to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and for their suggestions for future research.

<sup>2</sup> See Magagnin 2014; Gallelli 2016; 2018; Tian, Bo, Zhang 2021.

representations of the Chinese state, mostly in a positive way, in line with the foreign policy goals of the central government (see Liu, Wang 2020; Zheng 2021; Wang, Chen 2022).

Continuing in this line of research, the present paper focuses on the pragmatic function of metaphors in the Chinese diplomatic discourse, looking at them not just as a form of correspondence between two domains, but as communication tools to recreate a discursive scenario that supports specific foreign policy objectives. In other terms, metaphors will here be understood as 'perlocutionary acts' (Austin 1962) that can 'do things' (Schoenhals 1992), i.e., a form of crafting practice used by Chinese representatives in international forums to frame strategic issues in a way that aligns their specific interests (Morozova 2018; Heracleous, Jacobs 2008). The focus of this study, then, is on how metaphoric images can convey strategic narratives, namely broader geopolitical discourses through which ruling elites attempt to assign a particular meaning to international affairs, and thus achieve certain political objectives (Demjén, Semino 2020, 214; Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, Roselle 2018).

Specifically, this essay starts from the PRC's metaphorical narrative of the world as a 'community of common destiny' (*renlei mingyun gongtongti* 人类命运共同体), one of the core tenets in Xi Jinping's diplomatic discourse (see *Renmin Ribao* 2020; *Xinhua* 2023; SCIO 2023b, 4). It is necessary to immediately clarify that, whereas today's Chinese governmental documents translate the term *mingyun* as 'future', the present paper will recover its original official translation, used up to 2015, namely 'destiny'.<sup>3</sup> This choice is aimed at preserving the fatalistic sense embedded in Xi's formula, which conveys a sense of faith in the PRC's 'benevolence' that other countries are asked to blindly accept, as will be further explained in the following pages. Indeed, metaphorically equating the world to a community with a shared destiny represents a perfect example of a strategic external communication device, since, as we will see, it is a way for China to convey to foreign audiences a specific vision of the global order and its governance, allegedly more just, equitable, and harmonious. The metaphorization of humanity as a 'community of common destiny', therefore, more than being a mere correlation between two items in the PRC's diplomatic language, can be considered a *métarécit* (Lyotard [1979] 2014), i.e. a grand portrait of a world in which all countries experience an eternal peaceful coexistence under the 'benevolent' guidance of China.

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**3** As known, the initial English translation of *renlei mingyun gongtongti* was 'community of common destiny for mankind'. However, since the term 'destiny' could raise concerns among international audiences due to its sense of 'inevitability', in 2015, it was officially substituted with 'future', rephrasing the entire formula as 'community with a shared future for mankind'. See Chen 2021.

In analysing this metaphorical narrative, this study tries to shed light on a newly specific context to which it has recently begun to be applied, that is, China's space diplomacy.<sup>4</sup> Nowadays, indeed, we are witnessing a phenomenon whereby in Beijing's diplomatic discourse, space is being metaphorically related to the 'community of common destiny' and represented as the ideal setting for harmonious coexistence among different peoples and nations. As clearly stated in 2020 by Zhao Lijian, one of the most prominent Chinese representatives who served as spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: "Outer space, as a global public domain, is especially a community with a shared future for mankind" (Zhao 2020).

At the time of this writing, and within the limits of the author's knowledge, no academic studies have thoroughly investigated the practice of metaphorising outer space in terms of a community of common destiny. Some Chinese scholars have highlighted the PRC's effort toward the creation of such a heavenly community, but they mostly contribute to uncritically spreading the official Chinese narrative about the creation of a new global space order, without noticing and deconstructing the strategic intent of this process (see Xu, Su 2018; Zhao 2018). The present paper, therefore, represents a preliminary attempt to address this research gap.

The absence of critical studies on this topic, after all, is hardly surprising, since the metaphorization of outer space in terms of a community of common destiny is a new and still ongoing phenomenon, which has not yet been fully embraced by international audiences and governments. Nonetheless, it is essential to assess the actual strategic significance of this metaphorical narrative, which anticipates that, in the future, outer space could be completely integrated into a 'well-realised' community of common destiny.

Considering that the metaphorical projection of the community of common destiny in outer space is only at its initial stage, the present paper will not carry out a quantitative analysis that illustrates the recurrence of this representation in the Chinese diplomatic discourse; rather, what this essay tries to do is to offer some qualitative insights into the discursive process through which this narrative is being built, deconstructing its strategic intent and revealing its limits and contradictions. Indeed, more than creating a mere linguistic correspondence between two conceptual domains – the outer space and the community of common destiny – this metaphorical narrative foregrounds some aspects of the phenomenon in question and leaves

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**4** Please note that the term 'space diplomacy' can be interpreted in three ways: 'space for diplomacy', i.e. the utilization of space cooperation to support foreign policy objectives; 'diplomacy for space', i.e., the conduct of diplomatic actions to support public space goals; and 'diplomacy of space', related to initiatives for the management of strategic interaction in space. See Aliberti, Hrozensky, Bataille 2020.

others in the background. Thus, as we will see, representing outer space as a realised community of common destiny has as its first consequence the evocation of a harmonious scenario, of a heavenly, peaceful state, useful for representing China as a responsible space power, open to cooperation with other countries. Instead, it leaves in the background all the more critical and analytical views of outer space that would be possible, such as, for example, its increasing military and economic exploitation.

## 2      **The Metaphorical Narrative of a ‘Community of Common Destiny’**

Considered to be genealogically connected to the German term *Schicksalsgemeinschaft* (Mitchell 2022; Qian 2019), and entering the Chinese language from Japan in the early twentieth century, the ‘community of common destiny for humankind’ is a key concept in the current diplomatic language of the PRC (Chen 2021; Mitchell 2022; Panda 2021). Although this expression became popular only during Xi Jinping’s era, the shorter phrase ‘community of destiny’ (*mingyun gongtongti* 命运共同体) was already circulating by the 1930s-1940s, mainly to refer to the Japanese imperial project of creating a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (Mitchell 2022; Qian 2019).

In the first decades after the foundation of the PRC, the term fell into disuse, only to find new life during the reform and opening up era: at that time, among other usages (Mitchell 2022), it became common in referring to China’s interactions with foreign countries, yet remaining limited to bilateral relations. When the *Treaty of Peace and Friendship between Japan and the PRC* was formalised in 1978, it was used to praise Tokyo and Beijing’s bilateral community of fate (Qian 2019). Even throughout the nineties and early 2000s, the term’s geopolitical usage did not have a global scope. In 2007, for example, it was inserted in the Report to the 17th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to highlight the commonality and mutual integration between the two sides of the Strait, based on the assumption that both of them shared the “same blood and destiny” (Hu 2007). In 2009, the *People’s Daily* (*Renmin Ribao* 人民日报) recalled how, during Nixon’s era, the then US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger had called on China and the US to build a ‘community of common destiny’ (*Renmin wang* 2009).

As time went by, however, the phrase also began to be related to China’s broader contacts with foreign countries and it assumed increasingly global implications. In 2011, the slogan appeared in China’s *White Paper on Peaceful Development* (*Zhongguo de heping fazhan baipishu* 中国的和平发展白皮书), where it was utilised for the first time to discuss how economic globalization influences

international relations. According to the document, countries with different systems and at different development stages could coexist, seeking a new path to cooperate in responding to the diverse challenges of the present time (SCIO 2011a).

However, it was only in 2012 that the full phrase *renlei mingyun gongtongti* made its first official appearance in the Report of the 18th Congress of the CCP, which claimed that win-win cooperation was at the foundation of a community of common destiny for humankind, a model of taking into account the legitimate concerns of other countries while pursuing one's own interests, thus establishing a new type of multipolar development that is more equal and balanced (Hu 2012).

Shortly after, the concept was taken up by Xi Jinping, who made it part of his own ideological contribution. In 2013, Xi employed it during a speech at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (Xi 2013), albeit, at that time, the 'community of common destiny' was still not considered of special significance by observers of Chinese politics. It was only in 2015 that the phrase began to attract more attention, as it spread through the official State media, particularly after two speeches given by Xi – the first one at the United Nations General Assembly, titled *Working Together to Forge a New Partnership of Win-Win Cooperation and Create a Community of Shared Future for Mankind* (Xi 2015), and the second one, in May 2017, at the first Forum on the Belt and Road Initiative (*Xinhua* 2017). During the same year, the term was inserted within the Party Constitution, while in 2018 it was enshrined within the State Constitution, beginning to be celebrated as an integral part of Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy (*Xi Jinping waijiao sixiang* 习近平外交思想) (*Xuexi Shibao* 2023).

From that moment on, the notion of a 'community of common destiny for humankind' began to be widely popular in Chinese diplomatic discourse (Zeng 2020, 111-30), often employed vaguely by Chinese official representatives as a metaphorical narrative to refer to a global vision of the world, an upcoming *ecumene* based on the fact that nowadays humanity faces a series of inevitable economic, political, cultural, environmental and security challenges. As repeatedly stated by Xi Jinping, «humankind is a community of a shared future» (*Xinhua* 2023; see also *Renmin Ribao* 2020; MEE 2021; SCIO 2023b, 4), whose realization marks the advent of an open, inclusive, beautiful world that enjoys everlasting peace, universal security, and common prosperity among all human beings.

In trying to assess the implicit meaning of the metaphor of the world as a 'community of common destiny', it is firstly important to consider how it embeds a pretentious attitude to present itself as a doctrine for the salvation of humankind. In other words, in drawing on this narrative, Xi seems to be moved by a pastoral, even hieratic impulse, that makes his proposal a universal manifesto, a Messianic

prophecy that the Chinese leader offers to humanity to solve the conundrums of modern times. As stated in the White Paper "A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions", published in September 2023 by the State Council:

In the universe there is only one Earth, the shared home of humanity. Unfortunately, this planet on which we rely for our subsistence is facing immense and unprecedented crises, both known and unknown, both foreseeable and unforeseeable. Whether human civilization can survive these has become an existential issue that must be squarely faced. [...] Ten years ago, President Xi Jinping propounded the idea of building a global community of shared future, answering a question raised by the world, by history, and by the times: "Where is humanity headed?" (SCIO 2023a)

Certainly, the quotation presented here may suggest that China is merely raising global concerns rather than necessarily assuming a leadership role in addressing them. However, the implicit claim to guide humanity toward salvation becomes more evident in other statements, such as when Foreign Minister Wang Yi, at the 19th Congress of the CCP in 2017, emphasised that the community of common destiny provides a framework for international cooperation based on mutual respect, equity, justice, and win-win collaboration, positioning China's foreign policy "on a moral high ground" (Waijiao bu 2017). In this sense, China's role is framed as a mission it must undertake, as it perceives itself as morally superior to other nations and uniquely capable of fulfilling this responsibility. After all, according to Wang, this is not only a historical responsibility that China, as a major socialist country, must undertake for the advancement of human society but also "a broader mission for CCP members to contribute to the progress of global political civilization" (Waijiao bu 2017).

It is also worth noting that Chinese diplomats find the alleged roots of the cosmopolitan attitude that informs the metaphorical narrative of the world as a 'community of common destiny' in China's millenary traditional culture (Chen 2017), especially in the *Tianxia* system (literally, all under Heaven). This was the term used to describe the Chinese Empire, but was widely applied to convey the Chinese vision and normative principles for international relations. Aimed at creating compatibility between all peoples and nations, it refers to a totality that implies the acceptance of diversity, emphasising mutual dependence, mutual improvement, and perfect complementarity (Fairbank 1968; see also Carlson 2011; Miranda 2017). By elevating 'harmony' to a 'cultural gene' (*wenhua jiyin* 文化基因) of the Chinese nation, it is underlined how this value, which had in the past underpinned relations between the Empire and its

neighbours, is unquestionably still effective today on a global level for recreating a state of 'unity of opposites' (*duili tongyi* 对立统一), a 'community of common destiny' based not on the assimilation of the other (*tonghua* 同化), but on a form of respect for socio-political and cultural diversity. Mixing 'harmony' with other Confucian principles and contents of the Taoist and Buddhist traditions, the concept of 'community of common destiny' aims to demonstrate how China has always pursued peaceful coexistence with others.

The appeal to these classical references, however, is based on a vague combination of different philosophical elements, mostly recovered in the context of the contemporary revival of Confucianism (Miranda 2022; Scarpari 2015), and often resulting in a *pastiche* of citations and allusions that, divorced from their specific historical-cultural context, end up flattening the complexity of pre-dynastic China, as well as the evolutionary dynamics of the imperial one, with the only aim of legitimising the current Chinese foreign policy agenda (Callahan 2011; Zhang 2011; see also Savina 2022b). The Chinese Empire, indeed, is often depicted as crystallised in an ahistorical, and even mythical harmonious dimension, which is functional to ascertaining the validity of the current model of pluralist international order promoted by Beijing, i.e. of that form of Chinese cosmopolitanism which supports international cooperation without abdicating the principles of sovereignty and self-determination, thus opposing the Western democratic liberal and solidaristic order favoured by the US (Dian 2021, 53-102).

Beyond its ecumenical and largely utopian ambitions, therefore, the metaphorical narrative of humankind as a community of common destiny is nothing but the latest attempt in the PRC's efforts to provide a theoretical legitimisation to its foreign policy. Indeed, it can be considered as the ultimate endeavour of the Chinese leadership to present a conceptual framework for its international political actions, at a time when China has to justify its increasingly proactive, and even assertive engagement in the international arena.<sup>5</sup> Yet this narrative

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**5** After all, the practice of providing conceptual pillars to its foreign policy is a strategy that has been pursued as early as the Maoist period, when the Theory of Intermediate Zones first, and the Three Worlds Theory later, were articulated to frame the country's stance against any form of imperialism and revisionism. Furthermore, at that time, Prime Minister Zhou Enlai elaborated the so-called 'five principles of peaceful coexistence', a set of behavioural norms for regulating international relations. The practice of identifying theoretical foundations continued also in the post-Maoist period, especially after the end of the Cold War, when China predicted the advent of a multipolar system, albeit, during the Nineties, it decided to keep a 'low profile', aware that the hegemonic power of the US could not be challenged. In the following years, the PRC also enunciated the theory of 'peaceful rise', promoting a 'harmonious world' and presenting itself as a country that was not seeking to undermine the existing international order. For further references see Zhao 2022.



marks a step further than being a mere pillar of Chinese foreign policy, since it aims to present itself as a tool for global governance, a *vade mecum* China offers to all countries to address the major challenges of our time. The community of common destiny for humankind, indeed, is presented as China's unique contribution to facing global issues, from climate change, to sustainability, to cybersecurity, and so on. To deal with these phenomena, China proposes that rights and responsibilities have to be shared among all states, ensuring that the interests and expectations of emerging market countries and developing countries are fully respected through their participation in setting governance rules. This would be fundamental, especially in nuclear security governance, maritime disputes, and health security, but also in defining the rules in the deep sea, the polar regions, the digital domain, and other new frontiers (see Freeman 2019). Indeed the new ecumene envisaged by the Chinese leadership is not limited to the sole terrestrial dimension. In this regard, the next paragraph will illustrate how it is also being projected into outer space.

### **3 Projecting the 'Community of Common Destiny' into Outer Space**

Among the many contexts in which the metaphorical narrative of humankind as a 'community of common destiny' is being strategically applied, there is outer space. Today, indeed, alongside the national and nationalist narrative that the PRC has built around its space program (Savina 2023b), a more 'cosmopolitan' representation of outer space, particularly used in external communication is also being established, targeting foreign audiences and governments and aimed at recreating the perception of China as a country open to space cooperation and eager to use space for exclusively peaceful purposes and to the benefit of all humanity. After all, due to its intrinsic characteristics, which remind us of the fragile human condition of living on a little boat floating in the universe, outer space does indeed fit uniquely well into the ecumenical representation of the shared future conveyed by China's diplomacy, which can prefigure the building of a harmonious cosmopolis beyond the earth's atmosphere. Outer space, therefore, can be easily represented as a hotbed of the 'community of common destiny', an ideal setting for testing the possibilities of realising a harmonious coexistence among peoples and nations.

Before examining how the metaphorical narrative of humanity as a community of common destiny is being related to outer space, it is worth noting how, although this representation has become central only in the last years, similar views were produced even before Xi Jinping's New Era (Savina 2023a). Indeed, even without using the

current official phraseology, a cosmopolitan approach to outer space was already manifested within the PRC's White Papers on space activities published as early as the beginning of the new millennium (SCIO 2000; 2006; 2011; 2016), which reassured foreign countries about the peaceful intentions of Beijing's space rise, challenging the US narrative of the Chinese space threat.<sup>6</sup> In fact, at the beginning of the 2000s, whereas Western experts warned of the risk that Beijing's space program posed to American national security (see Tellis 2007; Keuter 2007), several PRC intellectuals framed the extra-terrestrial dimension as a territory where to experience peaceful cooperation, hoping for a more profound ethical-moral regeneration of human beings (see Chen 2011). From their point of view, outer space constituted a place where the power politics that inform the international system would be overcome – but also a place where the universalistic momentum of Chinese diplomacy could be embodied. In the second half of the 2000s, Wang Yuechuan (Beijing University) used the term 'space civilization' (*taikong wenming* 太空文明) to define the form that humanity would take after the widespread use of aerospace technologies (Wang 2006; 2010). In his view, outer space was an arena where China could seek a relationship of harmonious and peaceful coexistence with other nations. In 2008, Professor Shi Shengxun also argued that the advent of aerospace technologies would spur a gradual redefinition of national boundaries (Shi 2008). According to Shi, the dramatic change of perspective generated by observing the Earth from above – the so-called overview effect – was leading human beings to assume a global vision, realising that the world is a place without borders, a small and fragile place compared to the sublime immensity of the universe. Faced with this awareness, the interests and particularisms of individual states would lose meaning, while outer space would become an alleged *Tianshang* 天上, a new ecumene including everything that is 'above' Heaven.

Such intellectual speculations, although not directly backed by the Party-State, seem to have been instrumental in defining the official Chinese imaginary of space, and traces of this can be found in today's metaphorical narrative of the heavenly community of common destiny. At a domestic official level, the first time the concept of 'community of common destiny for humankind' was put in relation to aerospace was in 2022, when the State Council published a new White Paper on the country's space activities, stating that:

Peaceful exploration, development and utilization of outer space are rights equally enjoyed by all countries. China calls on all countries to work together to build a global community of shared

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6 On the Chinese space threat theory see Hunter 2019.

future and carry out in-depth exchanges and cooperation in outer space on the basis of equality, mutual benefit, peaceful utilization, and inclusive development. (SCIO 2022)

In presenting the contents of the paper, Wu Yanhua, the vice administrator of the China National Space Administration (CNSA) - which serves as the public international face of Beijing's space program - added how China called for all nation-states to build a 'community with a shared future for mankind' in outer space, based on conducting extensive international scientific exchanges and cooperating in an open, peaceful, and transparent way, thus advancing the progress of human civilization (*Renmin wang* 2022).

Before the publication of the White Paper, however, the Chinese narrative of space as the ideal place for realising the alleged community of common destiny had already found its primary usage in international forums, especially within the United Nations, where the phrase *renlei mingyun gongtongti* was adopted in the official space-related vocabulary as early as 2017. It was in that year that the UN General Assembly approved Resolution 72/27, No First Placement of Weapons in Outer Space, which affirmed that "practical measures should be examined and taken in the search for agreements to prevent an arms race in outer space in a common effort towards a community of shared future for humankind" (UNGA 2017a). Also in the same year, Resolution 72/250, Further Practical Measures for the Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space, was passed, stressing the importance of "promoting and strengthening international cooperation in the exploration and use of outer space for peaceful purposes, with the objective of shaping a community of shared future for mankind" (UNGA 2017b). At the time of this writing, ten other space-related Resolutions that contain references to the narrative of the community of common destiny have been adopted by the UN.<sup>7</sup>

The integration of this notion in official UN documents is the result of effective work carried out by the PRC diplomats to promote Chinese concepts designed to be shared by the international community. This promotion is taking place not only through formal channels, but also in a 'soft' way, based on drawing on Chinese cultural products and artifacts that can convey the official narrative of outer space as a

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**7** All the Resolutions can be consulted at: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/>. Please check the following filenames: G.A. Res. 73/31, U.N. Doc. A\_RES\_73/31 (Dec. 11, 2018); G.A. Res. 74/33, U.N. Doc. A\_RES\_74/33 (Dec. 18, 2019); G.A. Res. 74/34, U.N. Doc. A\_RES\_74/34 (Dec. 18, 2019); G.A. Res. 75/37, U.N. Doc. A\_RES\_75/37 (Dec. 16, 2020); G.A. Res. 76/23, U.N. Doc. A\_RES\_76/23 (Dec. 8, 2021); G.A. Res. 76/230, U.N. Doc. A\_RES\_76/230 (Dec. 30, 2021); G.A. Res. 77/42, U.N. Doc. A\_RES\_77/42 (Dec. 12, 2022); G.A. Res. 77/250, U.N. Doc. A\_RES\_77/250 (Jan. 9, 2023); G.A. Res. 78/238, U.N. Doc. A\_RES\_78/238 (Dec. 28, 2023); G.A. Res. 78/21, U.N. Doc. A\_RES\_78/21 (Dec. 6, 2023).

community of common destiny. This, for example, is what happened in 2023, during a side event of the 66th Session of the UN Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space, organised by the Chinese Mission and China Film Group Corporation, on the occasion of the release of *The Wandering Earth II*, the sequel of the science fiction blockbuster, which has been exploited by the Party's diplomatic machine to convey Beijing's reassuring and benevolent messages (Chen 2019; Silk 2020). The event, attended by more than 200 representatives, was a positive effort to make the narrative of common destiny go global. Li Song, the permanent representative of China to the UN in Wien, stated that strengthening cooperation in outer space and moving toward a shared future are the profound meanings conveyed by the movie (*Global Times* 2023). The Chinese envoy to the UN also stressed that the movie "tells the story of a life-and-death crisis faced by humanity on Earth, portrays a united world, where countries join forces and mobilize all of our space technologies and capabilities to drive the Earth toward a new common future" (*Global Times* 2023).

To this end, the PRC promotes the definition of a global governance of outer space, which aims, among other objectives, to monitor and handle near-Earth objects, regulate planetary protection, and manage space traffic (Freeman 2019). This is crucial, as space has become an increasingly 'congested, contested, and competitive' domain: as is known, nowadays, the number of countries and private companies pursuing their own interests in space and longing to exploit its economic potential is growing; meanwhile, the exponential increase in rocket launches, the growing number of satellites in orbit, the limited orbital real estate, as well as military experiments conducted by the major space powers, are making the problem of the sustainability of space activities more urgent (Del Canto 2023). Faced with this situation, international space law remains limited and out of date, unable to provide answers to the challenges posed by the New Space Age.<sup>8</sup> What is still missing is an adequate regulatory regime and a shared agreement on a new global framework to govern outer space (Kostenko 2020).

It is precisely in this complex scenario of economic exploitation, military risk, and legislative deficit that the Chinese metaphorical narrative of humanity as a community of common destiny in space is wedged. To face the new space challenges, indeed, China sustains

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<sup>8</sup> Please note that today there are five international treaties underpinning space law, all of them finalised during the Cold War. The main agreement is the Outer Space Treaty of 1967, which is the foundation of international space law; then there also the Rescue Agreement (1968); the Liability Convention (1972); the Registration Convention (1976), and the Moon Agreement (1984). Please note that the latter has not been ratified by the US and China. All the treaties can be consulted at: <https://www.unoosa.org/oosa/en/ourwork/spacelaw/treaties.html>.

the need to carry out the exploration and use of outer space for the common interests of all mankind, conducting space activities with due regard for the interests of other States and the entire international community. This narrative, however, hides the pursuit of clear foreign policy objectives, aimed at delegitimising the current US-led space regime. The final paragraph will try to deconstruct this strategic intent.

#### **4 Deconstructing China's Strategic Narrative of Outer Space**

The fact that a Chinese phrase is widely circulating in an international context and that it has been incorporated in many UN documents is of particular interest, since it marks not the mere iteration in an official forum of an empty slogan, but, more or less consciously, the adoption by an international organization of the strategic narrative of a specific state – and, in this case, of a given political Party and its paramount leader. Indeed, although the PRC has repeatedly claimed that the ‘community of common destiny for humankind’ should not be considered a ‘Chinese concept’, but a theoretical platform shareable by humanity, it is always China that, in celebrating the international adoption of this formula, has stressed how it stands at the core of Xi Jinping Thought (SCIO 2017). In this sense, its inclusion within the UN documents, rather than it being a real and neutral diplomatic effort aimed at addressing uncontrolled space militarization and economic exploitation, represents a political victory for China, a decoration for the country's ability to discursively impact the terminology of global governance and build a normative constituency which rejects American unilateralism. In other words, it serves to renew the emphasis China places on the necessity to coordinate policy with newly emerging powers, thus supporting and fostering what Beijing identifies as the trend towards a multipolar world, lined up against American hegemonism. China indeed seeks to curry favour with developing countries in international institutions, as part of an effort to ‘democratize’ international relations, albeit the alleged multipolarism it advocates hides what is in fact a willingness to recognize the right for illiberal and authoritarian political regimes to participate in the definition of the rules of global governance, with the ultimate aim of challenging the US regulatory power and, more broadly, the US leadership (Smith 2018).

To this end, the metaphorical narrative of space as a ‘community of common destiny’ is useful for integrating countries that do not have access to space, or that have begun to take the first steps towards it, in an array of nations that seek political and legislative representativity under the ‘benevolent’ wings of China. The goal is to establish a new global governance of space, influencing rules and

institutions that regulate space exploration, thus defining a space regime less aligned with US interests and more with Chinese ones.

This objective was evidently and proactively pursued as early as 2016, when the PRC was working on its first space station (*taikongzhan/kongjianzhan* 太空站/空间站) which has been portrayed by Chinese state media as a 'truly international' (*zhenzheng guoji* 真正国际) platform (*Global Times* 2022), in a different way from the ISS – the International Space Station – which, in China's view, has only been a tool for the US to assert its hegemonic space power, excluding countries such as the PRC from taking part to the project. By contrast, the Chinese space station has been open to cooperation with anyone interested in realising a 'community of common destiny' in outer space: to this end a Framework Agreement and a Funding Agreement were signed between the UN Office for Outer Space Affairs (UNOOSA) and China Manned Space Agency, working also within the UN Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS) to enable UN Member States, particularly developing countries, to conduct space experiments on-board China's space station, providing them with flight opportunities for astronauts and payload engineers (UN 2016).

These strategic diplomatic manoeuvres, aimed at fostering a positive image of China – it is worth recalling – are being facilitated by the West itself, which seems no longer able to face the challenges posed by the New Space Age. In recent years, indeed, the growing role of US private corporations that claim to be exploiting space 'for the benefit of humanity' (Rubenstein 2022) is mixing with the old divinely-inspired rhetoric of America's 'manifest destiny' (Trump 2020a). Under this paradigm, an amalgam of machismo, expansionism, militarism, and neoliberalism has assumed renewed emphasis: during Trump's era, for example, the US insisted on the need to protect US assets in space both from a defensive and offensive standpoint, through the creation of the Space Force (Trump 2020b). Meanwhile, the White House explicitly confirmed its intention not to view space as a 'global common',<sup>9</sup> providing operational guidelines for the exploitation of space resources by private entities. The willingness to facilitate space economic profiting, however, was already evident during the Obama administration, when the Commercial Space Launch Competitiveness Act was approved, and it was made even more explicit with the American Space Commerce Free Enterprise Act of 2017 and with an Executive Order of 2020,

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<sup>9</sup> According to the Executive Order (EO) No. 13914, 85 Fed. Reg. 20,38, "outer space is a legally and physically unique domain of human activity, and the US does not view it as a global common". The EO can be consulted at: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2020-04-10/pdf/2020-07800.pdf>.

the first one signed in conjunction with the beginning of the new American lunar exploration program, Artemis.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, China seems to be taking on the role that the US is abandoning, replacing them as a responsible power that acts as a benevolent leader who cares for the sustainability of outer space exploration (Rubenstein, unpub.). In fact, China has recognised space as 'common' (*Xinhua* 2024a), insisting on the necessity of multipolar governance to regulate the new space competition and stressing that every country must have an equal right to access and use outer space. Space exploration, therefore, should be participated in by more States, not merely as recipients of benefits but also as partners in formulating decisions that have international implications (Smith 2018). In this way, a harmonious community of common destiny in outer space will eventually be created.

What is withheld in this prophecy, however, is that, as a matter of fact, today not everyone is equal up there in Heaven, because outer space has already been subjected to the economic and military interests of the US, the Chinese state, and a few other actors such as space billionaires (Tabas, unpub.). Appealing to the metaphorical narrative of the community of common destiny in outer space, therefore, may show to the Chinese people and the international audience that the PRC has a certain degree of 'humanity', but in the end, it denies a critical understanding of the current space situation.

In terms of economic exploitation, China is in fact already in a superior position compared to the rest of the countries that do not have access to space. Seen from this perspective, the metaphorical narrative of the community of common destiny in heaven is therefore used to camouflage Chinese space expansionism<sup>11</sup>, which however remains manifest when China bolsters the presence on the international market of its Beidou satellite positioning and navigation system, against the US GPS, or when it recognizes the

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**10** The US Moon plans indeed will pave the way for the exploitation of the extra-terrestrial region for commercial purposes, as also confirmed by the Artemis Accords that the US is bilaterally signing with all the allies who wish to be part of its lunar project, shaping global space governance to suit Washington's interests and preferences (NASA 2020; see also Savina 2022a).

**11** Please note that economic superiority could make such a discursive justification superfluous, as economic power alone would be sufficient to exert influence internationally. Nevertheless, at a discursive level, the narrative of the community of common destiny is used to justify space expansion by constructing an image of cooperation that legitimizes a development model, aiming to present the Chinese space approach as more inclusive and shared. The author looks forward to exploring the type of space economy model proposed by China, which combines a state-driven approach with the development of private space enterprises, and how the state influences the operations of these companies, particularly in contrast to the American model. For further references see Curcio, Deville, Chen 2021.



strategic value of lunar resources (Zhao, Wang 2024).<sup>12</sup> After all, even the PRC experts are well aware of the economic spin-offs deriving from the Moon: between 2018 and 2019, the director of the Science and Technology Commission of the China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation (CASC), Bao Weimin, proposed creating a 'cislunar economic zone' (*diyue kongjian jingji qu* 地月空间经济区), to exploit the potential of the Earth-Moon space region (Bao 2018).

In terms of military power too, the PRC is working to strengthen its capabilities, developing a wide range of counter-space technologies, from direct kinetic kill vehicles (KKVs), to directed-energy weapons, to jammers and so on (Pollpeter 2021). Furthermore, in 2024, as part of a military reshuffle promoted by Xi Jinping, the existence of the People's Liberation Aerospace Force (*Hangtian budui* 航天部队) was officially unveiled (*Xinhua* 2024b). This confirms that China is aware of the strategic value of space, as already recognised in the early Nineties, when during the Gulf War the US obtained a smooth win thanks to the widespread use of satellites, which demonstrated to the PRC how outer space had become a decisive domain in the projection and multiplication of force. In the decades that followed, as the strategic role of space became increasingly evident, Chinese leaders pushed the army to focus on new theatres of war, and in the 2010 National Defence White Paper they highlighted the PRC's need to defend its 'security interests in space' (*zai taikong de anquan liyi* 在太空安全的利益) (SCIO 2011b).

In light of the crucial role of space, therefore, neither China nor the US is willing to agree to a framework for discussion that threatens to constrain its developments and thereby limit its economic and military advantages (Botti, Greco 2023). But above all neither of the two space powers wants the other to 'play the card' of outer space to obtain a political victory. This is evident on the occasions the two powers dig their toes in when international treaties, moratoriums, or resolutions against the arms race in space have to be passed. The UN Resolutions that adopted China's metaphorical narrative of the community of common destiny, for example, have been highly criticised by the US representatives who voted against their approval because of several concerns, including that China wants to impose its national view on multilateral politics (UN 2017).<sup>13</sup> Similarly, China

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**12** Please consider that a heated debate has developed in China on the rights of ownership and use of lunar resources. The author hopes to deeply investigate these aspects in future research. For further references see Mei 2024.

**13** This is not the first time the US expressed objections to Chinese proposals. In 2008, as part of the Conference on Disarmament, the PRC, in collaboration with Russia, presented the first draft of a Treaty on Prevention of the Placement of Weapons in Outer Space and of the Threat or Use of Force against Outer Space Objects (PPWT), then updated in 2014. The draft treaty included commitments by state parties "not to



voted against the 77/41 Resolution on Destructive direct-ascent anti-satellite missile testing proposed by the US (UNGA 2022),<sup>14</sup> since Beijing contended that it was only a parochial arms control initiative that favours Washington, “having already tested direct-ascent anti-satellite-missile-technology, both an offensive ‘sword’ and a deterring ‘shield’, preventing other states from gaining the defensive benefits of developing this capability” (Sooi 2023).

From this point of view, the projection into the heaven of the metaphorical narrative of humanity as a community of common destiny seems to have more to do with the attempt to politically delegitimize the US-led space regime than with the real possibility of putting an end to the process of uncontrolled military and economic exploitation of outer space. After all, it could not be otherwise, given the vagueness of the contents of this narrative, which do not specify how a human community in space should be created in reality. Beyond its flattering promise of outer space as a place of peace and harmony, therefore, it is its cloudiness and partisanship that raise serious doubts about the possibility that a community of common destiny for humankind in outer space can be truly realised and translated into norms and principles really capable of face the emerging space challenges.

Seen from this perspective, the community of common destiny, rather than presenting itself as a real new theoretical framework for global space governance, seems rather to act as a synthesis of the limits and contradictions of China's space diplomacy, promoting an instrumental and utopian eschatology, not really in line with the realpolitik of Beijing's astropolitical rise, vis-à-vis the US. Considering its anti-American and anti-Western substratum, the meaning of the community with common destiny could be fully grasped only by reversing its official interpretation: in the end, indeed, the criticism towards the West and the affirmation of the Chinese international role embedded in this metaphorical narrative, make it a paradigm that

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place in orbit around the Earth any objects carrying any kinds of weapons” and “not to resort to the threat or use of force against outer space objects”. The draft, however, has been accused of not explicitly prohibiting the use of anti-satellite technologies or soft kill weapons – lasers, dazzling optical sensors, radio interference, and cyberattacks. Specifically, the US objected to the draft treaty's feasibility and implications, noting that “given the dual-use nature of some space systems, it is not possible to craft a definition of a ‘weapon in outer space’”. The US also argued that the Treaty cannot be verified in any way (Security Council 2024). The draft Treaty can be consulted at: <https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/cd/2008/documents/Draft%20PPWT.pdf>.

**14** In April 2022, as a response to the Chinese, Indian, and Russian anti-satellite tests that took place in 2007, 2019, and 2021, respectively, the US publicly announced that it would refrain from conducting ASAT tests. In the weeks following the US announcement, several US allies made similar unilateral pledges (Morin, Tepper 2023).

seems to be kneaded with nationalism rather than cosmopolitanism. In fact, it is explanatory of China's desire to establish itself as a nation whose value and prestige are internationally recognised, and its socio-political model legitimised and considered equal to others. And this is sufficient to raise some concern as to whether the China-led heavenly 'community of common destiny' is the global future that all countries should pursue.

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