**empire/天下(Tiān Xià)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Chinese Perspective | ZHAO Tingyang | 17 Feb 2022 |

Political power in terms of state has explained the concept of the political for thousands years, yet the world remains anarchic. The political world is therefore repeating its “original situation”, not far from the Hobbesian state of nature, full of conflicts and hostilities as well as clashes of civilizations, so inconsistent with the well-organized states inside the world. We are thus in need of a new political concept that expects the world to be a world systematically organized and institutionally arranged.

An available concept could be found in terms of Tianxia, a Chinese concept more than 3,000 years old, literally “all-under-heaven”, and philosophically defining an all-inclusive world of “no outside”[[1]](#footnote-1) with “great harmony”[[2]](#footnote-2) of all peoples or “compatibility of all nations”[[3]](#footnote-3). Theoretically Tianxia consists of three worlds in superposition: the *physical world*, as the earth under sky; the *psychological world*, as the consent or agreement among all peoples; and a *political world*, a conceptual universal system of-and-for the world.

The experimental Tianxia system was invented during the *Zhou Dynasty*, generally believed to be designed by *Duke Zhou*, the first premier. It is supposedly a netlike system consisting of balanced and interdependent and therefore mutually trustable states (according to the different estimations, ranging from 130 to 170 states). Tianxia was the political starting point of China, as Greek *Polis* was the political starting point of Europe. They have led to the divergent ways of political thinking: where the Chinese begun with “world”, and the European with “state”.

It was unusual to begin politics with “world governance” at the early time of civilization, mainly due to the unusual situation that had driven Zhou to invent the world governance far ahead of normal evolution. By great fortune Zhou defeated Shang, the largest nation, in 1046BCE. Now that at the head of all Chinese chiefdoms, Zhou was confronted with an unprecedented problem of governance: how could it possibly rule all nations in China when some of them had much larger population than that of Zhou? It is said there were hundreds nations of cultural diversities in China at that time. The population of Zhou, estimated about 70,000 persons, was quite small in comparison to many others, especially to that of Shang with a population of one million. Therefore Zhou had to solve the challenging problem of *controlling bigger powers with a smaller one*. Duke Zhou developed the genius idea of *world governance* to convince most of the chiefdoms that a shared world system would guarantee peace and security for all nations and would therefore be better than the anarchic situation in which the isolated states were suffering from endless conflicts and wars.

Here is the list of selected propositions about Tianxia from the earliest texts, some older than 3,000 years, and all of them before Christ.

1. *Shang-shu* (Book of Political Documents) says: the responsibility of the kings of the world is to develop “compatibility of all nations”[[4]](#footnote-4).
2. *Shi-jing* (The Poems) gives the words “nowhere is outside of the all-under-heaven of the king”[[5]](#footnote-5).
3. In Gongyang’s commentaries of *Tso-chuan*, the first chronological history of China, it says “the all-under-heaven of the king has no outside”. And it does not make sense to speak of the concept of foreign states, for they are all states inside Tianxia[[6]](#footnote-6). A story told in *Hanfeizi* is most interesting to demonstrate the concept of “no outside” of Tianxia: a visitor came to the capital of Tianxia of Zhou and was asked if he was a guest. He declared he was a permanent resident. The policeman asked for his permanent address in the capital, he said none. Then the policeman accused him of lying, the visitor defended his honesty with the argument: “I have learnt from *The Poems* that nowhere outside the all-under-heaven of the king, and no one is not a subject of the king. Therefore I am a permanent resident of Tianxia, just as the king is or you are”[[7]](#footnote-7).
4. *I-ching* (The Book of Changes), mentions a metaphor with profound implications. It tells of the pioneering kings “putting on their *loose and relaxing garments* and bringing peace to all-under-heaven”[[8]](#footnote-8). What do the “loose and relaxing garments” represent? I think it is a metaphor of the political invention of civil rule to replace military rule, or, rule by institution to replace rule by violence.
5. Lao-zi (571BCE-? BCE) develops an epistemology for Tianxia: “to see a person as a person meant to be, to see a family as a family meant to be, to see a village as a village meant to be, to see a state as a state meant to be, and to see the all-under-heaven as a world meant to be. Why do I see everything so well? Just in this way”[[9]](#footnote-9). Lao-zi argues an approach of seeing X in terms of a concept that matches X well, nothing more and nothing less.
6. Guan-zi (732BCE-645BCE), a great political theorist who predates Lao-zi. He gave important statements on Tianxia, somewhat similar to Lao-zi’s. However his book had been edited and some words must have been added later by his disciples. It is unknown which are his own words or later added. Guan-zi says: “It proves not good at all to deal with a village in the way of dealing with a family, or a state in the way of a village, or the all-under-heaven in the way of a state. The truth is that, we should deal with a family in the way of the family, and a village in the way of the village, and a state in the way of the state, finally, the all-under-heaven in the way of all-under-heaven”[[10]](#footnote-10). Guan-zi also argues for a proper method corresponding to its object.
7. Lu Buwei (?-235BCE), a politician and a great scholar, says that “impartiality to everyone is the principle of the governance of Tianxia, since Tianxia is not the private property of anyone, but rather the shared wealth of all peoples in the world”. He tells a poetic story to demonstrate his cosmopolitanism: a man of the state of *Jing*, one of the states of Tianxia, once lost his bow, yet reluctant to get it back, saying “One man of Jing lost it, another man of Jing will find it. It is all right”. Confucius heard of this and said: “better not to mention the man of Jing. Just say a person lost it and another finds it”. Lao-zi learnt this and said: “It would be perfect not to mention any person, just say something lost and found” [[11]](#footnote-11).

We see that Tianxia is related to all-inclusiveness, all peoples, commonwealth of the world, perpetual peace, and justice to everyone. Unfortunately, the ideal of Tianxia came to an end after its experimental effort of 800 years and finally collapse in wars, due to the defects in its institutional arrangements, especially, the lack of a “world” taxation system, which resulted in the shortage of resources to maintain the “world governance”. Obviously, a weak and poor central government of Tianxia was short of power to maintain the security of all nations as promised. The ambitious and powerful states broke the balanced structure of the Tianxia system then led to wars. The first emperor Qin the Great defeated all other states and established the *China of Grand Unity* in 221BCE. It announced the end of Tianxia system.

From 221BCE to 1911, the *China of Grand Unity,* often misunderstood as an unchanged and continuing Chinese Empire of Tianxia, was actually neither a Tianxia system nor an empire, in a similar way that the “Holy Roman Empire” was neither Roman nor an empire and not holy as supposed. It is true the post-Tianxia China had kept the concept of Tianxia in use as an exaggerated symbol of its imperial glory, as did the Holy Roman Empire, but it was not true at all. The Western perception of China as an empire boasting of an arrogant tributary system is a misunderstanding based upon misleading information or careless studies on China. The truth of the tributary system was that foreign countries paid ritual respect to the emperor who rendered, in return, the most favorable trade deals. The Chinese financial ministers hated it because the tributary trade had caused economic losses, except for the emperors who indulged in their vain glory. Briefly, the tributary system was an unprofitable policy rather than the domination over the world as misperceived by Western mind. The truly significant heritage of Tianxia for the *China of Grand Unity* was the invention of “one country, many systems”, which enabled China to deal with political and social cooperation with the minorities in China, and has made China a *world-pattern state*, rather than a nation-state.

I propose a constitutional Tianxia, considered a contemporary redefinition of Tianxia[[12]](#footnote-12), and it is open to debates. There are two triggers for my reinvention of *Tianxia*. The first is that, my long time trust in the Kantian peace has been challenged in our time by Huntington’s clashes of civilizations. It exposes a more difficult problem beyond the Kantian notion of peace with respect to issues of shared values, religious beliefs, and the political regimes defining of nations. The second trigger is the failure of international politics. As it stands, it is and continues to be an ineffective game that brings with it the hostile strategies of deterrence, sanction, interference, the balancing of powers, cold wars, and even war itself, all of which only serve to make the world even worse off than it was.

Tianxia implies an alternative concept of the political, by which the political be defined as the art of *changing hostility into hospitality*, instead of Carl Schmitt’s recognition of enemy, Marxist’s class struggle, Morgenthau’ struggle for power, or Huntington’s clashes of civilizations. And war actually proves the failure of politics rather than the *continuation of politics* as Carl Von Clausewitz thinks. A constitutional Tianxia is meant to solve the global problems of world-size, such as technologies, global finance, climate change, pandemics and clashes of civilizations.

A new Tianxia expects to be established upon three *constitutional* concepts: (1) *internalization of the world*, inclusive of all nations in a shared system so making a world of no more negative externalities; (2) *relational rationality*, which emphasizes the priority of *minimization of mutual hostility* over maximization of self-interest; And (3) *Confucian Improvement*, which requires that *one improved if-and-only-if all others improved*, that is, the non-exclusive improvement for everyone thus more acceptable than Pareto’s Improvement. Otherwise put, Confucian Improvement equals to Pareto’s improvement for *everyone* or *each* gets a Pareto’s Improvement.

1. 《春秋·公羊传·隐公元年》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 《礼记·礼运》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 《尚书·尧典》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 《尚书·尧典》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 《诗经·小雅·北山》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 《春秋·公羊传·隐公元年》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 《韩非子·说林上》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 《周易·系辞下》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 《道德经·五十四章》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 《管子·牧民》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 《吕氏春秋·贵公》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Zhao Tingyang: Tianxia tout sous un Meme Ciel. Les edition du Cerf, 2018, Paris. Or, Alles unter dem Himmel, Suhrkamp, 2019, Berlin. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)