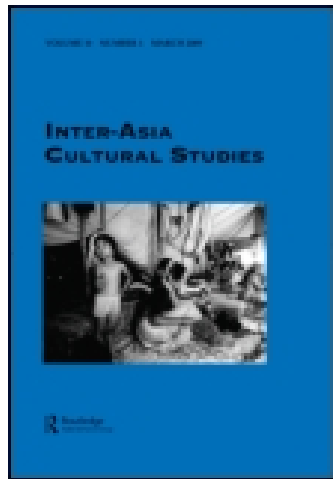


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Tianxia system on a snail's horns

Chishen CHANG

ABSTRACT *This article aims to report the findings from some recent researches on the historical formation of the concept of tianxia and its original meanings. In the light of these findings, I would like to make some comments on the Chinese philosopher Zhao Tingyang's works on the tianxia system. I demonstrate that the concept of tianxia portrayed by Zhao is at odds with the historical concepts of tianxia in many ways, and that the challenge raised by the latter for Chinese nationalism today is unanswered. I also examine Zhao's proposal of the tianxia system and point out that this proposal as a universalist commitment to a philosophy of the world seems to have failed on both the motivational and theoretical levels. In conclusion, I make an observation about a problem which might have a profound but inimical effect on the creativity of Chinese intellectual minds, namely, the urge to make chinoiserie theories at the expense of theoretical coherence and logical consistency.*

KEYWORDS: tianxia, jiuzhou, zhongguo, chinoiserie, Zhao Tingyang

A pre-modern Chinese concept, 'tianxia' has become a hot issue in recent years. The suddenly boosted attention paid to it, however, is not due to significant progress in the study of this concept itself but due to something else. In 2005, prominent Chinese philosopher Zhao Tingyang published *The Tianxia System: An Introduction to a Philosophy of World Institution*, in which he proposed a new way to theorize international relations and world politics in terms of the concept of *tianxia*. The book became a best-seller in China (Callahan 2008: 750) and made Zhao 'a star in China's intellectual circles' (Zhang 2010). Later on Zhao published two English articles, which might be viewed as both a summary and an improved elaboration of his 2005 proposal (Zhao 2006, 2009).

Since the publication of the *Tianxia System* (2005), several commentaries and criticisms have been made regarding Zhao's proposal. Some give credit to Zhao's attempt, pointing out that he makes a significant contribution to producing the 'Chinese representation of philosophy' (Zhou 2006, 2009: 132), that 'he should be praised for ... taking a balanced and eclectic approach to political theory by drawing on both the Chinese and Western traditions' (Zhang 2010), or that he does something similar to what Kang You-wei (an important 19th-century Chinese thinker) did before, namely, 'utilizing the authority of the Ancient to sanction the reform of the present system' (Gan 2006: 39). By bringing a traditional Chinese concept into the theorization of contemporary political issues, he preserves the continuity of Chinese thought while making it creative at the same time (Gan 2006: 39). As for criticisms, the most detailed criticism of Zhao's proposal so far seems to be that by Zhang Xu-guang (2006). Zhang criticizes Zhao for presenting Chinese and Western thought one-sidedly and applying double standards. He points out that Zhao eulogizes the Chinese ideas he promotes while disregarding the problems of their actual practice in history, contending that these problems are irrelevant as he is concerned with constructing these ideas as utopian rather than examining their practice in reality. But when it comes to the

Western values (e.g. human rights, democracy, liberty), Zhao refers to the problems in their practice as evidence against these values so he can discredit them. Zhang further observes that Zhao's 'rethinking China' lacks a dimension of critical self-examination of traditional Chinese thought, and he suggests that, instead of presenting traditional Chinese and Western thought as incompatible and in confrontation, one should undertake a balanced evaluation of each regarding their respective merits and inadequacies, and seek to make their merits supplementary to each other. Zhang ends his comments by questioning the credibility of some of Zhao's singular interpretations of Chinese classics and historical examples. William Callahan (2008: 753) points out that Zhao's proposal represents a kind of master narrative, which has been questioned in contemporary philosophical debates. He also notes that Zhao's *tianxia* utilizes in a peculiar way contemporary social theory's concern for the danger of excluding difference as Otherness, as well as for promoting 'conversion rather than conquest' (2008: 754, 756). Zhao claims that the Western worldview tends to exclude difference, whereas *tianxia* is all-inclusive. Against this, Callahan argues that *tianxia* is not as all-inclusive as Zhao claims, but rather excludes the West absolutely, on the one hand, and marginalizes through hierarchical inclusion the people and other neighboring nations of China, on the other (2008: 754). Several examples from Chinese history were also cited by Callahan as evidence against the idealized picture of the *tianxia* system portrayed by Zhao. Having examined the 'strategic placement' of Zhao's proposal within China's 'discursive networks of power', Callahan compares *tianxia* with Samuel Huntington's notion of 'the clash of civilizations', arguing that Zhao's proposal functions as a polemic which might modulate Chinese policymakers' thinking, and that his proposal enhances 'China's soft power as a source of a universally valid model of world politics'. He warns that *tianxia* would not be a post-hegemonic ideal as Zhao claims, but very likely a proposal for a Sino-centric new hegemony (2008: 757–758). Looking into the Confucian themes in Zhao's proposal, Daniel Bell points out that *tianxia* as a cosmopolitan ideal advocated by Zhao is 'inconsistent with key Confucian values' but rather 'owes more to imported traditions like Christianity, Buddhism and Marxism' (2009: 31). Bell argues that the essential spirit of Confucianism means granting primary concern to the interests of intimates and extending such concern for the interests of less intimate others in a gradually diminishing scale. Should the two concerns conflict, those of the former often take priority. Once applied to international relations, it is natural and right for Confucianism to allow national interest to outweigh cosmopolitan ideals, which would allow Zhao's alleged Confucian *tianxia* to be undermined by Confucian particularism (2009: 31).

There are several insights as well as a great variety of perspectives in the above remarks. Yet something important is missing in them; namely, a serious investigation of the concept of *tianxia* itself. At first sight it appears that the absence of such investigation is irrelevant, since Zhao has claimed that he simply utilizes the concept of *tianxia* to construct a utopian world order, and such utilization need not have much relevance to historical reality, namely, the actual meaning of *tianxia* in ancient Chinese thought and how the concept actually functioned in the pre-modern Chinese practice of foreign affairs (Zhao 2005: 16). Zhao's claim and his practice are legitimate, as a term can be freely used by its user for some purpose as long as she or he makes it clear that such use is purely idiosyncratic and hence has little or nothing to do with facts or reality. But this is not exactly what Zhao does. Having claimed that he cares little about historical factuality, Zhao provides a tale-like narration about the origin of the concept of *tianxia* (Zhao 2009: 8–9), a strange redundancy that makes one wonder why a philosophical proposal which is supposed to be proved by rigorous philosophical argument alone has to call in such a tale about history. Whatever reason(s) behind Zhao's style of constantly making idiosyncratic renderings of Chinese history mix into philosophical argument, as a researcher who has done some researches on the historical formation of the concept of *tianxia*, I think it might be helpful to report some

findings by other researchers and myself to provide a contrast to Zhao's narration, in the hope that the latter might not be confused with historical fact. Moreover, to describe the historical process in which the concept of *tianxia* emerged and developed various meanings would help to make the heated discussion of *tianxia* more anchored on solid knowledge of Chinese history, and such anchoring is rather essential if we want to treat the concept of *tianxia* more seriously.

In the following sections of this article, I first report the findings from some serious research carried out recently on the historical formation of the concept of *tianxia* and its original meanings. In the light of these findings, it is demonstrated that *tianxia* did not have the universal connotations that Zhao claims, and that *tianxia* implied some possibilities which would certainly be unacceptable to China today but nevertheless are not taken into account in Zhao's argument. After that I examine Zhao's proposal and demonstrate that this proposal as a universalist commitment seems to have failed on both the motivational and theoretical levels. In conclusion, I make an observation about a problem which might have a profound but inimical effect on the creativity of Chinese intellectual minds; namely, the urge to make *chinoiserie* theories at the expense of theoretical coherence and logical consistency.

The historical formation of the concept of *tianxia* and its original meanings

Important researches regarding the concept of *tianxia* are not few in number, as the bibliographies or literature reviews in Watanabe (2008: 151–157), You (2009: 14–32) and Chang (2009a: 170–171) show. All of these researches made important contributions to our understanding of the concept of *tianxia* and its functioning in the practice of foreign affairs in pre-modern China. However, it seems that the researches which focused on the historical formation of the concept of *tianxia*, dating its probable first emergence in Chinese thought and analyzing its original meanings are, according to my limited knowledge, still few in number. This inadequacy hampered the advance of our knowledge about how early and in what historical backgrounds the concept of *tianxia* was constructed in Chinese history. Some recent researches – Watanabe Shinichiro's *The Imperial Power and the Order of All Under Heaven in Pre-modern China* (2008), Chi-shen Chang's 'The formation of two key concepts: "zhongguo" and "tianxia"' (2009a) and Yi-fei You's 'The four corners, all under Heaven, commanderies and kingdoms: transformation and development of views of Tianxia in Ancient China' (2009) – might be regarded as attempts to make it up. To those who are interested in the origin of the concept of *tianxia* in ancient China, it is helpful to summarize the findings from these researches.

Tianxia in the Western Zhou period

Regarding the earliest use of the term '*tianxia*' in the available ancient Chinese written materials, it has been pointed out that the term was not found in Shang oracle inscriptions (You 2009: 46), despite the large quantity of excavated inscriptions. In the reliable written materials of Western Zhou, the term '*tianxia*' had appeared only rarely.¹ Literally, *tianxia* is composed of *tian* (Heaven) and *xia* (down, under), thus its literal meaning might be understood as simply 'that which is under Heaven'. But its use in the Western Zhou texts obviously had further connotations than that. If we examine its appearance in important political documents like *The Book of Zhou*, we see that the term *tianxia* was generally used in connection with certain active and interfering deeds or characters of Heaven (such as the decree of Heaven, the dread majesty of Heaven or the punishment of Heaven) toward the human world,² hence denoting a political world which was essentially ruled by Heaven via Its agents who received decrees or mandates from It. In this sense, as a term denoting a

political world, *tianxia* did not simply refer to a world that was under Heaven but rather implied the idea of political legitimacy by which the leadership of this political world was justified.

According to You (2009), in the Western Zhou period there was another term which also denoted a political world but appeared more frequently than *tianxia*: that term is '*sifan*'.³ You suggests that *sifan* as a political world reflects a cognitive map concerning the structure of that world. In this structure, Zhou polity stands at the center, whereas the other polities (either subordinate to Zhou or not) stand around Zhou in all directions. This cognitive structure emphasizes the distinction between the center and its peripheries, which extend to that between the inner (self; center) and the outer (other; peripheries) (2009: 34). If You's observation is correct, we may say that *tianxia* implied an idea of authority with which Heaven ruled the human political world, whereas *sifan* implied an idea of power structure that the center, the inner and the self dominated the peripheries, the outer and the others. In summary, we might say that during the Western Zhou period there were at least two views of the political world: one was *tianxia* and the other *sifan*. Western Zhou people's view of the political world might be a mixture and interplay of these two views.

Now we can take a look at 'an old story about the invention of the all-under-Heaven system' told by Zhao (2009: 7). According to Zhao, this system was invented by the Zhou leaders to meet the challenge of ruling the conquered peoples who greatly outnumbered their conquerors. It was created 'by means of the concept "all-under-Heaven"' (2009: 8). This system was designed to be a universally accepted one by which problems among polities would be solved, rather than using force. It 'consists of a political institution which benefits the people of all nations, and produces the greatest common wellbeing in the world', on the one hand, and 'creates harmony between all nations and cultures', on the other (2009: 7–8). However, as our references to the use of *tianxia* in the Western Zhou documents have shown, the most extensive connotation we can draw from *tianxia* is the implication of political legitimacy granted by Heaven. To claim that 'by means of' this concept a universal system was built with the above-mentioned ideas as its guiding principles, Zhao needs to provide evidence from historical documents. Unfortunately, he fails to do so; thus one cannot but wonder if this 'old story' is simply the product of his own imagination.⁴

Tianxia in the Spring and Autumn period

From the Spring and Autumn on, *tianxia* appeared more frequently in the written materials of that period. Based on his research concerning the meaning of '*zhuxia*' during the Spring and Autumn period, Chang (2009b) argued that *tianxia* in this period generally referred to the political world mainly composed of a political alliance called *zhuxia*,⁵ and hence had the connotation of the political-geographical scope occupied by *zhuxia*. In some cases it also denoted a larger political world which included non-*zhuxia* people or polities (Chang 2009a: 193–198). It is noteworthy that, during this period, the implication of the idea of political legitimacy that *tianxia* had in the Western Zhou period had become less obvious, and in most cases *tianxia* simply denoted a political world or a political-geographical space which stood as an object of political dominance or other political actions. Examples of *tianxia* as an object of political dominance can be found in the expression of '*de tianxia*' (to get *tianxia*)⁶. Another expression is '*yuo tianxia*' (to have or obtain *tianxia*).⁷ *Tianxia* can also be '*qu*' (taken), as King Ling of Ts'oo vowed that he would take *tianxia* for himself (Legge 2000a[1935]: 649). Examples of treating *tianxia* as an object of political actions can be found in the expression '*huai rou tianxia*' (to treat *tianxia* with benevolent caring as a way to win its support), which is rendered by Legge as the founders of Chow 'cherishing with gentle indulgence all under heaven' (2000a[1935]: 192).⁸

Apart from *tianxia*, another key term also emerged in this period, namely, *zhongguo*. The term '*zhongguo*' had already appeared in the Western Zhou period. Its earliest use might have either referred to the former domain of Shang polity or to *luoyi* (also known as *Chengzhou*). In the former case, *zhongguo* was understood as 'the Central State' (Hsu and Linduff rendered it as 'the Central Kingdom'; see Hsu and Linduff [1988: 96]). In the latter case, it meant 'the city that was located in the middle of the peoples or polities, with its distance to the latter being appropriate' (Chang 2009a: 179).⁹ During the Spring and Autumn period, *zhongguo* had around six meanings: (1) the domain of the king of Zhou; (2) *zhuxia*; (3) the political-geographical domain of *zhuxia*; (4) the area within the capital of a polity; (5) the area within the domain of a polity; (6) the civilization (2009a: 185–190). We can see that the second and third meanings of *zhongguo* coincided with the two connotations of *tianxia* in this period. Although the two terms were equivalent in this sense, when *zhuxia* and its political-geographical domain were referred to, it was *tianxia* rather than *zhongguo* that was more often used.

As for *sifan*, it is interesting to note that, in the Spring and Autumn texts, *tianxia* appeared more often than *sifan*.¹⁰ According to You (2009), this fact might be read as a sign of the decline of the imagined political order which *sifan* implied (2009: 57). This observation is well-founded, as it is well-known that during the Spring and Autumn period, Zhou polity had lost its status as the one and only center of power, and the center of power not only shifted between strong polities but also emerged in plural. In such a political world, it was not strange that *sifan* and the cognitive map of power structure for which it stood gradually faded from people's thinking.

Jiuzhou, sihai, zhongguo and tianxia during the Warring States period

During the Warring States period, a new term began to be closely connected with *tianxia* and *zhongguo*. This term was '*jiuzhou*' (nine counties).

The idea of *jiuzhou* had several origins as well as versions (Chang 2009a: 200–205). According to the most famous version, i.e. 'The tribute of Yu' (see Legge 2000b[1935]), *jiuzhou* was created by the God-sage, Yu. According to legend, Yu terminated the Great Flood (the metaphor for chaos and disorder) by creating a divine hydro-engineering work – which has the strongly metaphorical implication of creating a new order. After the work was done, Yu organized the restored lands into nine counties (*jiuzhou*). It has been pointed out by many scholars that the locations of these counties reflected the geo-political reality from the late Spring and Autumn period to the Warring States period (Chang 2009a: 200–206). Understood in this context, *jiuzhou* might be viewed as the further expansion of the Spring and Autumn *tianxia* (*zhongguo*). According to some earlier statements, the scope of *jiuzhou* was estimated as a square with the length of each side being 3000 *li* (2009a: 213–215).

Accompanying the idea of *jiuzhou* was another term, '*sihai*' (four seas). During the Warring States period, *jiuzhou* was understood as being surrounded by *sihai*. Thus *jiuzhou* was also called *hainei* (that which is surrounded by *sihai*) or *sihai*. Despite the fact that the term *sihai* is composed of 'four' (*si*) and 'sea' (*hai*), in the Warring States discourses the term sometimes meant the lands where '*man*', '*yi*', '*rong*' and '*di*' lived rather than 'four seas' (2009a: 206–212).¹¹

Facilitated by the understanding of the meanings of *jiuzhou*, *sihai* and *hainei*, we can further determine that, in the Warring States texts, the term *zhongguo* in some cases was equivalent in connotation to *jiuzhou*, *sihai* or *hainei*. Put more precisely, by the Warring States period the term *zhongguo* had developed at least seven meanings: (1) *zhuxia*; (2) the Central Plain; (3) *jiuzhou*; (4) the area of the Three Jins; (5) the capital of legendary sage-kings; (6) the area within the bounds of a state or one's homeland; or (7) a middle-sized state (2009a: 218–233).¹²

In summary, during the Warring States period, the terms *jiuzhou*, *sihai*, *hainei* and *zhongguo* became interchangeable in certain contexts, and they all referred to a scope the size of which was estimated to be around 3000 times 3000 *li*.

Now we can turn to the term of *tianxia*. During the Warring States period this term was so popular that it actually had become a common word.¹³ A comprehensive study of its meanings in this period has not yet been carried out, but we can be certain that one of its primary meanings denoted *jiuzhou*. Thus *tianxia* in this sense is equivalent to *jiuzhou*, *sihai*, *hainei* and *zhongguo*. Since this *tianxia* denoted a limited scope, it can be understood as 'tianxia in its narrow sense'.

Another concept of *tianxia* also emerged in the Warring States period. It denoted a scope which included *jiuzhou* and *sihai* and could be understood as 'tianxia in its broad sense'. In some cases, the areas outside *jiuzhou* and *sihai* were also included; thus we have 'tianxia in its broadest sense' (2009a: 216–218). In other words, during the Warring States period there were at least three definitions of *tianxia*, namely, *tianxia* in its narrow, broad and broadest sense, respectively. The third sense is not discussed here as it is not relevant to our topic. The second sense is discussed later. Here, we focus on the first sense of *tianxia*.

As we have demonstrated, in its connection to *zhuxia* and *jiuzhou*, *tianxia* in its narrow sense forms the core of the concept of China. From the Spring and Autumn period on, this core gradually expanded. It was enlarged drastically during the Warring States period, and ended up becoming a great domain ruled by the First Emperor of the Qin dynasty. It is important to note that *tianxia* in this sense (i.e. *tianxia* = China) continued to be used in later periods of Chinese history. Watanabe (2008) pointed out that, in the Tang dynasty, *tianxia* meant China rather than an all-inclusive world of which China was just a part, and that *tianxia* was a political domain composed of registered households and inland subordinate polities that were ruled by imperial political power and law (2008: 21–24). In Watanabe's words, 'tianxia was not conceived as a boundless expansive world but rather understood as the collection of states the number of which was definite', and 'tianxia was a limited, governed and divisible domain within which a monarch was upheld' (2008: 21). He concludes that: 'tianxia was the totality of numerous states, the totality of counties and commanderies; it was a confined area with limits on the four cardinal directions, and this area was understood as *yuji* (the land marked by Yu's legendary work) = *jiuzhuo*, which was distinguished from the surrounding *yidi* (abbreviation of "man", "yi", "rong", "di")' (2008: 22).

The fact that *tianxia* has a narrow sense which denotes China rather than a boundless cultural world can help to correct the misleading contention by Joseph Levenson (1968[1958]) that, in pre-modern Chinese history, *tianxia* referred to a universal world of civilization, whereas *guo* referred to a polity which involved bounded political interest (1968[1958]: 99–103). It would be more accurate to say that *tianxia* in its narrow sense indeed denotes a bounded political community with its own political interest. Although this political community is different from the modern nation-state, it is still a political realm rather than a boundless world of civilization.

It is noteworthy that the use of *sifan* in the Warring States texts was overwhelmingly outnumbered by *tianxia* (see You (2009: 56) for statistics). It seems that, when people in that period looked for a term to denote a political world (or *the* political world), *sifan* was virtually abandoned and *tianxia* became the primary candidate.

The inclusiveness of a confined tianxia

As I mentioned earlier, the literal meaning of *tianxia* is 'that which is under Heaven', which implies a notion of an all-containing world. Since all-containing means non-excluding, one might reasonably conjecture that this notion also implies a highly inclusive worldview. But

it has been shown that, from its earliest emergence in the Western Zhou period down to the Warring States period, *tianxia* had definitely meant something other than its literal meaning. *Tianxia* during the Western Zhou period implied the idea of political legitimacy. During the Spring and Autumn period it mainly denoted the political world composed of *zhuxia*. During the Warring States period it had a limited connotation which denoted *jiuzhou*. This section examines the relationship between the idea of inclusiveness and the confined connotation of *tianxia*.

Tianxia during the Spring and Autumn period may serve as our first sample. According to Chang's research, *tianxia* in the Spring and Autumn texts generally stood for a conceptualized totality of *zhuxia*, which was a political alliance in essence, and the primary meaning of 'man', 'yi', 'rong' and 'di' was not 'barbarians' or the culturally backward peoples, but those who did not belong to this alliance (Chang 2009b). In this case, *tianxia* was indeed inclusive in the sense that it downplayed the individuality of each of the feudal polities, treating them as collectively forming a totality, and hence incorporated them into a new large unit. But this conceptualization presupposed a reality as its core, namely, a political alliance with boundaries marked by power and interest. *Tianxia* therefore only included certain people or polities while excluding the others.

The second sample is *tianxia* in its narrow sense during the Warring States period. As already shown, in the texts of this period *tianxia* in its narrow sense referred to an imaginary geographical space called *jiuzhou*. The significance of the concept of *jiuzhou* was that it downplayed the political independence of each polity in the Warring States period (many of these polities had claimed themselves as kingdoms and hence theoretically subject to no higher authority in the human world) and transformed them into the local counties of an imagined great kingdom. In this sense, the concept of *jiuzhou* implied a project for a new political order, and *tianxia* in its narrow sense referred to this new order. Considering that this new order incorporated all of the polities within the scope of *jiuzhou* into a new large polity, *tianxia* was an inclusive concept. However, considering the fact that this *tianxia* only included polities within the scope of *jiuzhou* without extending to the regions of *sihai* and their residents, this *tianxia* was not as all-inclusive as its literal meaning suggested.

In summary, from its development during the Spring and Autumn period to its prevalence in the Warring States period, *tianxia* in its narrow sense was a concept with both inclusive and confined connotations. Put more precisely, it was inclusive in forming an expanding *zhongguo* (*zhuxia*; *jiuzhou*), which nevertheless had a confined and exclusive nature. It is therefore inclusive but not all-containing.

Tianxia as a world order

Having examined the inclusive but confined connotation of *tianxia* in its narrow sense, now we turn to *tianxia* in its broad sense. As previously mentioned, *tianxia* in this sense denoted a scope which included *jiuzhou* and *sihai*, namely, China and her neighboring polities. Moreover, *tianxia* in its broad sense also implied a world order in which the king of China ruled *jiuzhou* (China) directly and subdued *sihai* (neighboring regions of China, where the 'man', 'yi', 'rong' and 'di' resided) indirectly. This world order represented the earliest known theoretical design by the Warring States thinkers regarding the relationship between China and her neighbors.

The most concrete expression of this world order was described by the renowned scholar Gu Xiegang as *jifu* system (Gu 2005: 1–19). According to this system, China's neighboring polities (*siyi*, 'four yi', a collective term for 'man', 'yi', 'rong' and 'di') were included into a world order in which China (symbolized by *jiuzhou*) stood at the center and *siyi* were subordinate to China. There were several kinds of statement regarding the rules designated to maintain *siyi*'s status of inferiority and subordination. Some dictated that the status of the

rulers of *siyi* must have been no higher than the lowest ranks of the Chinese aristocracy, however large or powerful the rulers' polities might have been. Others listed the obligations of *siyi* to the ruler of China. These obligations were mainly in the form of offering tributes or paying homage visits to the head of China. Since *siyi* were not directly ruled by China's ruler, the number of tributes and the frequency of homage visits prescribed for them were not as onerous as those for the vassals within China and were supposed to be symbolic in nature as signs of subordination (Chang 2009c: 195).

It is important to note that, according to this world order, China does not actually rule *siyi*, and the relationship of the former to the latter is simply that of the superior polity to the subordinate ones but not that of a ruler to his or her subjects. The idea is that the polities of *siyi* can freely choose if they want to participate in this world order, as the ruler of China cannot force them to be part of it. But if they choose to participate in it, they have to accept their status as inferior and subordinate.

How should we describe *tianxia* as a world order in the above-mentioned sense? First, considering that it includes China and her neighboring polities, it is indeed more inclusive. Nevertheless, this *tianxia* understood as a square still has limits, with the length of its sides meaning it extends to 5000 square *li* at most (Gu 2005: 15; Watanabe 2008: 45–72). In other words, this more inclusive *tianxia* is still not boundless or all-inclusive. Second, it is definitely not a 'world government', as Zhao states (2009: 8), since *siyi* are not included on any institutionalized or administrative basis. Third, considering that this world order does not dictate that *siyi* have to be part of it, it appears to be highly tolerant. Fourth, considering that whenever *siyi* want to be part of it they have to accept an inferior and subordinate status, this world order appears to be highly discriminative. Last, but not least, to make the issue more complicated, this world order did not specify whether the rulers of *siyi* could become the rulers of China and thus reverse their supposed inferior status. In later Chinese history, this ambiguity indeed allowed such a possibility to become reality, with the Qing dynasty as the most typical case. In other words, this world order permitted foreigners to be the legitimate rulers of China, something utterly inconceivable to the Chinese today. In short, *tianxia* as a world order conceived by the Warring States thinkers is still of limited scope. It is a notion that is simultaneously tolerant, discriminative and ambiguous. It is not analogous to a world government, and it would certainly backfire in a country renowned for her nationalist passions.

In summary, in its formative periods (the Western Zhou period), *tianxia* had three connotations. In its earliest form the concept involved political legitimacy which justified leadership among (rival) polities. From the Spring and Autumn period to the Warring States period, *tianxia* in its narrow sense was a concept with both inclusive and confined connotations. In its broad sense, *tianxia* implied a world order that was still of a confined, tolerant, discriminative and ambiguous nature. Largely unaware of these characteristics of *tianxia*, Zhao (2009: 10) interprets *tianxia* in its literal sense and uses it as the foundation to construct a utopian world order that is characterized with 'the exclusion of nothing and nobody' or 'the inclusion of all peoples and all lands'. This utopian world order seems to be at odds with the historical concepts of *tianxia* in many ways, and a question is obviously left out: Should China as a nation-state today accept alien rule in China, just as the Chinese did in the past?

Zhao Tingyang's *tianxia tixi*: *tianxia* as a political proposal

Zhao Tingyang's *tianxia tixi* (the system of all-under-Heaven) is a political philosophical proposal aiming to present a novel theorization of world politics. Zhao repeatedly stresses that this proposal is a utopian construction hence its validity rests on its logical persuasion rather than the feasibility of its practice. This section puts Chinese history aside and examines this idea as a purely theoretical construction.

Zhao argues that globalization has created the globe as a realm in which peoples of different states collectively form mankind by having their fates connected by globalization. But according to current political theories (international relations [IR] theories in particular), the globe or the world is not a political entity that requires serious theorization. According to IR theories past and present, the world has been constantly understood as a space in which state actors pursue their interests and thus conflict with one another. This is due to traditional thinking which conceives the state as the primary entity in world politics. Since no other entities have higher theoretical significance than the state, the world cannot but become a passive space that merely serves as the field for interactions between states. However, globalization has created issues that have to be dealt with on a theoretical level higher than the state level, hence a gap emerges between the demands of reality and theoretical inadequacy.

In relation to this flaw in current political philosophies, Zhao urges that we must construct a philosophy of the world which treats it as the primary and ultimate entity in our theoretical framework. He claims that such a concept of the world is absent in Western political philosophy, but there is a promising concept that has the potential to be elaborated into one, namely, the concept of *tianxia*. He argues that, in Chinese political philosophy, *tianxia* is a concept with positive content, which has higher theoretical significance than the state. The most salient feature of *tianxia* is its all-inclusiveness and hence the absence of externality. In contrast to this, the concept of state (nation-state in particular) has strongly exclusive nature and presupposes the necessity of externality (an inter-state or international space which has no positive content). The concept of *tianxia* is therefore a suitable alternative to the state-centric thinking of current political philosophy in theorizing the world as a positive entity.

Zhao further argues that, to make the world a meaningful entity in world politics, a world institution (a governing body with an authority higher than state sovereignty) is necessary. The foundation of the creation and maintenance of this world institution is *mingxing* (people's heart). With people supporting the world institution via *mingxing*, the world becomes a family-like community in which the interest of each individual is maximized by the obligatory mutual benevolence which is the essential characteristic of family relationships. Apart from these, the world also has to be a political entity with absolutely no adherence to any specific value (religious or ideological). This is how the world as *tianxia* is supposed to be. Zhao admits that this *tianxia* is a utopian ideal but claims that it has normative significance in directing the future paths of world politics (2005, 2006, 2009).

It is noteworthy that Zhao aims to not only construct a new theory of the world but also argues for the superiority of traditional Chinese political philosophy in relation to its Western counterpart in providing a useful model for such construction. One of his arguments runs like this. According to traditional Chinese philosophy, *tianxia* is a system that consists of three levels, namely, family, state and *tianxia*. All three levels have family as their common structure, Zhao claims. This structural uniformity is described by Zhao as satisfying the criteria of universality, transposability (or transitivity), and continuum (or consistency) (2005: 142; 2006: 33; 2009: 12–13). From the perspective of political governance, the existence of an ideal family presupposes the existence of an ideal state, which in turn presupposes an ideal *tianxia*. In other words, the institution in the lower level always requires effective political governance from the higher-level institution so that the former can properly perform its ethical function. This structure is what Zhao calls 'political transposition'. On the other hand, from the perspective of ethical legitimacy, the ethical function of the family provides ethical legitimacy for the political governance of the state; and the ethical function of the state further provides ethical legitimacy for the political governance of *tianxia*. Zhao describes this structure as 'ethical transposition'. In short, in this three-level system, political governance and ethical legitimacy mutually support and justify each other

(Zhao 2005: 142–148; 2009: 12–14). Claiming that family is the most fundamental and universal ethical institution, that the Chinese three-level political system is the reproduction of family at all levels, and that in this system political governance and ethical legitimacy mutually support and justify each other, Zhao contends that the political system conceived by traditional Chinese political philosophy satisfies the criteria of universality, transposability and continuum, and is thus superior to its Western counterpart. The latter is also a three-level system consisting of individual, group and state. Zhao argues, however, that this system lacks the internal consistency and endogenous self-justification inherent in its Chinese counterpart.

What are the motivations behind Zhao's presentation of his political proposal of *tianxia*? According to Zhao, there are two reasons propelling him to do so. His first motivation is the result of the newly formed geo-political reality: China has become a significant player in world politics. To accord with its importance in the world economy, Zhao contends, China has to play an equally important role in the making of proposals regarding world order (2005: 2–3). The second motivation stems from the need to construct proposals about China's future paths in terms of traditional Chinese cultural resources. Zhao maintains that, before China's 'rise' in the 1990s, the Chinese used to view China self-critically, focusing on her backwardness and various deficiencies. But self-criticism is unconstructive and fails to demonstrate the possible contributions that China could make to the world. Now it is time to replace self-criticism with re-thinking the value of China's traditional culture. Instead of employing intellectual resources from the West and making proposals that are unconnected to the Chinese soil, it is necessary to make proposals as a result of thinking in Chinese ways (namely, creatively employing traditional Chinese cultural resources). In so doing, China would recover her thinking ability and become creative again, capable of establishing intellectual frameworks, worldviews, values and methodologies of her own. The construction of the political proposal of *tianxia* is such re-thinking put into practice (Zhao 2005: 4–16).

Although Zhao claims that he proposes *tianxia* for the sake of the world, his statements suggest that he does so for the sake of China. If we examine his statements as a whole, his concern for a world order is actually for a world order with distinctive Chinese characteristics. If Zhao believes that the world (conceived as *tianxia*) should be a political community which adheres to absolutely no specific value (religious or ideological), then why is it so important to insist that this world be conceived in a Chinese way or that the Chinese proposal of *tianxia* is superior to others? Other proposals have also treated the world as an ultimate community that transcends nation-states – Marxism and anarchism are the best known examples. Both Marxism and anarchism treated the world as a community of humankind in which states and their national cultures have no permanent position. Zhao admitted this fact, but the reasons he provided for not following these strands of thought to construct a political philosophy of the world were not persuasive enough.¹⁴

Conjecturing Marx's view regarding China as a rising power and comparing it with Zhao's could be very revealing. According to Marx's theory, the fact that China has become a significant player means that she forms an important link in the world economy chain and changes in production relations in China should cause fundamental changes in those of the world economy. If the rise of China as a large economic power meant something to Marx, the nature of production relations in China and the direction of their development would be his primary concern. But Zhao's reaction to the same fact is very different. His foremost concern is how China, having become an economic power, can exert equal power (i.e. soft power) in the making of discourses on world politics, and how China as a nation can affirm her cultural uniqueness to her own people and assert such uniqueness to other peoples of the world. By stressing the affirmation and assertion of China's cultural uniqueness first, Zhao actually deconstructs his alleged primary concern about the world itself.

Zhao's contention that, in traditional Chinese philosophy, family, state and *tianxia* all have family as their common structure is particularly revealing, as it provides a useful means to observe the inner difficulty of his theory. Zhao claims that family (ideally speaking) serves as 'a concentrated model of "the very essence of humanity"' in which 'human love, harmony, mutual concern and obligations' prevail (2009: 13) and that, within family, the interest of each individual is maximized by the obligatory mutual benevolence shown towards each member. Since state and *tianxia* cannot possibly be structured *as* family (a group bound by kinship), Zhao's claim can only mean that they are structured *like* family. What is the essential structure of family? The care of the underaged by the adults. The reason why family was the common structure of state and *tianxia* in traditional Chinese philosophy was that the ruler (head of state or *tianxia*) was always viewed as the adult, who ruled the underaged. According to Zhao, this structure is commendable since it can guarantee the maximization of the interests of the giver as well as the recipient of care and love, and make the political governance from above and the maximized benefit for the lower levels mutually justify each other. It is noteworthy that, in Zhao's idealized picture of family, the idea of individuality or personality is completely missing, and the issue of *individuality within family* is simply left out.¹⁵

The problem arises when Zhao claims that family has to be the building block of his *tianxia* system. If recognized individuality is not the issue and the maximization of individual's interests is the essential concern, then it appears that a state or *tianxia* which contains neither individuality nor family but rules with good political governance can satisfy this concern more effectively. Take the utopian polity proposed by Plato as an example. In this polity, society is ruled by philosopher kings who know best how to maximize the interest of their subjects, who are not permitted individuality. Family has to be abolished since family is, by nature, only concerned with the maximization of the interests of its own kin at the expense of non-kin and hence will hinder the maximization of every subject's interests. The limited and exclusive nature of family in maximizing individual interest was also observed by the Chinese thinker Mozi, who pointed out that the nature of family is partiality whereas only universality can guarantee the maximization of individual interests. Aiming to achieve the utmost maximization of individual interest, Mozi therefore advocated 'replacing partiality by universality' and 'universal love and mutual benefit'. Like Plato, Mozi also proposed the absolute obedience of the ruled to the ruler, known as the principle of 'identifying the superior', and the principle of 'honoring the worthy'¹⁶ in order to provide good governance to facilitate the maximization of mutual benefit. In brief, if it is Zhao's aim to construct a *tianxia* system in which the maximization of individual interest overrules individuality and *mingxing* (people's heart) supersedes democracy, then a Platonic republic or a Mohist *tianxia* seem to have much more theoretical affinity with this system than a *tianxia* based on the idealization of the Confucian family.

Conclusion

Transcending the limits and deficiencies of the nation-state system and an individualistic framework in political philosophy is certainly a direction worthy of more theoretical exploration. Unfortunately, Zhao's *tianxia* system as an attempt to this commitment seems to have failed on two levels. On the motivational level, it is not the concern for the world but the concern for making Chinese views more visible in the formation of contemporary political discourses that has primarily driven Zhao to work on his proposal. A philosophy of the world is therefore not an end in itself but a means by which the superiority of traditional Chinese political philosophy can be argued, which makes this philosophy self-defeating.

On the theoretical level, Zhao turns away from previous strands of philosophy of the world such as Marxism and anarchism and is keen to present a new strand of this

philosophy. Such a pursuit for originality is certainly commendable, but what Zhao does is to look for right paths from wrong directions. On the one hand, being unaware of the nature of the Chinese concept of *tianxia*, Zhao resorts to this concept to construct a philosophy of the world without realizing that this concept in many ways contradicts with the ideal world which he aims to advocate in that philosophy. Unless a necessary forgetting about the actual meaning and backfiring nature of *tianxia* is imposed, they will function as destabilizers within Zhao's proposal. On the other hand, his insistence on selecting Confucian legacies rather than other strands of thought (e.g. Mohism) from traditional Chinese intellectual resources as the theoretical pillar of his proposal creates inner difficulty in his proposal, something that could have been avoided if he had started from a more suitable theoretical alternative. In short, due to the wrong choice of building materials, Zhao's philosophy of the world is constructed on a shaky foundation and supported by a flawed structure.

The problem of Zhao's theoretical adventure is symbolic and symptomatic of certain inclinations in contemporary Chinese intellectual minds. It seems that some Chinese intellectuals are too keen to make *chinoiserie* theories rather than sound ones, namely, theories with internal coherence and logical consistency. They seem to be trapped in the constant need to present something Chinese to counter the West, not to mention the irresistible temptation of fame and influence. Ironically, a good cure for the latter can be found in the Confucian idea of self-cultivation against inappropriate inner desires and external temptations, provided that the eagerness to utilize Confucianism would not leave this Confucian teaching out.

The trap created by the mental rivalry between China and the West also has a way out, which is ironically provided by the very notion of *tianxia* itself. Nevertheless, this notion of *tianxia* is neither introduced in Zhao's *tianxia* system nor described in our historical review of the connotations of *tianxia*. This notion of *tianxia* is offered in a story from Zhuanzi (see the chapter called 'Zeyang'): on the right and left horns of a snail there are two kingdoms called *Man* and *Chu*. They constantly fight bloody wars for territory. The rest of the story need not be retold here. It is obvious that the *tianxia* thinking presented in that story – a truly limitless world in which China is tinier than a snail – is simply another utopia. But I have to confess that I prefer this one.

Notes

1. For a comprehensive list and detailed analysis of its appearance in the Western Zhou materials, see You (2009: 41–44) and Chang (2009a: 192–193).
2. For 'decree of Heaven', see 'The announcement of the Duke of Shaou' (Legge 2000b[1935]: 429–430). For 'the dread majesty of Heaven', see 'The testamentary charge' (Legge 2000b[1935]: 429–430). For 'the punishment of Heaven', see 'The prince of Leu on punishment' (Legge 2000b[1935]: 610).
3. You (2009) translated *sifan* as 'the four corners'. Nevertheless, it has to be pointed out that the meanings of '*fan*' in Shang oracle inscriptions were highly diverse, and from the great variety of expert opinions Chang collected at least nine definitions: a kind of agricultural tool; direction; gods of directions; a worship ritual; the name of a certain people; peoples (tribes, polities) outside Shang; neighboring peoples of Shang; a land and the people living on it; the far remote places in the four directions (2009c: 60–61). Considering that *fan* could refer to people or polities, and that some experts argued that *fan* was equivalent to *guo* and *ban* (2009c: 62), *sifan* might also be understood as 'peoples (polities) in the four directions'. Regarding why the other peoples were called by Shang people as *fan*, Chang collected seven explanations (see Chang 2009c: 62–64).
4. According to Cho-yun Hsu, a well-known expert on Western Zhou history and civilization, the Zhou people did create a conceptual invention, namely, the idea of the Heavenly Mandate (Hsu and Linduff 1988: 101–111).
5. According to Chang's (2009b) research, the connotation of *zhuxia* in the Spring and Autumn period was a political alliance rather than an ethnic or cultural community.
6. James Legge used this expression in cases such as when King Wan of Chow 'got his kingdom' (2000a[1935]: 616), or when King Ling of Ts'oo asked whether he might 'get the whole kingdom'

- (2000a[1935]: 649), or when Fei Woo-keih suggested a plan by which the king of Ts'oo can 'get possession of all under heaven' (2000a[1935]: 675), respectively.
7. This expression is used by Legge to mean that King Woo of Chow 'obtained' grand 'possession of all the land' (Legge 2000a[1935]: 727).
 8. For all of the examples of *tianxia* treated as an object of either dominance or other political actions, see Chang (2009a: 193n44, 198).
 9. Chang listed three meanings of *zhongguo* during the Western Zhou period: (1) *luoyi*; (2) one of Zhou's capitals; (3) central state (Shang polity) (2009a: 172–184).
 10. Taking *Zuozhuan*, *Guoyu* and *The Confucian Analects* as sample texts of the Spring and Autumn period, You's statistics showed that *tianxia* appears more frequently in them than *sifan* but not by a great deal (2009: 56).
 11. Watanabe (2008) argues that, from the mid-Warring States period to the Western Han period (206BC–8), *sihai* basically meant 'four seas' or 'boundaries'. It was not until the Eastern Han period (25–220), due to the influence of the 'Old Text' School, that the term obtained the connotation of the lands resided by 'man', 'yi', 'rong' and 'di' (2008: 55–57). Watanabe's arguments deserve more detailed discussion, which unfortunately cannot be offered here as they are not immediately relevant to this article.
 12. For a comprehensive list of all the entries in the Warring States texts in which *zhongguo* was used (there are 108), see Chang (2009a: 219–233). For the cultural and quasi-ethnic connotations of the concept of China during the Warring States period, see Chang (2009c: 166–180).
 13. For the statistics of the frequency of its use in each of the Warring States texts, see You (2009: 56).
 14. On Marxism, Zhao admits in several places that Marxism is indeed a philosophy of the world (2005: 39, 45, 96), which makes Marxism communicative with Chinese thought at least 'in form' (2005: 96). In one place he indicates the reason for not following Marxism in his pursuit of a philosophy of the world: 'But, Marxism is not very successful in the West' (2005: 96). As for anarchism, Zhao contends that, 'the anarchist world is unrealistic, since it has to assume that there are insufficient people who would become bad ones, or that no one would attempt to maximize his own interest ... but such assumptions are fantasies and hence meaningless' (2005: 119). Zhao seems to have rather limited knowledge of anarchism. Moreover, his application of double standards is obvious here, since he discredits Marxism and anarchism as a result of their unsuccessful practice and unrealistic nature and simultaneously treats *tianxia* as a utopia which must not be discredited in the same way. Incidentally, Zhao's reason for being skeptical about anarchism can be used against his idealization of the Confucian family and hence discredits that idealization as 'unrealistic'.
 15. In one place Zhao mentions that the Chinese system he eulogizes 'is often criticized for its neglect of the individual as well as individual rights'. He defends this system by saying that, 'there is no Chinese denial of the value of the individual', on the one hand, and that 'the political makes sense only when it deals with "relations" rather than "individuals"', on the other (Zhao 2006: 33). However, if the latter proposition indicates that 'the political only deals with relations between persons and these persons must not be understood as individuals' and if this proposition is held as correct, then the Chinese lack of denial of the value of the individual is wrong, as it fails to treat the individual as relation and hence shows, in Zhao's words, a 'poor understanding of political society' (2006: 33).
 16. All of the translations of Mohist phrases are borrowed from De Bary and Bloom (1999: 66–76).

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Special terms

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| ban 邦 | sifan 四方 |
| Central Plain 中原 | sihai 四海 |
| Chengzhou 成周 | siyi 四夷 |
| Chu 觸 | 'The announcement of the Duke of Shaou' 召誥 |
| de tianxia 得天下 | <i>The Book of Zhou</i> 周書 |
| di 狄 | <i>The Confucian Analects</i> 論語 |
| guo 國 | the decree of Heaven 天命 |
| Guoyu 國語 | the dread majesty of Heaven 天威 |
| hainei 海內 | 'The prince of Leu on punishment' 呂刑 |
| honoring the worthy 尚賢 | the punishment of Heaven 天罰 |
| huai rou tianxia 懷柔天下 | 'The testamentary charge' 顧命 |
| identifying the superior 尚同 | 'The tribute of Yu' 禹貢 |
| jifu system 畿服制 | Three Jins 三晉 |
| jiuzhou 九州 | tian 天 |
| li 里 | universal love and mutual benefit 兼相愛，交相利 |
| luoyi 雒邑 | utilizing the authority of the Ancient to sanction the reform of the present system 托古改制 |
| man 蠻 | xia 下 |
| qu 取 | |
| replacing partiality by universality 兼以易別 | |
| rong 戎 | |

yi 夷
yuji 禹迹
yu tianxia 有天下
'Zeyang' 則陽

zhongguo 中國
Zhuanzi 莊子
zhuxia 諸夏
Zuozhuan 左傳

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