

# The Tianxia System: World Order In A Chinese Utopia

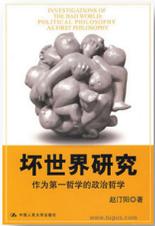
Reviewed By Feng Zhang



**Tianxia Tixi: Shijie  
Zhidu Zhexue Daolun**  
[The Tianxia System:  
An Introduction to  
the Philosophy of  
a World Institution]

By Zhao Tingyang

Nanjing: Jiangsu Jiaoyu Chubanshe,  
2005, 160 pages



**Huai Shijie Yanjiu:  
Zuowei Diyi Zhexue  
de Zhengzhi Zhexue**  
[Investigations of the  
Bad World: Political  
Philosophy as the  
First Philosophy]

By Zhao Tingyang

Beijing: People's University Press,  
2009, 366 pages

AS CHINA RAPIDLY MOVES to center stage in world politics, the question of this emerging superpower's international purpose and foreign policy is becoming more important than ever. What is China's international mission, and how might it realize its agenda? Does it even have a blueprint for action? The Chinese government's official line is often very vague on these questions. However, while China's international strategy is currently undergoing major transformations,<sup>1</sup> at the unofficial level China's intellectual elite have been advancing a diverse set of arguments about China's future international role. Because the intellectual power of these emerging views will, to varying degrees, influence policy choices in the future, it is essential for observers of Chinese foreign policy to pay serious attention to the lively intellectual debates taking place inside China. In

this spirit, I here review the influential works of Zhao Tingyang, a distinguished academic at the Institute of Philosophy at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing.

Although Zhao had already established himself as a philosopher before 2005, the publication of his book *Tianxia Tixi* that year made him a star in China's intellectual circles, helping to extend his influence beyond the confines of philosophy into the realm of international relations. Four years later, he published a second volume further developing his *tianxia* (literally, "all-under-heaven") theory while offering a more comprehensive outline of his own political philosophy. His philosophical theory of international relations has had a huge impact on China's community of international relations scholars, stirring up excitement as well as curiosity. This is due, in part, to the fact that Chinese scholars in this field have not been able to produce a theory as sophisticated as his, even though this has been on their agenda for some time.

Not being a philosopher myself, I shall concentrate on those parts of Zhao's writings that directly pertain to international relations, which are most of his 2005 book and most of Chapter 4 in his 2009 book. Readers can also consult two of his English-language articles for a summary of his theory.<sup>2</sup>

Let me first note the motivations behind Zhao's project. While intellectual curiosity and ambition certainly have been the initial drivers of his *tianxia* theory, an important motivation is also to "rethink China" so as to rethink the world and develop Chinese views and theories of world politics. At root is a strong desire to provide an indigenous Chinese perspective on international relations and to prepare China intellectually for a greater, more constructive and distinctive role in world affairs. As Zhao puts it, "The historical significance of 'rethinking China' lies in recovering China's own ability to think, reconstructing its world views, values and methodologies, and thinking about China's future, Chinese concepts about the future and China's role and responsibilities in the world."<sup>3</sup>

Believing that China can become a new kind of great power — one that is responsible for the whole world, but in a different way from historical empires — Zhao aims to create new concepts about the world and world institutions by promoting the idea of *tianxia* as the pivotal unit in ana-

lyzing world politics. He finds many inadequacies in existing Western theories of international relations, not least their exclusive emphasis on the nation-state as the unit of analysis. In his view, the world today is still a “non-world,” and the real problem we face is not so-called “failed states,” but a “failed world.” He faults Western theories for contributing to this “failed world” with their emphasis on the nation-state, and asserts that China’s tianxia theory, which borrows its key ingredients from ancient Chinese thought, can remedy this critical deficiency. He argues that tianxia theory offers an alternative, far better model of a future world order that takes into account the interests of the entire world, whatever its constituent elements.

What, then, is Zhao’s theory of the tianxia system? Although he does not always clearly or logically lay out its elements, one can nevertheless reconstruct the conceptual framework by noting four of its main components.

First, tianxia, a dense concept referring to “the world,” has three meanings: 1) the earth or all lands under the sky; 2) a common choice made

wider and more powerful explanatory framework than those found in Western theories.<sup>4</sup>

Second, an important principle of the tianxia system is “the exclusion of nothing and no one,” or, put differently, “the inclusion of all peoples and all lands.” That is, under the tianxia system nobody can be excluded or pushed aside, since no one is essentially incompatible with others; nothing is considered “foreign” or “pagan.” Moreover, tianxia is fair and impartial to all peoples: it is meant to be of all and for all, and never of and for anybody in particular. Thus, the right to rule or the legitimacy of governance in the tianxia system is, in theory, open to all peoples. The central idea of tianxia, furthermore, is to reconstitute the world along the lines of the family, thereby transforming the world into a home for all peoples.<sup>5</sup> It is this principle of “non-exclusion” that makes tianxia such an expansive system.

Third, Zhao insists on the importance of a world institution as the highest political entity or authority capable of caring for the entire world. This, in effect, amounts to saying a world government is necessary in the tianxia system. According

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by all peoples in the world, or a universal agreement in the “hearts” of all people; and 3) a political system for the world with a global institution to ensure universal order. With the concept of tianxia, therefore, the world is understood as consisting of the physical world (land), the psychological world (the general sentiment of peoples) and the institutional world (a world institution). Zhao claims that this conceptualization regards “the world” as the highest political unit, setting it apart from Western conceptualizations that stop at the nation-state as the highest unit of analysis. This Chinese-style analysis uses the structure of “family–state–tianxia,” which Zhao argues is a

to his theory, internal order depends on external order; or to put it differently, a lower-level order such as the one between nation-states always depends on a higher-level world order of which nation-states are only constituent parts.<sup>6</sup> He therefore argues that “internationality,” which is the concept upon which most Western theories of international relations are based, is unsuitable for thinking about world order. Instead, it must be replaced by the concept of what he calls “worldness,” whose scope is broader than and subsumes “national interests.”

Fourth, the tianxia system envisions a world system characterized by harmony and cooperation

without hegemony. The coherence of the system is maintained through the internal harmony of diversity.<sup>7</sup> However, the pathways to harmony and a world institution receive very little treatment in Zhao's first book. To fill this gap, the 2009 volume develops the two ideas of "the strategy of common imitation" and "Confucian improvement," couched in the language of game theory. The strategy of common imitation is regarded as the key to the formation of a stable institution, since it is argued that a common imitation of the best strategy available among all the players in a game will lead to a stable equilibrium.<sup>8</sup> "Confucian improvement" aims to achieve harmony as a mutually beneficial condition by creating a situation

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in which the common interests achieved by cooperation among players will always be greater than separate interests achieved by individual players on their own. Zhao argues that "Confucian improvement" is a major advance over "pareto improvement" as discussed in the Western literature.<sup>9</sup> Named after the Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto, a pareto improvement is a situation where a reallocation of resources within an economic system improves the lot of at least one individual without making any other individual worse off.

The tianxia system thus imagines a world institution that can 1) make the common interests of the whole a priority over individual interests,

so that the benefits of joining the system will always be greater than the benefits of leaving it; 2) create a structure of harmony where individual interests are so interlocking and mutually constituted that anyone's gain will always result in a gain for others, and anyone's loss will always lead to a loss for others; and 3) create common values by being inclusive of all cultures while denying the dominance of any one of them, so as to transform enemies into friends and realize world peace.<sup>10</sup> In short, the significance of this system lies in its putative ability to maintain worldwide peace, interests and order. Zhao further argues that this system would be superior to the three Western approaches that most resemble China's tianxia: the ideal of the Roman Empire, which relied on military conquest; Christian universalism, which tried to solve political problems through religion; and Immanuel Kant's "perpetual peace" thesis, which smacked of unilateral cultural imperialism.<sup>11</sup> Thus, tianxia is considered to be the best blueprint for world politics in the future.

This is a stunningly beautiful vision of a future world order. But what are the main problems? Before evaluating the framework, I should like first to point out a few misunderstandings and misinterpretations of Zhao's work.

First, it is a common impression that by employing the idea of tianxia, Zhao is trying to revive the old hierarchical, Sino-centric system of premodern East Asia, which, at least to some foreign observers, suggests that China has hegemonic ambitions. This is a fundamental misunderstanding. Zhao has pointed out clearly in several places that he is not simply recycling the old concept of tianxia; rather, he is trying to renew it and give it fresh meaning within the realities of world politics in the 21st century<sup>12</sup>. His understanding of tianxia is, therefore, different from the imperial Chinese view (indeed, from any other scholar's view). In any case, he has based his theory on the model of the Zhou dynasty (c. 1100-256 BC), rather than the unified Chinese empire after 221 BC. He emphasizes that the practice of imperial China deviated from the best practices of the Zhou dynasty, thus distorting the tianxia ideal, but even the Zhou dynasty was not a perfect embodiment of his tianxia system.<sup>13</sup> The objective of Zhao's project, therefore, is to reinvent the concept of tianxia as a way of thinking about world politics, and he should be credited for undertaking this serious scholarly effort. Whether he succeeds is a different matter.

Second, some commentators fault Zhao for misunderstanding the essence of Chinese culture, either by taking a dualistic perspective in interpreting traditional Chinese thought<sup>14</sup> or by selectively using ancient Chinese ideas to promote Chinese superiority.<sup>15</sup> This does not seem to me to be a fair judgment. Zhao is not trying to provide a holistic and comprehensive view of Chinese culture; rather, as he points out, he is trying to reach the best theoretical possibilities of world order by drawing on ancient Chinese thought.<sup>16</sup> The criticism of Zhao's selective use of ideas and evidence thus misses the point. His project has to be about the selective use of philosophical and historical materials, and the criteria of evaluation should be how well he has handled and synthesized these different materials.

Third, some criticisms of Zhao concentrate on the discrepancy between his theoretical propositions and the actual historical record. But again, this is wrong-headed. One cannot evaluate a philosopher's work from an empiricist's standpoint. To be sure, Zhao's understanding of the actual historical record may be open to question, but he

ing to convey. Zhao's writing is usually elegant and accessible, but his 2005 book is poorly organized. After a well-written introduction, the rest of the book is basically composed of two conference papers, with repetitions of views scattered in several places. The book as a whole therefore lacks organizational and analytical coherence. This may be one reason why so many commentators have misread the main arguments. In fact, his English-language articles are analytically clearer than his 2005 book.

Second, some of Zhao's theoretical and philosophical assertions invite skepticism. For example, he writes that "Western thought can think about conflict, but only Chinese thought can think about harmony."<sup>18</sup> This seems to have discounted the entire liberal tradition of Western political thought. There is also a tendency to over-emphasize the Hobbesian tradition in the West so as to create an analytically useful contrast with the tianxia ideal in the Chinese tradition.

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has acknowledged that he is a philosopher, not a historian. Moreover, Zhao has emphasized that his tianxia system is an ideal, a grand utopia, and has never been realized in history, not even by the Zhou dynasty.<sup>17</sup> He therefore looks to the future by reconstructing a concept from the past.

What, then, are the problems with Zhao's thesis? I shall evaluate the ways in which Zhao has structured and organized his arguments, the quality of his theoretical propositions themselves, and the merits of his utopian vision of tianxia.

To start with, the organizational problem is the least serious intellectually, but it can create real trouble in understanding what the author is try-

ing to convey. Zhao's writing is usually elegant and accessible, but his 2005 book is poorly organized. After a well-written introduction, the rest of the book is basically composed of two conference papers, with repetitions of views scattered in several places. The book as a whole therefore lacks organizational and analytical coherence. This may be one reason why so many commentators have misread the main arguments. In fact, his English-language articles are analytically clearer than his 2005 book.

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ernment? In fact, if one looks at the Zhou dynasty, the system closest to Zhao's ideal, one will discover that 1) the Zhou system was created by conquest, and 2) it eventually broke down because it was unable to rein in the individualist and self-interested pursuits of its member states. Because Zhao has not convincingly shown how the tianxia system might work as a peaceful and harmonious system, one is likely to balk at his proposal. Indeed, Zhao's failure to offer a clarifying analysis of the world institution's design is one of the most important reasons behind some foreign observers' suspicion that he is trying to revive China's imperial mode of governance in the 21st century.<sup>19</sup>

Zhao envisions a tianxia system that can take care of the interests of the whole world and is the guarantor of world peace and order. But how can such a system be devised, and who can be the agents of peace and harmony? Zhao proposes two strategies as pathways to a stable and ideal world institution: "common imitation" and "Confucian improvement." Each, however, has its own problems. "Common imitation" may fail because there may not be any common knowledge of the best strategy, or the best strategy is simply not recognized. As for "Confucian improvement," it may not be possible to reach conceptual agreement on the common interests that are perceived to be greater than individual interests. In any case, the relative gain of interests is most likely to be proven *ex post facto*. Moreover, perception aside, there may be cases where individual interests are simply greater than common interests, as Zhao readily acknowledges.<sup>20</sup> There are, therefore, a host of institutional design problems with regard to Zhao's tianxia system. Interestingly, without providing a realistic pathway, Zhao often falls back on the position that we should first adopt his world view or analyze world politics from the perspective of "worldness" rather than "internationality." Few would deny the need for a broad perspective on world politics, but the reality seems to have worked against the formation of a world government in the past. There is a long way to go from conceiving an ideal to developing a workable plan. It is hoped that Zhao's future works will fill this gap.

In the final analysis, Zhao's tianxia system is an interesting and perhaps exceedingly beautiful utopia. He has synthesized the best traditions of ancient Chinese thought to imagine a perfect future world order, but without providing a feasible pathway that can connect the two. He should

be praised for thinking about tianxia seriously, for introducing Chinese concepts to the outside world and for taking a balanced and eclectic approach to political theory by drawing on both the Chinese and Western traditions. He is perhaps the first modern Chinese scholar to have systematically theorized the tianxia, without committing the fallacies of Radical Confucianism, which wants to take China back into the ancient society *in toto*, or those of New Confucianism, which claims that Chinese culture has every ingredient of modernity already, even liberal democracy. From Zhao's works one can also glimpse the rising intellectual tide among Chinese scholars in rethinking China's international role. Zhao's project itself remains incomplete. But it has at least succeeded in stirring up a Chinese imagining of the future world order.

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1 For a relevant analysis, see Wang Jisi, "Zhongguo guoji zhanlue yanjiu de shijiao zhuanhuan" [Change of perspectives in research on China's international strategy], in *Zhongguo Guoji Zhanlue Pinglun 2008* [China International Strategy Review 2008] (Beijing: World Knowledge Press, 2008).

2 Zhao Tingyang, "A Political World Philosophy in terms of All-under-heaven (Tian-xia)," *Diogenes* 2009, 221: 5-18; and Zhao, "Rethinking Empire from a Chinese Concept of 'All-under-Heaven (Tian-xia)," *Social Identities*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (January 2006), pp.29-41.

3 Zhao, *Tianxia Tixi*, p. 7 (all translations are mine, unless otherwise noted).

4 Zhao, *Tianxia Tixi*, pp.41-44.

5 *Ibid.*, pp.49-61.

6 Zhao, *Investigations of the Bad World*, pp.80, 85.

7 Zhao, *Tianxia Tixi*, p. 75.

8 Zhao, *Investigations of the Bad World*, p. 18.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 119.

10 *Ibid.*, pp.320-21.

11 *Ibid.*, pp.318-20.

12 Zhao, *Tianxia Tixi*, p. 16; Zhao, *Investigations of the Bad World*, pp.5, 78.

13 Zhao, *Investigations of the Bad World*, p. 164.

14 Xiang Lanxin, *Chuantong Yu Duiwai Guanxi: Jianping Zhongmei Guanxi De Yishixingtai Beijing* [Tradition and Foreign Relations: With Comments on the Ideological Background of Sino-US Relations] (Beijing: Sanlian Shudian, 2007).

15 Xu Jianxin, "Tianxia Tixi Yu Shijie Zhudu—Ping Tianxia Tixi: Shijie Zhidu Zhexue Daolun (Tianxia System and World Institution: Reviewing The Tianxia System: An Introduction to the Philosophy of World Institution)," *Guoji Zhengzhi Kexue* [Quarterly Journal of International Politics] 2007, 2: 113-42.

16 Zhao, *Tianxia Tixi*, p. 16.

17 Zhao, *Tianxia Tixi*, pp.39-40.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

19 See, for example, William A. Callahan, "Chinese Visions of World Order: Post-Hegemonic or a New Hegemony," *International Studies Review* 10 (4): 749-61.

20 Zhao, *Investigations of the Bad World*, p. 120.