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Tianxia System for a Future World and Peace in the Future

*Interview with Zhao Tingyang,
Professor of Philosophy at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*



Abstract. Zhao Tingyang is Professor of Philosophy at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Senior Research Fellow at the Berggruen Institute (USA). The research interests of Professor Zhao Tingyang include ontology, political philosophy, and the philosophy of history. His works on Tianxia theory have been translated into many languages, including German (Alles Unter dem Himmel, Suhrkamp, Germany), English (All-under-Heaven: The Tianxia System for a Possible World Order, University of California, USA; Redefining a Philosophy for World Governance, Palgrave Macmillan, UK), French (Tianxia tout sous un Meme Ciel, Cerf, France), Spanish (Tianxia: una filosofia para la gobernanza global, Herder, Spain), Italian (Tutto Sotto il Cielo, Ubaldini, Italy), and Polish (Nowa Filozofia ladu Swiatowego, Time Marszalek, Poland). In his interview, Zhao Tingyang reveals the details of his “Tianxia” concept, the essence of which is to establish a system of coexistence of peoples and states based on a renewed understanding of politics as “the art of transition from hostility to hospitality.” In such a system, as Professor Zhao Tingyang notes, the hegemony of one power

over others is excluded, the risks of conflicts and large-scale crises are minimized, but opportunities are created for the development of all states on the principles of equality, rationality and improvement.

Key words: Tianxia, political philosophy, history, world order of the future, transsubjectivity

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Система «Тянься» для будущего мира и мира в будущем

Интервью с Чжао Тиньяном,
профессором философии Китайской академии общественных наук

Аннотация. Чжао Тиньян — профессор философии Китайской академии общественных наук, старший научный сотрудник Института Берггрюена (США). Занимается онтологией, политической философией и философией истории. Его труды о теории «Тянься» были переведены на множество языков, в том числе немецкий (*Alles Unter dem Himmel*, Suhrkamp, Германия), английский (*All-under-heaven: The Tianxia System for a Possible World Order*, издательство Калифорнийского университета, США; *Redefining a Philosophy for World Governance*, Palgrave Macmillan, Великобритания), французский (*Tianxia tout sous un Meme Ciel*, Cerf, Франция), испанский (*Tianxia: una filosofia para la gobernanza global*, Herder, Испания), итальянский (*Tutto Sotto il Cielo*, Ubaldini, Италия) и польский (*Nowa Filozofia ladu Swiatowego*, Time Marszalek, Польша). В своем интервью Чжао Тиньян раскрывает детали своей концепции «Тянься», суть которой заключается в установлении системы сосуществования народов и государств, основанной на обновленном понимании политики как «искусства перехода от враждебности к доброжелательности». В такой системе, отмечает профессор Чжао, исключен гегемонизм одной державы над другими, минимизируются риски конфликтов и масштабных кризисов, но создаются возможности для развития всех государств на основе равноправия, рациональности и совершенствования.

Ключевые слова: Тянься, политическая философия, история, миропорядок будущего, транссубъективность

Для цитирования: Чжао Т. Система «Тянься» для будущего мира и мира в будущем. Интервью с Чжао Тиньяном, профессором философии Китайской академии общественных наук. Интервью провела Тянь Е // Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Международные отношения. 2024. Т. 24, № 3. С. 397–402. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-0660-2024-24-3-397-402>

— Dear Professor Zhao Tingyang, in 2005, you initially put forward your original concept of political theory, *Tianxia* (All under Heaven), which provoked deep discussions among famous scholars from China, the United States, Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, South Korea and many other countries. For many years, you have been working to reveal the unifying elements of ancient Chinese history, including the well-known Chinese concept of *Tianxia*, to develop a theoretical basis for the future of the world order. Could you elucidate the meanings behind this concept and elaborate on the reasons why this ancient concept has become the basis for contemporary Chinese political theory?

— What matters is how we perceive “history” itself. Yes, indeed, many of the ancient concepts can be found in history. Unlike abstract theoretical concepts, one of the properties of stories is their ability to preserve the “ur-experience” of a person in the “original situation” when he is faced with the need to

solve a problem. This ur-experience is invaluable because of its immediacy, and its sincere reflection of what really matters, and the likelihood that it contains the best ideas from the depths of our imagination. When faced with difficulties, the human mind awakens the greatest inspiration, desperately searching for the best solution. This may be the reason why historical narratives retain their relevance over time. Great writers such as A.S. Pushkin, L.N. Tolstoy, F.M. Dostoevsky, and A.P. Chekhov in every era have the imagination to create the initial experience that can teach something. Such narratives do not lose their contemporariness regardless of the era. Great narratives from ancient Chinese history are no less relevant.

To gain an understanding of Chinese history, it is necessary to understand the nature of Chinese thinking. The structure of the Chinese mentality is somewhat different from the European one: it is not based on epistemologically limited “transcendental categories,” as I. Kant postulated, but on infinite

and narrative “categorical images” and therefore always implies a narrative. The lack of precise definitions conditions the limitation of imagery, but its other advantage is openness and an infinite number of interconnections, so that imagery forms a “network” thinking. The concept of *Tianxia* represents a basic image and a network system of meanings with the possibility of unlimited growth. However, I am not interested in historical ideas about *Tianxia*. I am thinking about what new dimensions and meanings the figurative concept of the world order according to the theory of *Tianxia* can acquire today.

In my 2005 book, *The Tianxia System: An Introduction to the Philosophy of World Institutions*, I analyzed three contemporary and, to some extent, future meanings of the concept of *Tianxia* (in this case, the world), taken mainly from the ancient history of the world. These meanings are as follows:

- 1) *Tianxia* is the physical world in which people can live;
- 2) *Tianxia* is the mutual spiritual world formed by the hearts and minds of people;
- 3) *Tianxia* is the political world in which all people are, that is, a political system with unlimited capacity.

Thus, the conclusion is that the world is a superposition of the physical, psychological, and political worlds. At the same time, the hierarchy and unity of authority in the ancient concept of the world have been dismantled, turning the world into a system without a single center but with the infinity of networks (Zhao Tingyang, 2005, pp. 41–42). Such a world system is called upon to address Samuel Huntington’s problem of the clash of civilizations (Huntington, 2014).

— In 2016, you developed your theory of the *Tianxia* system and published a new monograph on political philosophy, entitled *All under Heaven: The Tianxia System for a Possible World Order*. Can you tell us more about this book and the contemporary manifestations of your theory? In what way does this monograph relate to your previous works on this topic?

— The book, published in 2005, represents a continuation of the 2000 article. It was only an introduction, not yet a full-fledged theory, and has since been refined through numerous discussions and debates. *Tianxia* in the 2016 interpretation is a complete theory with some significant revisions, mainly the construction of a new, future-oriented vision of the world, with more complex theoretical characteristics, a concise justification of a new concept of the political and its ontological reason. All this is called the ontology of coexistence. The book then discussed the basic principles of the new world system (Zhao Tingyang, 2016).

I present a new concept of politics as the art of “transition from hostility to hospitality.” If the function of politics is not to turn enemies into friends, then it is not politics, but war, and then there is no point in it. War is a failure of politics, not the continuation of politics, as Carl von Clausewitz says, that is, war is a matter of life and death, and politics is a matter of coexistence, and they have completely different goals and objectives. For all mankind, a truly correct politics must be based on the existential theory of coexistence, based on the principle that existence presupposes coexistence. It is obvious that any being except God can only exist in society.

Based on the provisions of the new concept of politics and the theory of coexistence, I put forward arguments for a future world system that should be compatible with it and consist of three main “constitutional concepts”:

- 1) internalization of the world. This means a world system inclusive of all nations, therefore no more negative externalities, as all in a Noah’s Ark;
- 2) relational rationality. It means the priority of mutual minimization of hostility above maximization of exclusive interest;
- 3) Confucian Improvement. It means the non-exclusive improvement for everyone, better than Pareto’s Improvement, and defined as one improved if-and-only-if all others improved. Confucian Improvement equals to that everyone gets a Pareto’s improvement if anyone gets it. Confucian improvement is the foundation of cooperation for everyone (Zhao Tingyang, 2016, pp. 271–274).

— **You mentioned that the concept of *Tianxia* is universal enough to be regarded as a world system: a community of all countries governed by all countries and all civilizations working together and serving all mankind. Could you elaborate on the possible practical applications of your theory in the light of the general trends of Chinese foreign policy strategy? And would this system represent a complete departure from the current world order model?**

— *Tianxia* theory is a political philosophy, not a political strategy, and it is certainly not a kind of diplomatic practice. In fact, I have not studied diplomacy at all, and what I understand by it is quite likely a misunderstanding. Sometimes diplomacy looks like an excessive theorizing and empty armchair reasoning (“paper games,” sometimes political and economic deals, and sometimes it is the longest way between two points, as is the case with crisis management strategies that only postpone the crisis). I would say that diplomacy is a non-forceful method of playing the game in the conditions of real politics, and it has no direct relation to the theory of *Tianxia*. The *Tianxia* system is a political concept that refers to the future, not the present. Today, the world still does not have the conditions for the formation of such a system. All current international strategies still fit into the framework of the concept of real politics, and there are no conditions for going beyond them yet.

The structure of the world of the future is an individual conception based on its historical basis. It should be noted that the construction of the *Tianxia* system requires specific material conditions, not empty and loud moral statements. The implementation of the world system will require the development of artificial intelligence (AI) and the invention of effective energy sources (for example, controlled thermonuclear fusion); it will also require the evolution of economic systems, for example, the creation of a single currency that is part of the world community, as well as a single world tax rate (which T. Piketty proposed, but he imagines a global rate that is too high); and this will require a significant change in the political systems of

individual countries. I believe that ideological politics, that is, political views designated as “-isms,” will gradually degenerate in the future. The conflict of ideologies leads to mutual exhaustion, wasting resources without the possibility of gaining a clear advantage and achieving a rational goal. If people are rational enough, it is quite possible that every political system in the future will evolve into some kind of “hybrid system” that recombines the most historically successful aspects of previous systems. I imagine a “smart democracy” (Zhao Tingyang, 2021), a hybrid system, a “knowledge-weighted democracy” or “knowledge-oriented democracy.”

The main transformation has been a change in the voting system. The new system consists of two stages: a general election in which all comers participate to determine “the desirable,” and then a vote by a scientific committee that determines which of the “desirable items” chosen by the people are “feasible,” i.e. the final choice is determined by knowledge. This makes human intellectual activity an integral part of the democratic system through institutionalization, making the democratic system intellectual (Zhao Tingyang, 2021). It is easy to see that this is a new model of decentralization: the people choose what is desirable; the professionals choose what is feasible. This is a form of democracy combined with elitism.

Tianxia is not a community, but a common system. Communities have more serious requirements, and they must be based on common beliefs and values. The *Tianxia* system assumes cultural pluralism, accommodating a wide range of all kinds of cultures and religions, and is a model of a co-existential system with compatibility, or, as G. Leibniz puts it, compossibility, but not a community. I do not believe in the Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history,” I do not believe that the future world will be united by some particular faith, and I do not dream of what is the impossible.

Although the world does not need a unifying faith, it still needs an ethical principle that could rationally explain universal human relations. The limitation of traditional ethics is that all ethical principles are based on subjectivity, and from

subjectivity no one can derive a universally consistent intersubjectivity, therefore a new model is needed that allows ethical principles to be based on trans-subjectivity. I propose a revised “Golden Rule” as “Never do to others whatever others would not like you to do to them” in place of the traditional one as “Never do to others whatever you would not like others to do to you.” The new “Golden Rule” strictly avoids any egotism, therefore truly reciprocal, symmetrical, and universal. I believe that this principle is also applicable to the world system within the framework of the *Tianxia* theory.

— As China’s international influence and participation in global processes grows, the power of its actions and discourse in global governance and international order-building is growing every day. Against this background, your theory has attracted much attention from the international community, but it has also raised some concerns: many scholars fear that your theory will lead to the replacement of the “US-centric system” with a “China-centric system.” What is your opinion on this matter? And in what way do you think your theory will impact the international order?

— This concern is completely unfounded. The *Tianxia* system was conceived as an institutional vision of a world order based on the interests and aspirations of the whole world (for the world and of the world). The original meaning of *Tianxia*, as the ancients said, was “a world of-and-for all peoples,” that is, “a world of worldness,” not a world dominated by the strong. I am afraid that the traditional approach to politics, in which one hegemon replaces another, is not suitable for the world of the future. In a world where we are accustomed to hurting each other, hegemonic dominance is no longer an optimal strategy for survival, but rather may turn into a strategy of self-defeating. As Mao Zedong observed, where there is oppression, there is resistance. The constant stubbornness of creating enemies for oneself will plunge the world into uncontrollable disorder and chaos, and in a world where entropy increasing, everything will collapse, and with it the hegemony itself. It is

necessary to reconsider the very concept of politics.

I believe that in the future, the old story with the change of hegemons is unlikely to repeat itself. In politics, it is always talking about the optimal organization of collective existence, but the system of assessing “collective existence” has changed throughout history, and at different scales of existence, different political problems also emerge. Historically, it turned out that the main trend is an ever-increasing scale of existence and, accordingly, the scale of political problems: from tribes at the dawn of civilizations to the state, from the state to the region, from the region to the international system, and in the future, the scale of politics will necessarily be cosmopolitan, or global, or universal in nature.

According to the ideas of the ancient Chinese, the scale of politics had an evolutionary sequence of “family — state — world,” and the highest level of politics was the whole world “All under Heaven,” or *Tianxia*. Until now, the study of political science has been limited to the scope of state-centric international politics, and the *Tianxia* concept attempted to develop its own view of “world politics” rather than international politics. In terms of the scale of problems, world politics is one dimension higher than international politics. It’s unclear how does *Tianxia* theory affect international politics, because it essentially denies the concept of international theory (Zhao Tingyang, 2009).

I would like to say that I often look at international processes or world problems from a narrower perspective. The *Tianxia* system implies that the global world must be viewed from a global perspective, only in this way the correct perspective can be achieved. This approach of “viewing *x* through *x*” is an invention of Lao Tzu, who said that we must view the family through the prism of the family, the city through the prism of the city, the state through the prism of the state, and the world through the prism of the world. We can see the essence of things only because I always view things through the prism of the appropriate system of measurement.”

The political issues have acquired different emphases in different eras. For a long time,

politics was concerned with the distribution of interests and power, or resources and territorial sovereignty, or religious and ideological struggle, or clashes of civilizations, or multicultural identity, but in the future, more pressing issues will be global crises of humanity, such as human — AI cooperation and the possibility of forming transsubjectivity, systemic crises in the global economy or finance, and the security of various global systems. For example, how will humans and artificial intelligence cooperate, and is it possible to develop trans-subjectivity between humans and AI.

There are also global economic or financial systemic crises and the security of global systems that go beyond national and international

politics. This means that in the future, universal and global challenges will be more important than regional power struggles, which may force humanity to rethink the principles of system organization, as well as the conditions of existence and the order of coexistence for the new generation. The *Tianxia* theory is a concept of the general structure of mankind, but I must say that *Tianxia* does not guarantee universal human happiness. Happiness, I am afraid, will always be a luxury, but *Tianxia* gives hope for reducing human suffering. In fact, suffering is one of the eternal themes for mankind, but modern people often forget the main thing in pursuit for short-term happiness.

Interviewed by Tian Ye

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