The State of the Field Report X: Contemporary Chinese Studies of *Tianxia* (All-Under-Heaven)

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Abstract

This article offers a critical overview of a set of normative theories, namely *Tianxia* 天下 (all-under-heaven), whose purpose is to provide a renewed conceptual framework for the improvement of the world system. First, the article introduces the origins, main features, and differences within *Tianxia*, before discussing two major criticisms leveled against it. The article then argues that the most powerful parts of these criticisms come from the challenges posed against *Tianxia*'s legitimacy. The article elaborates on this and introduces two additional challenges of the same kind which were not discussed before. While the article leaves open the question of whether *Tianxia* is a realistic utopia, it insists that meaningful discussion of *Tianxia* must take legitimacy challenges seriously. It ends with a discussion concerning whether China can be understood as a civilization-state and how this understanding affects *Tianxia*'s reception as a realistic utopia.

Keywords *Tianxia* 天下 (all-under-heaven) · Utopia · Plausibility · Feasibility

1 Introduction

Over the past two decades, a series of normative theories rooted in the essentially Confucian idea of *tianxia* 天下 (all-under-heaven) has appeared on the academic stage and stimulated wide responses and discussions (Babones 2017; Paek 2014; Chen 2007, 2012; Callahan 2005; Ge 2012; C. Gan 2012; Guo 2013; Liu 2015a, 2015b; Sheng and Jiang 2014; Wu 2013; Xu 2015; Xu and Liu 2015; Yao 2012; Zhao 2005, 2016; Zhao et al. 2016; Zhao et al. 2018, etc.). According to *Tianxia* theorists, the world system governed by the so far dominant view of national relations did not, and could not, prevent the clash of civilizations from occurring. Worse still, today's international political organizations, inspired by such a view, are both inadequate and ineffective in dealing with a variety of disputes among nations, be it

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the prevention of national confrontations or the rifts over international cooperation concerning climate change. In the face of these problems, some theorists suggest that we should recourse to ideas different from those underpinning the world system today. This gives rise to *Tianxia* as a set of normative theories whose purpose is to improve the world system.[1] Since its core idea is borrowed from Zhou 周 dynasty Confucian classics, many commentators see *Tianxia* as the rejuvenation of the idea in the contemporary world—"an old bottle filled with new wine," as it were. Critics of *Tianxia* see this move as utopian wishful thinking which not only ignores historical lessons but neglects the relevant social and political reality, whereas *Tianxia* theorists take it as a viable way to reshape the world system for the better.

Following the shared usage in the literature—note that both *Tianxia* theorists and its critics speak of *Tianxia* as a utopia (for instance, Zhao 2005: 28; Zhao et al. 2016: 52; Ge 2012)—I will use the term loosely in this article, considering whether or not *Tianxia* is a form of realistic utopia. According to this usage, to say a theory is a utopia is amount to indicating that the theory under discussion is not *already* part of the reality, is detached to a certain degree from such a reality, and is determined to change it by pitching an ideal sufficiently high for it to look up to and critically examine itself. When the term is thus used, both *Tianxia* theorists and its critics can agree with one another that *Tianxia* is indeed a utopia. Their differences, consequently, reflect their different appraisals of the *relationship* between *Tianxia* and the reality that it *is* set to improve. The questions that concern both are the following: What is the nature of *Tianxia* as a normative ideal? What, if anything, can render a utopia plausible in the eyes of those who are not already convinced? And what are those factors that affect the feasibility of such a utopia which, in turn, renders *Tianxia* realistic?[2] For those who are not convinced by *Tianxia*, claiming that it advocates utopian world governance is to claim that such world governance is neither plausible nor feasible, and partial to the national interests of a particular country, namely, China (Paek 2014; Callahan 2005: 130, 144).

This article discusses *Tianxia* in relation to the questions raised above. It first provides a critical overview of what appears in the literature as the origins of *Tianxia* before introducing its main features and differences among theorists. Then the article discusses two major criticisms, namely historical and realistic criticism, that are leveled against *Tianxia*. It argues that the most powerful parts of these criticisms derive from the challenges posed against *Tianxia*'s legitimacy. The article elaborates on this and adds two more legitimacy challenges that were not discussed previously

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[1] This article will use *Tianxia* (all-under-heaven) to refer to this set of normative theories, together with the critical comments in response to them, and use *tianxia* to refer to the Confucian idea or concept that forms its very basis. In reflecting on *Tianxia*, the article confines itself to the literature published in Chinese; this does not rule out, however, such scholars as William A. Callahan and Paek Yŏngsŏ 白永瑞, whose works were translated into Chinese and thus had impact on the discussion.

[2] These questions suggest that criticizing *Tianxia* as a utopia is insufficient. What is crucial is not utopia itself as a set of normative theories, but the relation between the utopia and reality. It is by dint of different answers to *these* questions that people begin to form distinctive stances: proponents of *Tianxia* see it as a way to *improve* reality, whereas critics see it as a way to *sustain* it despite its infeasibility and implausibility. This shows that even when people have similar assessments of the nature of the world system (hegemonic, unilateral, etc.), they can still differ in their attitudes toward *Tianxia*.

in the literature. While the article leaves open the question of whether *Tianxia* is a realistic utopia, it firmly insists that meaningful discussion of *Tianxia* must take legitimacy challenges seriously. The brief conclusion discusses to what extent China can be understood as a civilization-state, and whether seeing it that way can render China more cosmopolitan. The answer to the question turns on *Tianxia*'s legitimacy as well.

2 The Origins of *Tianxia*

The origins of *Tianxia* are partially related to what is called the necessity of "rethinking China" (*chongsi Zhongguo* 重思中國) (Zhao 2005: 11). According to *Tianxia* theorists, as China rises to the international center stage, it becomes both necessary and urgent to reflect upon China's experience and draw on its intellectual resources to improve the world system. What is implied in this rethinking is that the current world system is eminently unsatisfactory: it is wrongfully governed by the ideology of neoimperialism, misleadingly shaped by nationalism and the struggle for national interests, and lacks what is required to truly unite different nations (cf. Ge 2012, Liang 2018). Rethinking China is thus inextricably linked to the assessment of the world and, in this sense, does not create its own necessity. Rather, its necessity is created by the rise of China on the one hand and the discontent with how the world system is currently organized on the other.

What is already noticeable here is the candor with which theorists speak of *Tianxia*. In the process of formulating it, these theorists also disclose the genesis of *Tianxia*, thereby providing what can be seen as *Tianxia*'s self-consciousness. Since a look into this can help us get a handle on *Tianxia*, it is necessary to separate out various analyses of origins in the literature, which can be summarized as follows.

The rise of China. The role the rise of China plays in the emergence of *Tianxia* should not be underestimated. For Zhao Tingyang 趙汀陽, Sheng Hong 盛洪, and Yao Zhongqiu 姚中秋 (Zhao 2016: 1–5; Sheng 2012: 45; Yao 2013: 78), among others, the rise of China, including its economic success, the scale of its population and territory, and its significance in the global supply chain and market, have put it face-to-face with challenges that it never encountered before. The bigger China as an economy grows, the weightier its responsibility becomes. As China rises, according to these theorists, this kind of responsibility is precisely what is demanded of China, which includes not just the responsibility of contributing to the world's prosperity but that of providing an alternative vision or outlook capable of transforming the currently deficient world system. The most pressing issue with such a system, for *Tianxia* theorists, is the lack of a conceptual framework that can help us construct a truly united world. This is because the dominant vision is still dependent on a nation-based understanding of the world. As a result, it cannot think and act without national interests playing a significant role. The cosmopolitan vision of the world provided by Immanuel Kant in *Perpetual Peace*, for instance, is still predicated upon the recognition of the separation of nations. As Kant puts it, "Each nation, for the sake of its own security, can and ought to demand of the others that they should enter along with it into a constitution,

similar to the civil one, within which the rights of each could be secured. This would mean establishing a federation of peoples. We are here considering the right of nations in relation to one another in so far as *they are a group of separate states which are not to be welded together as a unit"* (Kant 1970: 102, emphasis added). There stands a need, therefore, of a new vision or outlook of the world that can weld "a group of separate states" together as "a unit," and this implies seeing the world as an all-inclusive whole *without unnecessarily emphasizing the importance of nations*. The defining feature of this vision, then, is its ability to transcend the nation/country divide and comprehend the world as a whole. The rise of China, with its new vision of the world, paves the way for such an endeavor, according to *Tianxia* theorists (Sheng 2012; Yao 2012; Zhao 2005, 2016).

Accompanying the rise of China is the rejuvenation of Confucianism. For *Tianxia* theorists, the latter has provided the necessary intellectual resources and psychological readiness. Some commentators hold that the rejuvenation of Confucianism is inevitable in that it has lent indispensable succor to *Tianxia* (Ge 2012; Liang 2018: 87). Some point to Jiang Qing's 蔣慶 seminal work on political Confucianism—to be more precise, his systematic reinterpretation of the Confucian Gongyang 公羊 School—as one of the works that vitalize *Tianxia* (Jiang 2014; cf. Liang 2018: 88).

The discontent with neo-imperialism. Influenced by Edward W. Said's criticism of imperialism in *Culture and Imperialism* (Said 1994; the Chinese rendition of the book appeared in 2003) and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's criticism of the world order in *Empire* (Hardt and Negri 2001; the Chinese rendition appeared in 2008), *Tianxia* theorists are convinced that the current world system is beneficial only to a limited number of powerful nations and that it is constituted at the cost of nations that are impoverished and powerless (cf. Ge 2012). As a result, the economic integration that has so far been achieved is only a limited version of globalization, namely *economic globalization*, whereas *political globalization*, understood as one that provides people of different nations with a sense of belonging, just like what a competent nation provides to its citizens, is yet to come (Zhao 2016: 87). Insofar as there is a discrepancy between economic and political globalization, and insofar as the world is short of spiritual linkage among people, a new vision or outlook is required, according to their analyses, to combat neo-imperialism.

The dissatisfaction with nationalism. It is believed that nationalism, alongside the stubborn obsession with the interests of one's own nation, is dominant in the current world system. This is the reason, at least in part, why the world has not yet embraced cosmopolitanism wholeheartedly. One proof of this is that the world has not yet eliminated national considerations. In a globalized world, it is ironic that nations are only geographically and financially connected; we are yet to see a more comprehensively unified world. Although the current international organizations are salutary arenas for international cooperation and negotiations, they are not well suited to accomplish such a task. They are still nationalist, insofar as they are still concerned with the interests of different nations. According to Zhao Tingyang, this nationalism, underlying both national considerations and concerns of international institutions, is the root cause of the chaotic state of the world, threatening to transform globalization into "global-breaking." What is required, for him, is "a concept of the people that is truly universal and a concept of world society" (Zhao 2005:

78).[3] *Tianxia* is believed to be capable of providing a conceptual framework for the constitution of such a "world society."

The disorder and fragility caused by the rebelling minority. Closely associated with nationalism and the form of neoimperial domination built into the international world system is the concern of what the techno-equipped minority can incur, that is, disorder and fragility of the world system. In today's highly competitive world system, domination no longer takes the form of exploitation as Marx forcibly articulated in his works. Instead, it is the hidden forms of domination such as hegemony and invisible control through rule-setting and stage-framing that carry the day. As technology evolves, the world has come to a tilting point where globalization and the development of science and technology, now capable of empowering the least powerful, threaten to render the world chaotic and fragile. They pose serious and even lethal challenges to the world system. According to one *Tianxia* theorist, the only way out of this dire situation is the establishing of a new world system that can reduce inequalities by benefiting everyone and every nation, meanwhile creating a new "game" in which every nation is treated equally and vicious competitiveness can no longer prevail (Zhao 2016: 125–127).

The urgency of constructing a new world system. It goes without saying that we are not living in a world as ideal as we can imagine. *Tianxia* theorists further claim that we have not reached the limit of our imagination, although we have all realized, to different degrees, how urgent it is to construct a world system that is more peaceful, more environmentally friendly, fairer, more equal, beneficial to all nations, and all-inclusive (Guo 2013, C. Gan 2012, Zhao 2005). This is where the responsibility sets in. To the task of making such a world system, different civilizations can and should make their distinctive contributions. To the extent that *Tianxia*, characteristic of Chinese civilization, is a worldly unit (*shijiexing danwei* 世界性單位) rather than a parochial unit (*difangxing danwei* 地方性單位), it is suitable for such a task; and one can expect that it can make its unique contribution (Zhao 2005: 77; cf. Wang 2008: 20). As *Tianxia* theorists see it, it is their job to work out the specifics of the contribution.

3 Features of *Tianxia*

The concept of *tianxia* adopted by *Tianxia* theorists, as noted above, is inherited from Confucian classics. The concept depicted a creative way of arranging relations between different nations. For *Tianxia* theorists, what is characteristic of this concept is that it transcends all differences each nation represents and is capable of eradicating the barriers between different nations. Since it does not presuppose the necessity of the notion of a nation and does not work on the basis of such a notion, it is believed to be able to cover all nations and all people. Hence "all under heaven" (*tianxia*): not only that all nations are covered by *tianxia*, but *tianxia* is all-inclusive via the adoption of a special all-inclusive vision (more on

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[3] Unless otherwise indicated, all translations in this article are mine.

this shortly). According to *Tianxia* theorists, it has three dimensions attached to it: geographical, psychological, and ethical/political. Geographically, all nations need to be connected in a way that no nation is out of *tianxia*'s reach—it is the most basic requirement of *Tianxia*. The psychological dimension demands that *Tianxia* earns popular support from people of different nations. In addition, it also refers to the psychological requirement *Tianxia* makes on the part of people, that they all work toward the collective good rather than the gain of self-interests. Ethically or politically, *Tianxia* designates "an ideal or utopia that enables us to see and construct the world as a family" (*tianxia yijia* 天下一家) which requires that we "imagined and tried to pursue a form of 'world policy' and a form of 'world government' secured by it" (Zhao 2016: 27–28; Zhao et al. 2018: 7). As far as the last dimension is concerned, it can be possible only when *geographically* all countries are included and *psychologically* people are ready in the above-specified senses.

This helps to bring out the first defining feature of *Tianxia*. It is a particular *point of view* constitutive of *tianxia* that sets it apart from other counterparts that also seek to improve the world system. This point of view sees all nations as intrinsically alike, and by adopting it *Tianxia* is able to treat all nations with equal respect. It is precisely for this reason, according to *Tianxia* theorists, that "the Chinese thought never produced ideas that resemble 'heresy' in the Western thought and, by the same token, never created the same kind of clearly defined, resolute, and decisive nationalism in the West" (Zhao 2005: 41). It is also for this reason that *Tianxia* is different from Kantian cosmopolitanism. Since it is not confined to the predominance of the concern of national interests, as one can infer, it can reach further and connect wider (Zhao 2005: 15).

It is noteworthy that it is this feature that prompts many *Tianxia* theorists to claim universality for *Tianxia*. We will see how this claim poses a legitimacy challenge. For now, it suffices to say that for these theorists *Tianxia*'s universality is based on the universality of human nature and, as such, it provides the basis for a better form of world governance (Yao 2012: 254). Although the meaning of universal human nature is not clear, readers can nevertheless see how the universality of *Tianxia* works, by extending from the internal core to the external peripheries and by eliminating the distinction between the two. According to *Tianxia* theorists, the universality entailed by *Tianxia* is what the current world system lacks. Despite its self-proclaimed universality, the current world system contains a dominant nation and many peripheries. What it represents, hence, is nothing less than a hierarchical order. This explains why Zhao Tingyang believes that "the world is still unworldly" (Zhao 2005: 74). By this he means that the current world system is no more than a space for national contests and mutual injuries and does not belong to the people, both psychologically and ethical/politically.

The absence of the core/periphery or inside/outside distinction is also captured by a principle that is crucial to *Tianxia*, namely *tianxia wuwai* 天下無外 (*Tianxia* is all-inclusive). According to this principle, no nation can be found outside of *tianxia*'s parameter and, within this parameter, no inequalities should be allowed to exist among nations (Guo 2013: 35; cf. C. Gan 2012; Xu 2015: 4). Such an ideal finds its most vivid expression in *Tianxia de Dangdaixing* 天下的當代性 (*A Possible World of All-Under-Heaven System*):

The principle which holds that "*Tianxia* is all-inclusive" transcendentally pre-supposes the idea that the world is a whole, therefore only internality exists in the *Tianxia* system and there is no externality to be found within it. It thus dissolves the concept of an outsider and that of foe: no one will be seen as an unwelcome and unacceptable outsider, and no country, nation, or culture will be seen as a "foe"; every country and region that is yet to join the *Tianxia* system are cordially invited to join the co-existence system. (Zhao 2016: 2)

How to construct such a world system which represents the *Tianxia* point of view and embodies this principle of *tianxia wuwai*? *Tianxia* theorists' answer to this question touches upon Confucian basic values such as benevolence (*ren* 仁), righteousness (*yi* 義), and ritual (*li* 禮). For them, these values form the moral and institutional basis for the construction of a new world system (Zhao 2005: 46, 57; Sheng 2012). In answering the question in this way, *Tianxia* is made to inextricably connect with the ideals unearthed from Confucian classics. This linkage, however, is likely to arouse the worry that the new world system thus shaped is representative of that which is typical of China. *Tianxia* theorists' response to this worry is that although *Tianxia speaks from* the Confucian perspective, it does not *speak for* Confucianism, nor does it for the national interests of China: "The ultimate purpose of rethinking China is to reflect upon the world" so as to "develop the thought that is initially about China into the thought that is essentially about the world" (Zhao 2005: 11). The answer leads to the second feature of *Tianxia*.

In emphasizing the idea of *tianxia* which underpinned the governance of the Western Zhou 周 dynasty, *Tianxia* theorists bring out a governing model that is characteristic of *Tianxia*: as they see it, the world has been governed by a model in which the dominant country extends its own domestic order and value system to the rest of the world, thereby threatening the national sovereignty of other nations. This model—call it *extension model*—is fundamentally different from one that is exemplified by *Tianxia*. The latter only recourses to attraction and influence and proceeds by respecting other civilizations and forms of government (Zhao 2016: 87). This *conversion model* works, that is to say, only by drawing other nations close without appealing to forces and coercion. Thanks to this model, no examples can be found of China's attempt at "national-building" anywhere in history, and it explains why China has demonstrated no imperialist or messianic tradition. When adopted widely, this conversion model, though characteristic of China, can benefit the new world system.

4 Differences within *Tianxia*

Although different *Tianxia* theorists use the same term of "*tianxia*," the theories they construct do not necessarily share the same standpoint. In fact, *Tianxia* as a set of normative theories manifests distinct methodologies, disciplinary backgrounds, and value orientations. It is to the extent that they all recourse to the idea of "cultivation of moral culture and ethos to attract people and nations from around the world" (*xiu wende yi lai zhi* 修文德以來之) that the differences among these theories are seen

as "familial disputes," and that these theories can be included under the rubric of *Tianxia*. However, when it comes to the question of what the universally effective form of world system is, they tend to have different answers. Some of them hold that *Confucian* ideals are the basis of such a world system (Zhao 2005, 2016; Jiang 2014; Yao 2012; Sheng 2012; Sheng and Jiang 2014; Chen 2007, 2012), others appeal to *socialism* (for instance, Zhang 2011, 2014), and yet others insist on *liberalism* to be the ultimate source of inspiration (for instance, Xu 2015; Liu 2015a, 2015b). Understanding the differences between these three groups can help us gain a better grasp of *Tianxia*.

For those who belong to the first group, Confucianism is the normative basis of the world system. In Qing Jiang's understanding, for instance, issues that concern *tianxia* are precisely those related to "the clashes of civilizations" and international relations today. They belong to the same category of the problem that people face at different times, and to solve it, a reevaluation of Confucianism is necessary. For Jiang, this reevaluation takes the following two forms: the reevaluation of the late-Qing 清 dynasty Gongyang school and its representative figure Kang Youwei 康有為, and the reevaluation of the Confucian *Wangdao* 王道 ideal. Such a reevaluation is made yet more necessary, according to Jiang, by the fact of the collapse of traditional Confucianism under the impact of the West in the past century. The focus of the re-evaluation, then, should be on the political, institutional, and practical aspects of Confucianism—hence the "political Confucianism." For Jiang, "the principles on which [the solutions to *tianxia* and the clashes of civilization] is based are derived from the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋)... which most fully reflects the political wisdom and basic principles of Chinese culture in dealing with 'the clashes of civilizations'" (Jiang 2003: 36).

For Confucian scholar Yao Zhongqiu, it is a crucial feature of the Confucian ritual of the Zhou dynasty (*Zhouli* 周禮) that lays the conceptual groundwork for *tianxia*. For Yao, the secret of the traditional *Tianxia* lay not in its emphasis on the civilizational homogeneity, nor the crude form of domination that was initiated by the rule of Qin 秦 empire, but the appeal of a civilization. According to him, this was the defining feature of the ritual of the Zhou dynasty, which centered upon the civilizational appeal, rather than force or suppression, to ensure the permeation of civil culture and moral ethos from the center to the peripheries and from the upper to the lower strata of society. In the process, the *tianxia* order can manage to maintain global cohesion and encourage diversity at the same time (Yao 2012: 617). Yao's method, like that of Jiang, can be seen as "interpreting China through Confucian classics." They both try to look at the world through the lens of Confucianism, and aim to establish the rules of the world system based on Confucian ethical thought. They both use history to explain the Confucian classics (*yi shi jie jing* 以史解經), and use the classics in turn to clarify history (*yi jing ming shi* 以經明史). History and Confucian classics are for them the kinds of "political learning" and, as such, they are important components of what Adam Smith calls the "science of legislators" (Yao 2012: 22). It is through the creative interpretation of history and Confucian classics that *Tianxia* is constructed.

This method is not uncommon among Confucian *Tianxia* theorists. Inspired by the Confucian idea of *ge zheng xingming* 各正性命, for instance, the Confucian

scholar CHEN Yun 陳贇 argues that politics is about "allowing each thing to fulfill its own purpose." That is to say, politics is about allowing all people and nations in the world to realize their own nature in a way that is in line with their true nature. This requirement then demands that "all under heaven (*tianxia*) is for the common good": a normative theory of *tianxia* should allow all people and nations in the world to achieve their own goals as they see fit (Chen 2007: 39).

The second group insists that socialism provides the normative basis for thinking about *tianxia*. In this group, ZHANG Weiwei 張維為 is an exemplar figure, for whom "China is first and foremost a modern nation, but there are various characteristics of Chinese civilization that make it unique" (Zhang 2011: 64). China's existence as a "civilizational state" corresponds to the traditional *tianxia*, and the unique form of governance has formed China's "unique political and cultural view" which is the greatest source of legitimacy for China, according to Zhang. What is characteristic of this historical legitimacy is the political tradition of "selecting capable people" and the concept of "winning the hearts of the people," which embody the political wisdom of ancient and modern Chinese.[4] For Zhang, China's *tianxia* tradition stands in contrast to Western modes of governance; it emphasizes family and country (*jiaguo* 家國 instead of nation) and people-oriented politics (*minben* 民本 instead of democracy) (Zhang 2011: 73). These provide the key components and normative basis for *Tianxia*.

The third group includes XU Jinlin 許紀霖 and LIU Qing 劉擎, who make use of ideas borrowed from liberalism to revise traditional *tianxia*. Xu promotes "neo-tianxiaism." To him, what makes it new are its emphasis on the principles of decentralization (*quzhongxinhua* 去中心化) and equalization (*qudengjihua* 去等級化), as well as its aim of "creating a new universal *tianxia*" which is fundamentally different from traditional ones. According to Xu, the purpose of the first principle of neo-tianxiaism is to correct the hierarchy of the "power/civilization order." The way to bring about such a correction is through adding "the equality principle of sovereignty of nation states." The principle requires that different nations must be recognized as equal. The goal of the second principle of neo-tianxiaism aims to restrict the narrow position of prioritizing national interests over everything else, which is then balanced by universalism and limited by universal principles of civilization. As such, neo-tianxiaism represents a dual overcoming of traditional *tianxia* and the obsession with national states (Xu 2015: 6). In short, neo-tianxiaism aims to replace hierarchical "power/civilization order" with equality of sovereignty and substitute ideas that prioritize the national interests with universalism. The universalism "does not derive from a particular civilization, but is shared by the existing civilizations in the world." They are "featured by the 'overlapping concensus' of various forms of civilizations and cultures, which represent the Confucian ideal of 'maintaining harmony while allowing for difference' (*he er bu tong* 和而不同)" (Xu 2015: 9, 10).

While LIU Qing coins a different term for his version of *tianxia*—"new cosmopolitanism" (*xinshijie zhuyi* 新世界主義), his idea bears some resemblance to Xu's

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[4] The idea of a government based on selecting capable people is also related to the political meritocracy developed by Daniel A. Bell (Bell 2016).

version. For both, constituting a new global order based on a traditional notion of *tianxia* needs to be cautious of promoting Chinese culture as a particular form of cultural existence, of the danger of abandoning the universality of human value, and of replacing the hegemonic status of Western countries via economic and military power (Liu 2015a: 6). According to Liu, the gist of new cosmopolitanism is to provide a transcultural, universal, and normative basis for the posthegemonic world order. Differing from theorists such as ZHAO Tingyang, who base their *tianxia* on the elimination of the notion of nation state, Liu argues that nation state cannot be eliminated easily, nor should it be. The current international system recognizes each country as an independent, sovereign nation state, regardless of how that country thinks of itself (nation state or not). In such an international system, a country's self-understanding is both shaped and limited by how other countries perceive it. Despite that the ideal of *tianxia* calls for going beyond nation state and for thinking and acting globally, this cannot mean that one should negate the legitimacy of national perspective (Liu 2015a: 7; Zhao et al. 2016: 65). It does mean, however, that the ideal of *tianxia* demands that nation state be transcended by "transcultural universalism" (*kua wenhua de pupianzhuyi* 跨文化的普遍主義) (Liu 2015a: 11). In the process of seeking to rejuvenate *tianxia*, "one needs to reject the dream of returning to the long-gone project of 'Chinese empire' and of rescuing the ideal of *tianxia* in Sino-centrism. Instead, in explicating the cultural legacy in the *tianxia* ideal one should jettison Sinocentrism. It is due to the desire to avoid Sinocentrism embedded in the ideal of *tianxia* that we choose 'new cosmopolitanism' instead of 'neo-tianxiaism'" (Liu 2015a: 8).

5 Historical and Realistic Criticisms

*S*ince its publication*, Tianxia* has attracted a variety of criticisms. Critics have challenged its intellectual foundation, the accuracy of its interpretation, its political implications vis-à-vis its intended outcomes, and so on. Most notable among these criticisms are the following two: one criticizes *Tianxia* for its failure to be truthful to its historical performance and thereby guilty of being a utopia (Ge 2012), and the other takes *Tianxia* to task for its insensitiveness to its hegemonic potential (Callahan 2005, Paek 2014). According to the latter, in playing the hegemonic role, *Tianxia* sustains and prolongs rather than undermines the hierarchical order of the world system. Together these two criticisms represent the two major challenges that face *Tianxia*—for convenience, we may call them *historical* and *realistic* criticism, respectively. Other criticisms fall into either one of these two forms. I will argue in this and the next section that the two criticisms should best be understood as legitimacy challenges, that is, challenges that concern the legitimacy of *Tianxia*. In addition, I will present two more challenges of the same kind that were not previously discussed.

As a prominent historian, GE Zhaoguang 葛兆光 explores the performance of the traditional *Tianxia* and criticizes its current reinterpretation or reconstruction as being unhistorical. According to the historical evidence, Ge argues that the practice of *Tianxia* necessarily contained a geographic center and its periphery, and

necessarily created a form of racial consciousness that distinguished "us" (center) and "them" (periphery). In terms of culture, the practice of traditional *Tianxia* set "Chinese" (*hua* 華) apart from "foreigner" (*yi* 夷), seeing the former as representing civilization and the latter barbarism. In so doing, it also differentiated superior nations (*zun* 尊, which dominate) from inferior nations (*bei* 卑, which are dominated). In light of this evidence, it is historically not true that *Tianxia* is such an aspirational ideal that transcends differences between nations and sees every nation as equal. When constructing a theory of *Tianxia*, Ge maintains, theorists seem to forget the historical performance of *Tianxia*, especially the discriminatory functions it served in Chinese history. Ge accuses *Tianxia* theorists, therefore, of engaging in utopian wishful thinking, and he sees the *Tianxia* advocated by these theorists as a form of overinterpretation that exaggerates the Gongyang School by falsely detracting a theory from its concrete historical contexts. For him, *Tianxia* is an "unhistorical history" (*feilishi de lishi* 非歷史的歷史): "It has not entered the political and institutional sphere; it is merely what scholars imagined or envisioned when they read Chinese classics, and it is merely an armchair work" (Ge 2012).[5]

The realistic criticism comes from a different direction. It does not question *Tianxia* by taking issue with its historical performance, but does so by seeing its possible performance as an extension of the political. For these critics, the form of global governance advocated by *Tianxia* is not immune to the impact of power and thereby should not be evaluated by its ideals alone. It is from this perspective that Willian A. Callahan argues that the discourse of *Tianxia* speaks to China's national interests and is uttered to boost China's soft power (Callahan 2005: 144). *Tianxia* does not provide any clear guidelines regarding what should be done to build a peaceful and united world, other than laying out a vague framework. Callahan worries, therefore, that Pan Sinica might be the result of the implementation of *Tianxia*, enabling Sinocentrism to replace Eurocentrism; in which case, the world would not be different from the current one (Callahan 2005: 139). Seeing this possibility, Callahan is convinced that "[the world governance advocated by *Tianxia*] is not a utopian world system that can lead us out of the global problems" (Callahan 2005: 144). In a similar vein, PAEK Yŏngsŏ 白永瑞 sees *Tianxia* as belonging to the imperial discourse. For him, the concept of *tianxia*, just like the concept of a civilization-state, serves to promote imperialism by strengthening China's national interests in East Asia. For him, *Tianxia* is likely to ignore the voices and demands from the peripheral states, so much so that it cannot be fair and aspirational as it is claimed to be, or worse still, that it has the potential of becoming a new form of hegemony and imperialism (Paek 2014).

Both criticisms have a point, to be sure, and deserve to be treated seriously. It seems that the power of these criticisms comes more from the direction they jointly point to than from the substantive allegations they separately make. The

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[5] Ge goes even further when he claims that "the rise of a hero and a great nation is usually predicated upon blood and fire. Although we wish the global order be based on morality, benevolence, love, and reason, in actual politics and in history alike order is based on power and interests" (Ge 2012). In arguing for this, he is very close to making a realistic criticism against *Tianxia*.

discriminatory functions (the historical criticism believes) *Tianxia previously* served do not have to be the functions it serves *now*, and the hegemonic function (the realistic criticism attributes to *Tianxia*) does not *have to* be the function *Tianxia* serves— just that other similar ideals serve this function does not mean *Tianxia* has to serve the same function. To be more specific: the effects that traditional *Tianxia* had in the past do not determine which effects it produces now or will produce in the future. There is no guaranteed continuity between ideals' historical uses and their current ones.[6] Insofar as *Tianxia* is a prospective enterprise with the purpose to apply an ideal to the *current* world system, it should not be beholden to its previous uses. As a prospective enterprise, it promises to be answerable only to its *present* concerns. If *Tianxia* is triggered by a series of new concerns in today's world, that is, concerns that are different from those in ancient China, then it is those new concerns that vindicate, support, and lend authority to new ways of constructing *Tianxia*. It is, therefore, not unreasonable to expect different outcomes when *Tianxia* is implemented in real life. In this sense, *Tianxia* should not be judged by its previous historical "failure," or false interpretation of its alleged success, as its critics would put it.[7] Even if it failed before, it does not mean that it will not succeed *this time*. As a set of normative theories, *Tianxia* is highly context-sensitive, and the effects it has will change radically as it is appropriated and repurposed depending on the *current* social-historical settings.

The same logic can apply to the realistic criticism as well. The way the world system functions *now* does not provide one with an intellectual basis for predicting how *Tianxia* as a new ideal or vision *will* function. The world system is currently underpinned by a set of ideals—ideals that see the nation as the most basic unit based on which imperialism is rendered possible, but observations of how this set of ideals works do not provide us with necessary information concerning the functions of *Tianxia*. As a new vision of the world system that has not been tried before, predictions regarding its effects simply cannot be made on the basis of the performance of those different ideals. Hegemonic or not, the function of *Tianxia* should not be seen as a continuation of these ideals; rather, it should be seen as a qualitatively different

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[6] Nietzsche has put the point rather clearly. For him, this is the very reason why we cannot define a concept that has a history: "Something that has somehow or other come into being, is again and again ... transformed and rearranged for a new use by a power superior to it," as a result, the history of a concept's exploitation for the most diverse purposes, finally crystallizes into a kind of unity that is difficult to dissolve, difficult to analyze and—one must emphasize—is completely and utterly *undefinable* (Nietzsche 1989, II §§12–3).

[7] In saying so, I set aside the disputes between *Tianxia* theorists and its critics over some historical facts. For instance, ZHAO Tingyang and GE Zhaoguang debated the historical performance of *Tianxia*. For the former, the Zhou dynasty embodied *Tianxia* (Zhao et al. 2016: 61), so it is not true that *Tianxia* only existed in books and failed miserably in history. The argument I am providing here, however, is that *even if* the historical criticism is correct and Zhao is wrong, it still does not affect *Tianxia*'s validity. It is Zhao's further claim that being ideal is not a shortcoming but a necessity of human thought, without which it would become difficult to see the limitations of social and political practices. For him, *Tianxia* resembles the ideals in Plato's *Republic* (Zhao et al. 2018: 5). This, then, shifts their disagreements to the nature of a utopia, an issue we will discuss presently.

replacement whose functions and purposes can only be determined when we see how it is appropriated and repurposed by the socio-historical settings as we find it.

Having said this, I hasten to add that the historical and realistic criticisms do point to something that has been overlooked by *Tianxia* theorists, namely the relationship between *Tianxia* as an ideal and reality. By stressing the significance of this relationship, the criticisms help to put the problem of legitimacy to the fore. They draw our attention *away* from the ideal of *Tianxia to* its functions. Discussion of *Tianxia* then is no longer merely about how to construct an ideal that reflects the kind of perfect world we can imagine or about how to assess such a construction *as an ideal*. Thanks to such a shift, the question of *Tianxia*'s feasibility and plausibility begins to figure and start to challenge *Tianxia*'s relation with the targeted world. It is in this sense that the two criticisms should best be understood as legitimacy challenges that take issue with the relationship between the two. For critics, they seem to believe that *Tianxia* is bound to fail in meeting these challenges: historical evidence convinces Ge that *Tianxia* is entrapped by its historical performance and it is not feasible for it to construct a world system according to its ideal design—hence, an unrealistic utopia; and observational reflections convince Callahan and Paek that as an ideal *Tianxia* is not plausible, given how the world currently is organized and how much an ideal can do with regard to such a world. As I have argued, they seem to draw these conclusions too quickly, for the extrapolations based on the previous effects of relatively the same ideal or current effects of different ideals are unreliable to make a prediction about the functions of *Tianxia*. Additional arguments thus need to be given regarding the predicted functions of *Tianxia* when the latter is appropriated and repurposed by today's socio-historical settings. Together, however, they help to emphasize the daunting issue that concerns *Tianxia*, namely, legitimacy.

6 Legitimacy Challenges

Another way of understanding the legitimacy challenges that face *Tianxia* is to see how people from different countries come to use *Tianxia* as a way of seeing and constructing the world. To see whether *Tianxia* will earn its place in these people's repertoire, especially those who are not previously exposed to it and thereby not readily disposed to use it, we need to take more into consideration. *Tianxia*'s actual use will not depend *solely* on its aspirational power, because such power is never sufficient for an ideal to be put into use. It also depends on its reception by people of different countries and backgrounds: Is it appealing from their perspectives? Can it tackle the problems that are embedded in the current world system? Does it have the potential of filling the gap between itself as a utopia and reality? These questions are crucial to the task of *Tianxia* as a realistic utopia.

In light of these questions, *Tianxia* theorists will have to say more. That is, mindful of the fact that *Tianxia* is needful is not a sufficient condition for people to accept it, *Tianxia* theorists need to tell us more about what *Tianxia can* (not only should) do about the world system. For instance, they need to tell us how it will fight against imperialism and hegemony, and what has changed *in relation to Tianxia* so that what *Tianxia* is set to change can be changed accordingly, etc. It is insufficient to provide

a separate analysis of the world system and a separate set of normative theories pitting against such a system. The utopia's actual reception demands *an investigation into how Tianxia bears upon or interacts with the current world system*.

We may consider two more challenges that fall into the same category (i.e., legitimacy challenge) but have not been discussed previously. The first one derives from the gap between *Tianxia*'s emphasis on its *Chinese* background and its ambition to create a *globally* applicable utopia—a tension, then, within *Tianxia* between its particularity and universality. Such tension inevitably poses a threat to its legitimacy. How to prove that *Tianxia* is universal when it appeals to the obvious Chinese tradition is a problem *Tianxia* has to tackle. To be sure, simply claiming universality for *Tianxia* will not do, for one can imagine many similar ideal theories make the same claim, and yet only a few can render themselves legitimate. Lɪᴜ Qing alludes to this challenge when he argues that *Tianxia* is presented "in an un-*tianxia* manner." By that he means that *Tianxia* is a decentralized, all-inclusive, and universal ideal that is designed to be attractive to all nations, and yet *Tianxia* theorists often recede to the adoption of a particular Chinese perspective, prioritizing its own civilization over others (Zhao et al. 2016: 60).[8] To rid themselves of this un-*tianxia* manner, *Tianxia* theorists need to convince those who share Liu's concern that there is in fact *no* tension between particularity and universality and it stands to reason for *Tianxia* to claim universality.

The other challenge comes from what is believed to be one of the most important characteristics of today's world. As we have seen, it is *Tianxia*'s task to unite various nations into a whole, meanwhile doing away with the obsession with concerns of national interests and the center/periphery distinction. For this task to be carried out successfully, however, it needs to face up to the current world. If there are countervailing forces in this world against the efforts of world unification made by *Tianxia*, then the realization of this ideal is bound to be an uphill struggle, to say the very least. For those who see the existing forces pulling the world apart, *Tianxia* is even at the risk of being unrealistic. In discussing the possibility of an emerging new global order, Wolfgang Streeck offers a view that reflects exactly this worry: "The contemporary state system … is subject to strong centrifugal forces.... In one way or another, these are related to the penetration of national polities by international markets, weakening their capacity to protect social cohesion" (Streeck 2021: 45). In this succinct remark, Streeck points to not just the forces that stand in the way of world unification, but the very cause of these forces. According to Streeck, the Brexit, Trump's "America first," and the new nationalism in Europe are all manifestations of these centrifugal forces. If there indeed are such centrifugal forces in play, then *Tianxia* theorists need to show how *Tianxia* can overcome them and grapple with the cause of these forces ("the penetration of national polities by international markets") to prove itself a realist utopia.

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[8] Other critics such as Zhao et al. 2016: 64–67 and Callahan 2005: 130, 137–139 also allude to this legitimacy challenge, but their concerns are more with *Tianxia*'s performance than with its legitimacy. It is noteworthy that this is not to say that *Tianxia* cannot claim universality. After all, what matters for *Tianxia* is to claim *plausible* universality.

Challenges like these are legitimacy challenges insofar as they concern the legitimacy of *Tianxia*. We can think of more of these legitimacy challenges when we think along the same line. As a matter of fact, *Tianxia* theorists are not unaware of these challenges. For instance, when ZHAO Tingyang states that "if an ideal is not at the same time practical, it is meaningless; by the same token, if a practice does not contain idealism, it is also meaningless" (Zhao et al. 2018: 7), he seems to be concerned precisely with a legitimacy challenge. In the previous section, we have argued that *Tianxia*'s historical performance does not determine its current functions; now we can add to this that its historical practicality (something Zhao argues for) does not provide it with plausibility in today's world. So, following Zhao's claim, it helps if *Tianxia* theorists can provide further arguments to the effect that *Tianxia* can resolve legitimacy challenges in this world. It helps, that is, if they take legitimacy challenges seriously, together with characteristics of this world that make *Tianxia* pointful in the first place.

7 Conclusion: A Civilization-State?

The question concerning whether China is a nation-state or a civilization-state (or "a civilization-state pretending to be a nation-state") is crucial to the legitimacy of *Tianxia* as well. Many theorists have come to emphasize China as a civilization-state so as to highlight its natural affinity with cosmopolitanism as well as its capabilities of improving the world system (for instance, Chen 2007: 107; Wang 2008: 783). According to this narrative, a civilization-state does not prioritize particular national interests, for what it cares about is the "civilization" that cannot be confined to a particular state. It can enable a civilization-state to manifest cultural and political hospitality to other nations in the world.

The term "civilization-state" became popular partly because of Lucian W. Pye's work, according to which China is a civilization-state pretending to be a nation-state (Pye 1992: 235). It was Martin Jacques's work (Jacques 2009), however, that made the phrase well-known among Chinese scholars. For those who were immersed in Confucian classics, it was the reading of KANG Youwei, who emphatically understood China as the symbolization of a civilization, that created the possibility of seeing China as such (Wang 2008: 783; Chen 2007: 107; C. Gan 2012; cf. Ge 2012).[9] In response to this perception, some scholars made the opposite claim that China is not a civilization-state but a nation-state pretending to be a civilization-state (or a nationalism pretending to be cosmopolitanism) (Xu 2015: 17; Ge 2012; Liu 2015b).

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[9] For GAN Yang, for instance, China is "special" in the sense that it is a civilization-state, so much so that there is something amiss when China made itself into a nation-state when joining the modern world system. In both Y. Gan 2003 and 2012, he argues that China should correct the mistake and return to the path of civilization-state, for that is what it essentially is.

It seems that there is no way to settle the dispute once and for all. But it is safe to say that any essentialist reading of China is likely to be problematic.[10] This means that we cannot say, *in absolute terms*, what China is. What China is (or is not) cannot be defined by what is considered to be *the* nature of China, for the understanding of this nature changes over time; China's reflective self-understanding varies when it interacts with different civilizations and nations at different historical times. Therefore, China does not define its nature all by itself. What can be certain is this: *if Tianxia*'s legitimacy is to base on China's being understood as a civilization-state, then the burden is on those who hold this view to prove that such an understanding is indeed plausible today. That is to say, insofar as its being perceived as a civilization-state is conducive to the project of *Tianxia*, theorists need to make the perception easy to believe, not only by those at the giving end but also, and perhaps more urgently, by those at the receiving end.

In a response to critics, one of the *Tianxia* theorists states the following: "I have noticed that one common challenge is that *Tianxia* is too ideal to be realized; it borders on a utopia. It *is* a utopia, indeed. In fact, no ideal can be realized easily. We can even say that ideals are not to be realized; rather, it is a yardstick that is used to gauge the distance between the real and the ideal" (Zhao et al. 2016: 52). This almost amounts to subjecting *Tianxia*'s legitimacy to critical scrutiny. And one can agree with almost everything he says, except the role of a gauging tool played by *Tianxia*. There are numerous yardsticks to gauge the distance between the real and the ideal, and even those that *Tianxia* theorists take exception to are capable of playing such a role. Why choose *Tianxia* over others? If what gains adherents for *Tianxia* is its gauging capacity alone, it is both necessary and urgent to take its legitimacy into account.

In fact, *Tianxia* theorists have done an exceptional job in proving that *Tianxia* is not just a gauging tool; they have successfully constituted a set of systematic, coherent, and inspiring normative theories, whose purpose is to *change* the world system. As normative theories, *Tianxia* theorists specify what contributions Chinese civilization, as one of many civilizations, can make to this challenging task. It helps if it can also point out how *Tianxia* bears upon or interacts with the current world system, for this will not only make the *Tianxia* utopia realistic but also build into it a necessary, realistic component which is crucial for its plausibility.

Declaration The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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[10] ZHANG Weiwei, by coining the term "civilizational-state" to stress the nature of China, stands out as the most noticeable exemplar of reading China in an essentialist way. For him, China is neither an extension of the traditional empire nor a nation-state, but a combination of both. As a civilizational-state, China would not follow other countries' steps or adopt their models; it would follow its own track and let its own inner logic run its natural course (Zhang 2011; Zhang 2014: 253).

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