

## Book Review

The Earth may be divided among many countries, but since there is only one Heaven, there can be but one tianxia, or “all-under-heaven”. The Chinese concept tianxia might be literally translated into English as “sky-beneath”, and it has been variously rendered as “enlightened realm”, “world-system”, or simply “the world”. To keep Chinese scholars happy, just don’t translate it as “empire”. The West had empires. China had tianxia.

The contemporary Chinese philosopher Zhao Tingyang takes an entire (short) book to define the term, the roots of which are some 3000 years old—and then redefine it for today’s world. Drawing on his 2005 Chinese-language bestseller *The Tianxia System* and two of his more recent Chinese-language books, *Redefining a Philosophy for World Governance* is the first major statement of his thought available in English. In three closely related essays, it explains the intellectual roots of the tianxia concept in China’s ancient Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BCE), develops that concept into modern theory of governance, and then applies that theory to the problems of today.

Governance, not government, because Zhao is not proposing any specific way to run the world. He embraces neither democracy nor technocracy. He certainly does not suggest that the world should be ruled by an ancient philosopher-king, though he admires the legendary Duke of Zhou for having been just that. Zhao’s tianxia system is a plea for global cooperation and consideration, short on details but long on passion. His book invites readers to look to deep into the history of the Chinese “world” for the inspiration to create a better future for our own, global world.

Tianxia, Zhao begins, arose as a political concept with the unification of ancient China’s central plains under the Kingdom of Zhou. Zhou was neither the largest nor the most powerful kingdom of its time, and thus the unexpected success of the virtuous King of Zhou in overthrowing

the Shang Dynasty created the political challenges of “the small rules the large” and “one rules the many”. The creative solution of the king’s premier, the Duke of Zhou, was the tianxia system.

The tianxia system is a kind of game-theoretic approach to ensuring a stable equilibrium among otherwise competing states. It is a system in which (1) “the benefits of joining ... outweigh those of staying outside”, (2) “all states are interdependent ... and ... their relationship is mutually beneficial”, and (3) “public interest, shared interest and public enterprise [are] beneficial for all states”. In other words, it is a great balancing act, but one without an outside master to tip the scales: Zhou’s (and Zhao’s) tianxia system is premised on “the internalization of the world, so that it has no externality”.

The Duke of Zhou succeeded in stabilizing the Chinese tianxia by implementing a system of decentralized rule (“enfeoffment”) in which each local state under the Zhou Dynasty was responsible for governing itself, but also expected to participate in a shared set of rituals. In return, the central Zhou Dynasty was expected to govern virtuously, itself in accordance with ritual. Such a system could accommodate internal diversity and even external expansion without breaking under the strain. Of course, it did eventually break down ... after 800 years. That’s not a bad record for a small state trying to run a large empire—er, tianxia.

Much to his credit, Zhao does not pretend that China has always been governed under a tianxia system. Instead, he sees the Zhou Dynasty as embodying an ideal that later Chinese dynasties appropriated for their own ends. The tianxia system, centered on the Central Plains surrounding the Yellow River, was a cultural resource that could be (and was) mobilized by those who wished to rule China. The Central Plains were the center of a “whirlpool” that exerted a centripetal force on neighboring lands, pulling them into its own history and mythology. No one could seriously claim the “Mandate of Heaven” who didn’t control the Middle Kingdom itself.

The whirlpool analogy is one of the most interesting aspects of the book. It is nothing less than a theory of how nationalism becomes globalism. Consider contemporary Taiwan (a topic Zhao steers clear of). Trace its history to the Central Plains of China, as the Kuomintang (Nationalists) do, and Taiwan is a part of China. But trace its history

through the indigenous peoples of the island, and Taiwan is Austronesian. These are two alternative whirlpools into which Taiwan could be drawn, and which whirlpool is chosen depends on who is doing the drawing.

Zhao implies that an analogous principle holds for creating a global community that is not a mere society of nations but a true world society, a latter-day tianxia. People must be drawn into a common historical narrative before they can accept that they all belong to the same world. This is no mere philosopher’s fancy. It is actually happening in parts of Europe, where national histories are being replaced with European histories. It is not inconceivable that something similar could one day happen on a global scale.

For Zhao, true tianxia can only arise organically, not through force. That’s what makes a universal tianxia system different from a universal imperial one. Empires impose universal histories on their subjects; just think of the Romans, or of the Bismarckian rewriting of German history to center on the whirlpool of Berlin, rather than those of Vienna or Munich which for centuries contested the leadership of Germany until Bismarck succeeded in uniting the country around his native Prussia. Zhao criticizes imperialists for getting things backwards:

“Thinking wrongly that universality comes from universalization, it [imperialism] always attempts to universalize its own values unilaterally. This is a fatal misunderstanding. Whether in logic or in practice, universality is a precondition for universalization, not the other way round.”

The tianxia system is ultimately a peaceful system because it internalizes all of the world’s potential conflicts into a community of shared destiny. No one today talks about Sussex going to war with Kent because both have long since internalized a shared Englishness, a shared Britishness, and (until recently) a shared Europeanness. Zhao’s vision is that they will one day also internalize a shared worldness, and at that point tianxia (all-under-heaven) will be as seamless as Heaven itself.

Zhao believes that such worlding is necessary to solve the world’s many challenges, but he doesn’t believe that it will happen any time soon. Nor does he argue that a new, global tianxia would be centered on

China’s Central Plains, or that China would play any special role in bringing it about.

Zhao offers a morally uplifting vision of the future, but he doesn’t provide instructions for how to get there. Perhaps a good philosopher never does.

Redefining a Philosophy for World Governance is an inspiring and thought-provoking book, but it is not a particularly hopeful book. In 1971, no less a philosopher than John Lennon asked us to “imagine there’s no countries”; five decades later, that’s still hard to do. Zhao doesn’t ask us to give up our countries, but he does ask us to “internalize the world” and accept a “compatible universalism” that puts “relational rationality” ahead of individual rationality.

That’s a tall order, and Zhao knows it. But perhaps it’s nonetheless a good goal.

*Salvatore Babones*

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