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The evolution of *tianxia* cosmology and its philosophical implications

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Abstract The terminology *tianxia* has both historical evolution and cultural and philosophical connotations. This concept not only denotes a geographical and spatial meaning, but also implies the moral construct of metaphysics. A systematic study of its historical and cultural repercussions can show that the evolution of the meaning “*tianxia*” not only embodies the cosmological construction, moral belief and self-identity of the Chinese nation, but also manifests the historical processes of modern China evolving from “*tianxia*” to a modern nation-state. Meanwhile, the deconstruction of the *tianxia* cosmology has shattered the old Chinese concept of a single united *tianxia*, or the whole world under one Heaven. Also, “Confucian China” has been increasingly losing its vitality and strong hold on the people, while the concept of nation-state has gained its way into people’s consciousness, which has added more diversity and open-mindedness to the concept of *tianxia*.

Keywords Chinese philosophy, *tianxia*, cosmology, nation-state, nation, morality

China has a long history. In its early stage of formation, it was a country united by the union of tribes mainly based on the Chinese consanguinity. The geography of *tianxia* 天下 (China, country or the world, literally “sphere below the sky”) stretched from the Kunlun Mountains to the west, the East

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Sea to the east, the Mongolia deserts to the north, and *Jiaozhi* 交趾 (present Vietnam) to the south. The word “*tianxia*” was not merely a geographic notion, nor was it even a concept of politics, but a concept of values and of historical cultural conceptions. As Zhang Guangzhi commented on the source of the prelude to the Chinese civilization, he said that “a ‘state’ is a political entity with dimensional bounds, just like a city or a province. Another meaning refers to, at a higher level, a typical society of several characteristics in the field of politics. In the sense of the latter, this noun is a static abstract concept expressing characteristics instead of time-space bounds.” (Zhang 1999, p.25) What Zhang Guangzhi stresses is the multiple coexisting chiefdoms or states existing during a certain period of Chinese civilization, whose territories have no absolute time and space limits. In other words, the concept *tianxia* of the Chinese people refers to a frame of network within which so many members competed against each other, developed simultaneously, interacted and impacted one another. This was the oppositions between states and a necessary prerequisite for the formation of state ideology in the ancient Chinese civilization.

The situation wherein *tianxia* was united as an inclusive whole in China began to transform after the Italian missionary Matteo Ricci’s cultural arrival, who brought the Western cultural and scientific knowledge to China such as astronomy, the calendar, geography and sciences in 1516, and the arrival of the eight-power Allied Forces who opened the gate of China with their strong boats and powerful guns. In exploring the reasons why modern China underwent tremendous changes, John Fairbank and Joseph R. Levenson at the Harvard University typically proposed the “impact-response” model, while Paul Cohen at the same school brought forth an opposite idea. In his book *Discovering history in China: American historical writings of the recent Chinese past*, Cohen thought that the break in the Chinese traditional culture was not due to the impact by the West, but to the internal changes of Chinese society itself. “One more trap that is easily fallen into is the tendency to lapse into excessive abstraction in discussing the ‘Chinese response.’ China, as a geographical entity, is continental in size and exhibits a staggering range of ethnic, linguistic, and regional variation. Within any given region there has always been a great gulf between the world view and life pattern of the elites and those of the masses.... The term *Chinese response*, therefore, can serve at best as shorthand for a very complex historical situation.” (Cohen 1984, p.15) “In brief, the story of China’s response to the West in the last century is nothing if not complicated. Much that happened in this era, although historically important, was unrelated, or only marginally related, to the Western impact.” (*Ibid*, p.15) According to Cohen’s understanding, the impact-response framework is somewhat

problematic. Not only did the modern West change immensely over time, but also the “differentness” of China gave shape to the ways in which the rich diversity of the Chinese responded to the situations. To my thinking, the concept *tianxia* will have to be expounded clearly if we want to judge these two directly opposite propositions. Is the *tianxia* a concept as Laozi had mentioned in his line “Stay indoors but well informed of *tianxia*”? Is it the one that Wei Yuan talked about in his *Haiguo Tuzhi* 海国图志 (*the illustrated records of overseas*) which took all the other countries in the world as areas inhabited by savages and China as the centre of the world stage? Or is it the one that Xu Jishe explained in his *Yinghuan Zhilue* 瀛环志略 (*the brief records of nations around*), which asserted that China was only one of the nine bigger prefectures, and that the surrounding nations or ethnic groups were no more than savages but the true *tianxia* (the world)?

As the concept *tianxia* was challenged by “many nations” in the world, the traditional Chinese culture was also challenged beyond any doubt. With the enormous changes never before witnessed during the past 3,000 years, the doctrine about *tianming* 天命 (the Heaven’s Mandate or vocation), which held that “*Dao* (the Way) will not change as the Heaven does not”, and *daotong* 道统 (the spiritual lineage in the Confucian tradition) had been impacted, because all traditional Confucians were deeply convinced that the cultural values related to *tianxia* were constant, although the culture associated with a “state” could be changed. As Levenson pointed out, The Chinese thought that China was all under cultural heaven (*tianxia*), rather than a ‘state’, and that in the *tianxia* there was no other cultural form more advanced than the Chinese culture. “This changing fortune of a civilization, this vast and perplexing history, was caught in miniature in the changing relation between the concept *tien-hsia* and the concept *kuo*. *Tien-hsia* and *kuo* were time-honored co-ordinates in Chinese political thinking... *Tien-hsia* signifies ‘the Chinese Empire’ —alternatively, ‘the world’; as *tien-hsia*, China is the world. And *kuo* was a local political unit, a part of the Empire in classical times, and in the modern world, the ‘nation’.” (Levenson, 1958, pp.99–101) To Levenson, *kuo* (*guo*, country, nation) connotes land or people but *tianxia* is a conception of a civilized society with culture, morality and values, to which the civilized Chinese must be committed to. Indeed, in the eyes of the traditional Chinese people, the world was simply the *tianxia*, and the *tianxia* was just the “Chinese Empire”.

Therefore, how many connotations does the concept *tianxia* have in the mind of the people after all? What are its cosmological construct and its cultural philosophical contexts? To what extent has it influenced the Chinese cosmology, world view and philosophy of life? And what relation does it have to the occurrence of a nation-state? These are the very issues that this

paper intends to discuss.

I The concepts ranging from “the mystery of *tianxia*” to “the *tianxia* for public”

In time immemorial of the tribal ages, human beings and gods lived together. Bao Xi invented fishing nets, Shen Nong invented the string musical instruments, Chi You invented weapons, Huang Di invented textures, and Cang Jie invented Chinese characters. According to *Yi Jing* 易经 (the Book of Changes):

As he ruled the *tianxia* in the ancient times, looking up Bao Xi followed principles of the Heaven and looking down he surveyed the patterns on the Earth. He observed birds, animals, and all the other objects in the world. Based on his personal experiences and his knowledge about the world, he invented the Eight Diagrams (八卦, some commented diagrams previously used in divination in China) so as to comprehend the functions of the Divine and collect the information of things. He invented nets with strings so as to hunt and fish, which was probably based on the principle of *li* 离 (one of the Eight Diagrams). After Bao Xi died, Shen Nong rose and substituted the former, who invented farming tools with wood so as to civilize the *tianxia*. What he followed was assumedly the principle of *yi* 益 (one of the Eight Diagrams). Some markets were formed at noon to gather the people in *tianxia* and collect the goods in *tianxia*. People would get away after they exchanged their goods and obtained what they wanted. That might come from *shihe* 噬嗑 (one of the Eight Diagrams). After Shen Nong died, Huang Di, Yao and Shun rose in sequence. These three were expert at diversification to keep people interested and energetic, and divinize and cultivate things to suit people’s convenience. As with *Yi* 易 (the principle of changes), it would change when it came to its end, since it was changeable, it was favorable, and because it was favorable, it could last long. Therefore, *tianxia* was blessed by Heaven, easy and propitious. Huang Di, Yao and Shun governed *tianxia* easily and the people lived happily. That might be based on *qian* 乾 and *kun* 坤 (two of the Eight Diagrams). (Qin Ying & Qin Sui 1995, p.318)

In this single passage, the expression *tianxia* was mentioned 5 times, and it refers exclusively to the natural sky or the natural space besides the objects on the earth, without any profound philosophical connotations. In the

primitive Chinese society, when doors were not bolted at night, no one picked up and pocketed anything lost on the road. That was an era full of moral idealism, just exactly as *Li Ji* 礼记 (Book of Rites) said, in that era “*tianxia* was public and fairly shared, worthy and wise persons were selected to rule, and people were honest and friendly...People of senior ages did not have to worry about their livelihood, those at the prime of life had their satisfactory occupations, children were well nursed, and all widowers, widows, orphans, the childless, the disabled, and the diseased were properly supported.” (Zhu Bin 1998, p.331) People dug well for drinking water, and farmed the land for food; they lived harmoniously together, and the rulers were intelligent and virtuous. According to the legendary tales, Yao, Shun and Yu could dispense justice, endure great hardships in pioneer work, select virtuous people, and appoint talents. “People inhabited many natural hamlets and villages, some of which were developed into larger and more powerful establishments known as *cheng* 城 (city literally in Chinese, actually a kind of castle). Together with surrounding villages, the *cheng* would be organized as a larger community named *bang* 邦 (state or country). Again, “this community consisting of so many natural villages belonged to an enormous league. The village communities co-existed peacefully and within the league. So people actually lived within a union, which was the very *tianxia* the contemporary Chinese people could know at that time. Therefore, people embraced the awareness that *tianxia* should evidently be united as one.” (Ge 2001a, p.7)

Thus, it can be seen that, first and foremost, *tianxia* in the eyes of the early Chinese people was united rather than separated. Although different ethnic tribes had their own customs and practices, they could co-exist peacefully and harmoniously. It was at this period that the early form of *li* 礼 (rites), an important concept in the Chinese culture, or the system of divination had appeared: “As he ruled *tianxia* in the ancient times, Bao Xi comprehended the functions of the Divine and collected the information of things.” (Qin Ying & Qin Sui 1995, p.318) The *tianxia* at that very stage was in a relatively independent autonomous environment, free from destructions and disturbances brought by the large-scale invasion of external culture intrusion. Meanwhile, the *tianxia* was also a world of democracy, for Huang Di, Yao and Shun all governed the *tianxia* in a manner of inaction. The *Book of Changes* has employed the terminology *tianxia* for several times to refer to the collectivity of certain objects in the natural world, for example:

To penetrate the mystery of *tianxia*, the saints imitated its appearance and symbolized the objects, hence there are the symbols; to experience the activities of *tianxia*, and the saints observed their mutual impacts

and effects, and performed the typical rites. And then the saints commentated the symbols with words for the purpose of divination, hence there are the lines in the Eight Diagrams.

It was on the basis of *yi* 易 that the saints explored the profoundness and mystery. Based on the profoundness, they could apprehend the phenomena of *tianxai*, and thanks to the mystery, they could obtain the achievements of *tianxia*. Because of their infiniteness, they could enjoy high speeds without any haste, and reach their destination without hard trips.

As Confucius said, “What does *Yi* intend? It intends to foster natural objects and social affairs, and to undertake the *Dao* of *tianxia*. That is what it is.” Therefore the saint employs *Yi* to reiterate the intentions of *tianxia* and dissolve the doubts of *tianxia*. (Qin Ying & Qin Sui 1995, p.318)

Although it was said that “To penetrate the mystery of *tianxia*, the saints imitated its appearance and symbolized the objects”, it has suggested the observational activities of ordinary people to learn about the world. The “mystery of *tianxia*” is just the mystery of the sky, the earth, the cosmos and the society, and the “symbols” are just some images to symbolize the world. The people who performed these kinds of rites and were qualified to communicate between the divine and the human beings are the saints. And only those who knew the “activities of *tianxia*”, the “intentions of *tianxia*”, the “achievements of *tianxia*” and the “doubts of *tianxia*” can be called the sages. The *tianxia* at this stage was still a primitive society, as people lived in caves together with wild animals. Certainly, at this prehistoric stage, people could not believe in personalized gods or heavenly gods. “The nature, including the sky and the earth, moves, changes and renews by day and night, thus, human beings have to adopt a synchronous process to be identical with the whole evolution of nature and the universe. Only in this way can human beings form a union with heaven and earth, i.e., identifying their body and mind, the social groups with nature. That is also known as the ‘union of the heaven and man’.” (Li 2001, p.112) The Eight Diagrams created by Bao Xi was actually just some basic memory marks, but no doubt that there were some related consanguineous organizations and primitive ceremonial activities punctuated by those marks.

After the transformation of the matrilineal *tianxia* society into a patrilineal one, the *wufu* 五服 (five types of costumes marking the social and ethnic status) system indicated the equal relationships during the Five Emperors (*wu di*, 五帝) period, while the “privatization of the *tianxia*” (one family reigned *tianxia*) illustrated the hierarchical antagonistic ones in the Three

Kings (*san wang*, 三王) phase. The *Book of Rites* recorded in great detail the public and private relationships during the Three Kings period: “As the Great *Dao* was practiced, *tianxia* was public, and worthy and able persons were selected to rule...therefore people were not only kind to their own relatives...that was what is called the Great Harmony (*datong*, 大同)...Now, the Great *Dao* has dissolved, everyone take *tianxia* as his own property, and everyone is kind only to his relatives...the hereditary system is thought as appropriate...known as well-to-do (*xiaokang*, 小康). ” (Zhu Bin 1998, p.331–332)

It should be admitted that the society of “*tianxia* for public” was not an ideal society (or Utopian dream) of Confucians as some people had thought, but only the establishment of a monogamous system during the period when *tianxia* (tribal union) was formed, a preliminary primitive civilization of human beings. Therefore, it was especially valued in the Confucian tradition. Except the fabulous ideals such as the “Five Emperors ruled *tianxia*” and Yao and Shun voluntarily giving up their sovereignty as rulers, the politics in Chinese history had exclusively been under the control of a family with one surname, the *xiaokang* type of regime taking *tianxia* as familial properties.

The earliest form of *tianxia* was just the earliest type of Chinese civilization, which indicated, in particular, the specific law of cultural development of China, with cultural civilization preceding the nation-state. This case is different from the generality that a state and the civilization occurred at the same time. The pre-maturity of ancient Chinese civilization was attributed to the natural geographic environment and the particular mode of production at that period of time, that is, the fertile land and abundant rainfalls in the Yellow River basin area well facilitated the development of agriculture. Therefore the embryo of early *tianxia* (China), as the cradle of civilization, was developed in the Yellow River valley. The particular mode of production was mainly based on agriculture and the exchange of natural crops formed the peasantry economy, which was characteristic of that Yu’s 禹 time (as his agricultural officials industriously farmed by themselves, they ruled *tianxia*). And especially, the continuation of tribal consanguineous traditions formed one of the most important social foundations for the rise and development of cultural psyche of the early Chinese nation.

II The moral connotation and spatial extension of *tianxia*

“All the lands below the sky are the property of the king; and all the people from the lands to the seas are the subjects of the king.” (Zhao 1997, p.173) By the Zhou Dynasty period when great changes had taken place, the

productive means and the manner of production of land in *tianxia* had turned to be “state-owned”. As a consequence, all the absolute rights to wealth and gods began to belong to the kings. Ever since King Li 厉王 of the West Zhou Dynasty ruled *tianxia*, the prowess and morality of the kings declined all over *tianxia*, as manifested by “The great Heaven did not show its virtues and it destroyed the feudal kingdoms through famine”. (*Ibid*, p.173) In addition, the doctrine of Heavenly Mandate had come into being, because of the idea embraced by the people of the Zhou Dynasty on “the union of heaven and man”. The mission and power that were simultaneously conferred by the religious god and the ancestral deities was: “The Heaven produces the teeming multitudes in such a way that inherent in every single thing is the principle for its being. Thanks to their natural endowed qualities, the people are fond of good virtues. Heaven is watching over the Zhou Dynasty, for clearly the establishment of it comes from Heaven. In order to safeguard the king, the Son of Heaven, Heaven has borne a man named Zhong Shanfu.” (*Ibid*, p.198)

What is worth mentioning is that “Heaven” at that time not only belonged to the royalty and the noble, but also to “the multitude”. It was thought that people in *tianxia* would have a satisfactory destiny only if they deserved the trust of Heaven, valued virtues and safeguarded the principle of Heaven. *Tianxia* at that time had become that of the majority. Just as the Tianxia Chapter of *Zhuangzi* said, the people of the Zhou Dynasty “took Heaven as their principle and the virtues as their foundation”, this implied that they respected Heaven in religion, and valued virtues in morality. Likewise, the union of Heaven and man in a religious sense was a result of the fact that the ancestries’ virtues were matched with the god’s. “Actually, the union of heaven and man not only refers to the integration of nature and human beings, but more importantly, to the identity of human beings and supernatural divinity. The Chinese character “*tian*” 天 in the history of Chinese philosophy boasts multifarious meanings, including Heaven in the sense of religion which controls the fate of human beings, the creator of human beings and nature, the formulator of morality itself, the sky, and the destiny that represents fortuitism.” (Wang Xianqian 1996, p.215) Therefore, the word “*tian*” has entered the linguistic discourse of human society and has become a concept implying that human beings and gods share the same anthropomorphous form and nature in essence. In many cases, it also refers to the sky, the heaven, the earth, *tianxia* and all the beings in the world. Although the term *Dao* in the Daoist tradition is somewhat like the dharma in Buddhism, it is categorically different from the English word “heaven”. According to the preliminary statistics of this author, Laozi used the word “*tianxia*” 51 times in his work *Dao De Jing*, respectively referring to the sky,

the heaven, the empire, the multitudes and all the living beings in the world. Although Arthur Waley, a British sinologist, is a first-class translator, he still did not fully expound the similarities and differences between *tian* and *tianxia* in his translation, which demonstrated that neither the “world” nor “China” can sufficiently express the abundant connotations of the expression “*tianxia*”. But due to the limit of space, I will momentarily suspend the discussion of the rendering of *tianxia*.

As described above, *tianxia* during the Yin (Shang) period was composed of different tribes and ethnic groups, when an establishment measured by ten *li* (a distance of approximately half kilometer) in circumference could be called a “state”. At the turn of the Xia and Shang dynasties, a place seventy *li* in circumference could be a “power”, so Tang of the Shang Dynasty started his career on the basis of his establishment of only seventy *li* in circumference and finally defeated Xia, and by the turn of the Shang and Zhou dynasties, a locality one hundred *li* in circumference still could be a “power”, therefore King Wen set off from a place only one hundred *li* in circumference and finally destroyed the Shang and obtained *tianxia*. But by the time of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, only a province thousands of *li* in circumference could possibly be called a “power”. In the course of fierce wars and annexations, people had come to know that violence and forces were not reliable ways to obtain *tianxia*, therefore rites, ritual systems and ethics had become important means to handle the relationships between human beings, families, states and *tianxia* as a whole. However, this situation did not last long before it changed by the end of the Spring and Autumn period, when the old history would have been forgotten and the new future was still on its way. Just as Confucius said, “When *tianxia* follows the *Dao*, only the king is entitled to regulate rituals and music and issue the orders of punitive wars; when *tianxia* goes astray, the feudal princes will regulate rituals and music and issue the orders of punitive wars...When *tianxia* follows the *Dao*, commoners without official posts do not criticize political affairs.” (Guo Qiyong 2002, pp.354–6)

This was an era when the rituals had been neglected, music ignored, society corrupted and declined, and *tianxia* had gone astray from the *Dao*. At the critical point that the *Dao* was “to rise” or “to decline”, Confucius, the acknowledged sage, endured hardships to restore the law and order in *tianxia* and yelled out for the establishment of internal moral self-discipline of human beings. This kind of moral self-discipline is a systematic, transcendent and critical self-reflection, an immanent transcendence in both morality and religion. This epoch bore great similarity to that of the West, when Western philosophers called the “breakthrough” in the course of historical civilizations in Greece, India, China and Israel within 1,000 years BC the

“philosophical breakthrough”, and in particular, Karl Kaspers, the German philosopher, called this glorious spiritual civilization period the “Era of Axis.” During this era, a number of thinkers appeared in China, including Confucius, Laozi, Mozi and Zhuangzi; sages and the Buddha of the *Upanisad* era occurred in India; there was a group of Hebrew prophets in Palestine; and Greece had its geniuses of reason represented by Socrates. As some Confucians of the Song Dynasty had vividly remarked, if Heaven had not borne Confucius, the world would have remained in the darkness all the time. That indicated that the era of sages was also a time in need of giants and generating giants. Meanwhile, this was the time when *tianxia* went astray and rites were available only among folks or in foreign lands. In fact, it was because *tianxia* went astray that all different philosophers and authors in the pre-Qin Dynasty criticized politics and society, and protested against the kings and nobles. Once they were unable to resist the power, Confucians were even ready to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the *Dao* and righteousness of *tianxia*. That was a kind of idealistic spirit almost equivalent to a religious faith, which was further developed by Mencius. As Mencius said, “When *tianxia* follows the *Dao*, one should cultivate oneself with *Dao*; when *tianxia* goes astray, one should sacrifice oneself to achieve the *Dao*. But I have never heard such matters as to satisfy people at the cost of *Dao*.” (Jiao 1996, p.556) That was a kind of aggressive and enterprising spirit that took *Dao* as one’s own responsibility. Essentially, it was not different from Confucius’ remarks that “I would come forth as *tianxia* followed the *Dao*, and retire into reclusion when *tianxia* went astray.” (*Analects*, Book 8:13) Only that the former was more outspoken in terms of brave aggressiveness and brave sacrifice. In such a society of disorder, a person of virtue should also “Cultivate oneself alone as he has no way out, and edify *tianxia* as he is prosperous and successful.” (qtd. in Jiao 1996, p.525)

As Jiao Xun commented in his work *Mencius Zhengyi* 孟子正义 (Proper Commentaries of Mencius): “When they achieved their political ambitions, the people in the ancient times would do favors to common people; when they failed, it would be said that they had bad luck. In this case, they would cultivate in private among the people, without losing their integrity. That was why many people cultivate themselves alone. A success in society suggests that they could practice their *Dao*; therefore they could do favor to common people as well” (Jiao 1996, p.525) Here, the expression that “*tianxia* follows the *Dao*” can be explained as a kind of feudal politics characteristic of humanity, while the expression to “do favor to common people as well” contains the connotations of helping the common multitude prosper in the world. Linguistically, the expression “*tianxia*” in the above

expression is not only phonetically euphonious, but also rhetorically beautiful, which indicates a sense of justice and a patriotic obligation for their country and homeland. Just as Mencius had rightly declared, “A man of virtue stays in *tianxia*’s vastness, takes *tianxia*’s proper posts, and performs *tianxia*’s great *Dao*. Achieving his ambition, he shares it with the people; not achieving his ambition, he follows his *Dao* alone. Wealth and power cannot tempt him, poverty and humbleness cannot move him, and power and pressures cannot overwhelm him. That is what is called a great man.” (qtd. in Jiao 1996, p.246)

It seems to me that only a man who fully embraces such awe-inspiring righteousness and lofty moral realm is qualified to talk about the word *tianxia*. This is the ideal personality where the Chinese nation could place their expectation on. This is the embodiment of brilliant moral will. This is the source for high-minded personality and moral character formation. This is also the idealistic moral self-discipline, a combination of individuals’ unsurpassable righteousness 浩然之气 and the cosmos (*tianxia*). From Mencius, who advocated to “be pleased with *tianxia*’s pleasure, and concerned with *tianxia*’s concerns”(qtd. in Jiao 1996, p.557), to Fan Zhongyan who declared to “be concerned ahead of *tianxia* and pleased later than *tianxia*”(qtd. in Fan Shichong & Fan Nengrui 1998,p.5), and further to Gu Yanwu who expressed that “the prosperity and decline of a state are the responsibility of those enjoying wealth and power”, but “even the ordinary man is responsible for the prosperity and decline of *tianxia*”(Gu 1994, p.471), all had displayed the patriotic passions and the righteousness that regarded *tianxia* as one’s responsibility.

III *Dao* being split by *tianxia* and its heterogeneous formation

Ever since the Zhou Dynasty, *tianxia* had been divided into nine provinces besides the capital, and the feudal princes had been classified into five ranks. “As a matter of fact, a few states such as Lu, Jin, Wei and Teng were some kind of colonial tribes under the rule of the Zhou Dynasty, and other states such as Qi, Qin, Yan, Chu, Wu and Yue were mostly naturally developed states, whose relations to the Zhou Dynasty were formulated as inter marriages or alliances prevailed.” (Guo Moruo 2002, p.245) After the Zhou Dynasty shifted its capital eastwards, the ancient books and records were scattered all over the country. Hence the scholarship previously monopolized by the royalty turned out to be the learning of different schools. As the culture and thoughts about *tianxia* previously monopolized by the royalty were polarized into the different schools of thoughts, the situation wherein

different schools of learning contended and competed became inevitable:

“The ancient people must be perfect! They were matchable to the gods, and as pure as the Heaven and the Earth. They fostered all living beings in the world, harmonized the sky and the earth, favored the human beings, knew the fundamental *shu* 数 (numbers, which were the basic elements consisting the world), observed the functional *du* 度 (degrees or rules, which were the representation of *shu*), accessed anywhere they wanted to reach, and escaped anything they hoped to avoid. They could interact with all the things through their humanity. Their achievements in *shu* and *du* are still largely evident in the old laws and learning, and those in *Shijing* 诗经 (the Book of Songs), *Shangshu* 尚书 (the *Book of History*), *Liji* 礼记 (the Book of Rites), and *Yuejing* 乐经 (the Book of Music) are still understandable to the learned worthy people in the Zou and Lu states. *Shijing* expresses the inspirations, *Shangshu* records the historical events, *Liji* regulates the behaviors, *Yuejing* sings the harmonies, *Yijing* explains the *yin* and the *yang*, and *Chunqiu* 春秋 (the Spring and Autumn Annals) describes the rights and obligations. Originally these scholarly achievements were available in the Middle Kingdom, but now they got dispersed all over *tianxia*, and the different schools of learning only occasionally mentioned some of the *Dao*. As *tianxia* is in a mess, wise and worthy people could not be found any more. The universal ethics were absent; most people in *tianxia* cherished and boasted their partial understanding of the scholarship. Ears, eyes, noses and mouths have their own faculties indeed, but none of them are able to substitute for the others. Likewise, the different schools are experts at their own aspects, which might occasionally play a good role. But none of them are comprehensive or universal, so they are still ignorant and unable after all. Compared with the beauty of Heaven and Earth, the laws of all the objects, and the integration of the ancient people, few of them can fully represent the beauty of Heaven and Earth, and the appearance of the gods and wisdom. Therefore, the doctrine advocating sageliness within and kingliness without (political power) has become obscure instead of clear and active; and the people in *tianxia* strive for what they desire by themselves, satisfy themselves at the cost of *tianxia*. Alas, all the current philosophers and authors merely boast their own doctrines instead of reflecting on themselves. Certainly they will reach different destinations! So the learners of the future would be unlucky since they would have no way to see the purity of Heaven and Earth, or marvelous achievements of our ancestries. The *Dao* and the scholarship will be split by *tianxia*.” (*Tianxia*, *Zhuangzi*) (qtd. in Wang Xianqian 1996, p.216) The ancient people in the mind of Zhuangzi must denote the period before the Spring and Autumn period, when the sages and kings could “harmonize *tianxia*”, and benefit ordinary

people. The *tianxia* Zhuangzi referred to was possibly taking the fiefdom states as the center extending outwards in geography. The so-called “Yu differentiated nine provinces” (Jizhou, Yunzhou, Qingzhou, Xuzhou, Yangzhou, Jingzhou, Yuzhou, Liangzhou and Yongzhou) in the *Book of History* has suggested the borderlines and centers of each state. In addition, *wufu* 五服 respectively extending five hundred *li* mentioned in the *Book of History*, *wufu* mentioned by Jigong Mufu in *Guoyu* 国语 (the Political Remarks About the Nation), and *jiufu* 九服 (nine types of costumes remarking social and ethic statuses) in the *Book of Rites*, all represented the borders of territories of *tianxia* before the Spring and Autumn period, with the representatives at the edges of the four directions were *dongyi* 东夷 (barbaric minorities in the east), *xirong* (西戎, barbaric minorities in the west), *nanman* 南蛮 (barbaric minorities in the south) and *beidi* 北狄 (barbaric minorities in the north). In the minds of the people at that time, China was just the center of the empire (the Middle Kingdom). In the quotation above, Zhuangzi employed *tianxia* five times and the Central Kingdom once to describe the circumstance that “*Dao* and scholarship will be split by *tianxia*”, for which he had bemoaned. Under this situation, we can use both the “positive” and “negative” views of the post-modern thoughts in the West to give an explanation. Some people thought that it was an upsetting period (from the sixth century BC to the third century BC): *tianxia* by then was in a mess. Wise and worthy people argued against each, many moral standards had been promoted, belief of the truth had been challenged, morality neglected, and authority was questioned and confronted; while other critics argued that it was a glorious era because many different schools of philosophers and authors were candid in expressing their own ideas; the minds of the people were liberated, and the people were free to argue for their doctrines, just as the 20th century cultural expert Liu Yizheng pointed out, “The judgment of historical events depends on a critic’s view. Those who bemoaned the split of scholarship must hold the view of retrogression, and those who embraced the idea of evolutionism will definitely applaud them as the prosperity of different schools of thought. The facts were the same, but the judgment can be quite different: it is because of this reason that we cannot hold that the Spring and Autumn period was the beginning of specialized scholarship and that there had been no academic scholarship before that.” (Liu Yizheng 2001, p.248) Then how should we judge this situation during this period? Different people have different ideas. As Yu Shiyong argued, “breakthrough” and “split” could be lexically interpreted as the same, of course, therefore it was not far-fetched at all if one used the Western terms of “philosophic breakthrough” and “transcendent breakthrough” in explaining the historical course that the royal

academy of the kings had been separated into different schools of learning during the pre-Qin Dynasty period, and the only fresh idea was that the expression “breakthrough” contained a view of comparative cultural history, which was not confined to ancient China only. As Yu Yingshi thought, this kind of paradigm in breakthrough was positive in reflecting on the history of the development of ancient culture.

From Laozi’s *Dao De Jing*, it can also be seen that *tianxia* was a frequently used collocation in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. It occurred for over fifty times in that text, such as “The saints embraced the oneness as a model for *tianxia*” (Wang Bi 1996, p.12), “Therefore it is appreciated for one to treat his own body as a part of *tianxia*, as if he can leave himself in *tianxia*. Therefore a wise man tends to regard his own body as a part of *tianxia* as if he can entrust himself to *tianxia*.” (*Ibid*, p.7) “It is regrettable that a king of tens of thousands of chariots defies *tianxia* with his single body.” (*Ibid*, p.15) “Viewing *tianxia* from the stand of *tianxia*, how can one know the source and cause of *tianxia*?” (*Ibid*, p.33) It can be seen that the philosophers and authors at that time had their great ambitions to take *tianxia* (instead of local states) as their responsibility, just as Mencius had advocated, “volunteer to take *tianxia* as his own heavy responsibility”. (qtd. in Jiao p.387) That was more conspicuous as with Confucians who had the awareness of obligations: “In the old times, one who wished to impose his perfect virtues on *tianxia* would have to manage his own state affairs first; one who wished to manage his own state affairs would have to govern his own family first; one who wished to govern his own family would have to moralize himself first; one who wished to moralize himself would have to rectify their minds; and as with the rectification of the minds, the sincerity of intentions was a requisite.” (Zhu Xi 1983, p.3)

Beginning from *tianxia*, through state, family, oneself and the mind, and to the intention, *Daxue* 大学 (the Great Learning) describes a model of pursuit from the mind, and morality to the enormous cosmos, providing us a structural mode from mind to national societal order. “It changed the old thinking model based on the dimensional structure of the universe, the heaven and the earth on which to establish the consanguineous patriarchal ethics, and on the basis of consanguineous patriarch and ethics to straighten out the state order. The direction was completely reversed. The establishment of the order of the state, the nation and the society was changed from external constraints to internal self-discipline. In this way, the ultimate foundation for all the legitimacy and rationality changed from ‘the universe, the heaven and the earth’ to ‘the nature and passion of the mind’ .” (Ge 2001b, p.130) “Sincerity” (*cheng* 诚) not only represented a

kind of integrated object, but also embodied the persistence and continuation of a series of changing events in the mode of “cooperative creation”, a kind of integration and self-realization, self-actualization, self-improvement (The sincere pursues sincerity by himself, and *Dao* is self-contained). As Roger T. Ames, a modern American sinologist, argued, in the tradition of non-cosmological generation in China, i.e., Confucian and Daoist traditions, this idea of cooperative creation was familiar, if it was not decisive. “At a cosmological level, integrity is the ground from which self and other arise together to maximum benefit. It is not what they are, but how well and how productively they are able to fare in their synergistic alliances.” (Hall and Ames 2002, p.162–163) “In both the Confucian and the Daoist cases, there is a commitment to the uniqueness and the integrity of the particular, and in both cases, the definition of the particular emerges out of collaboration with its enviroing conditions.” (*Ibid*, p.172) In the Chinese context the construction of the particular human being is closely integrated with the larger world. Likewise, A. C. Graham, a famous Western sinologist, also thought the Chinese Confucian cosmology was characterized by the close relationships between *tianxia* (the universe) and other objects. As he argued, in the cosmology of the Chinese, all the things were dependent on each other. No transcendent principles were used to explain them, or in other words, there was no transcendent source where they were derived from...this stance had impressed us most deeply. The novelty of which had disclosed the preoccupation of the Western interpreters, that is, the concepts of the Heaven and *Dao* must contain the transcendence of the ultimate principles of the Western style. So Westerners hardly understood the idea that *Dao* and human beings were mutually dependent too. (Graham 2003, p.241)

This self-enlightening path from the internal to the external involves the transcendent feeling of a religion, which indicates the Chinese people’s belief of “the union of Heaven and man” and the spirit of “following the Mean Way while pursuing wisdom and participating in secular affairs while abandoning mundane temptations” (Feng 1985, p.12). The Chinese humanism requires the Chinese to understand and develop the nature of oneself, the nature of other people, and the nature of objects, so that Heaven, Earth and human beings could take their own proper places. In this way, each person and every object could accept all the objects in the world, accommodating each other, harmonizing with each other without losing his (its) own essence. The harmony between the internal and the external, between nature and humanity, and between morality and religion, is characteristic of the Chinese spirit which is different from Western humanism. Unaware of this feature, one could hardly define the Chinese national spirit. The character that “*Dao* does not abandon human beings”

asserted by Confucianism illustrates that Chinese philosophy opposes the split and separation of metaphysics and physics: they always watchfully try to maintain integration between the transcendent ideal and the real life, as “the substance and its function share one source and the visible and the invisible are perfectly combined.” (Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi 2004, p.582) Therefore, Chinese philosophy has formed its unique natural and rational attitude towards *tianxia*, the world, the cosmos, the history and the human life.

IV From “*tianxia*” to “forest of nations” and finally to “nation-state”

If we say that *tixian* during the *sandai* 三代 (the three ancient dynasties in the Chinese history, i.e., Xia, Shang and Zhou) period was a city-state mainly based on natural villages and linked by consanguinity, *tianxia* during the Spring and Autumn and the Warring States periods was a federal state with its capital and provinces stretching thousands of *li* and feudal princes fighting each other, the united *tianxia* of the Qin and Han dynasties was purely a political concept, and *tianxia* of the Song and Ming dynasties was a country of social ethical order, then what did “*tianxia*” mean to the Chinese people when the foreigners struck open the gate of China with their strong, seemingly impregnable boats and powerful guns?

Essentially, since Dong Zhongshu of the Han Dynasty brought forward the proposition that “The king’s Way and the Three Mainstays (三纲, *sangang*) have their origins in Heaven” in the Han Dynasty, both the state and society had been regular in the societal and cosmological order. Their legitimacy and reason had seldom been contested. According to the Chinese in the old times, heaven and earth were matched with *yin* and *yang*, with the heaven (*yang*) superior and the earth (*yin*) inferior; and the Chinese as an entity was matched with the inferior ethnic groups surrounding it in its four directions so that the kings could be valued and the barbarians could be rejected. The ancient China was just such a *tianxia* under the rule of a universal monarchy which was a combination of political, religious and cultural authorities. Dong Zhongshu extended the principle of “paying homage to a monarch and humbling a subject” to the other aspects of societal relationships, putting forward his doctrine of the Three Mainstays in his famous works *Chunqiu Fanlu* 春秋繁露 (the Luxuriant Dews of the Spring and Autumn Annals). In addition, the chapter *Loyalty and Filial Piety* of the Hanfeizi (韩非子) also observed that “A subject should serve his monarch, a son his father, and a wife her husband. If these three kinds of relationships are in order, *tianxia* will be well regulated; or otherwise,

tianxia will fall into chaos. That is the everlasting regular truth of *tianxia*, which even a wise king or a worthy subject cannot deny.” (qtd. in Wang Xianshen 1996, p.358)

From this point it can be seen that both Confucians and Legalists had come to the same destination in terms of how to establish an absolute order for *tianxia* although they had gone through different courses. Accompanied by this, and with the cosmology of taking *tianxia* as the centre, the Chinese traditions in terms of politics, spiritual Confucian lineage and academy had never been confronted by any dominant threat or challenges from other races. The picture of Chinese *tianxia* was intact, as far as the cartography is concerned. However, the world map drawn in 1584 was marked with longitudes and latitudes. On one map made by a European scholar, the globe was divided into western and eastern halves, and China was placed on a far corner on the map. Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) realized that it would be very risky to inform the Chinese people of this fact, as it is noted in *Li Ma Dou Zhongguo Zaji* (Matteo Ricci’s China Notes) the Chinese people thought the sky was round while the earth was flat and square. They were convinced that their country was located at the very heart of the square earth. They would not appreciate the geographic concept in which we had pushed them to a single corner in the east. In order to maintain the Chinese established mindset that has lasted for thousands of years, Ricci invented some expediency: he smartly changed the mapping, making China just at the centre of the whole world map in his *The Great Map of Ten Thousand Nations*. (Zou 1996, p.5) The idea that “I heard to civilize the barbarians with the culture of the Chinese nation, never heard the Chinese nation was civilized by the barbarians” (Part I of Tengwengong, *Mencius*) had been deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of the nation. That situation had continued from the very beginning to the 19th century, and the Chinese people during that period only knew themselves as the sovereign state in *tianxia* without realizing that parallel sovereignties existed in the world. However, the fierce collision between the West and the East in the 19th century completely changed Chinese people’s comprehension of the world as a whole. In the works such as *Haiguo tuzhi* (the *illustrated records of overseas*) by Wei Yuan and *Yinghuan Zhilue* (the *brief records of nations around*) by Xu Jishe, the Chinese character *guo* 国 began to be used together with *yi* 夷 (barbarians), representing different nations or countries in the world.

Before that, the word *yi* (barbarians) or its synonymy usually used to refer to the surrounding four big tribes in China’s four directions outside *tianxia* in central China reflected a dominated China ethno-centralist ideology. As the *Chunqiu Zuozhuan* 春秋左传 (the *Zuo Qiuming Edition of Spring and*

Autumn Annals) said, “Those none other than our race will definitely have a different mind.” (Yuan 1994, p.15) The changing of terms from *tianxia* to *yi*, to *guo* and to nations was a definite consequence for the Chinese to know the world. At the same time, it had also broken the *tianxia* cosmology and time-space concept that the China was a united whole *tianxia*. The adaptations of such lexicology from “*yi*” 夷 (barbarian) to “*hainei*” 海内 (within the seas), to “nations” and to “world” were not only the change of geographic range and the mapping size of the ancient Chinese people’s *tianxia*, but also an alternation of fixed thinking mode of *tianxia* in their mind. As a result of this change, the “barbarian races” bordering the four directions were exalted from “vassal states” to “nations” equal to China, while China degraded from the leadership of *tianxia* to an ordinary country belonging to one of the nations among ten thousand nations. The central authority of *tianxia* had come nearly to an end, while the surrounding marginal nations were rising up, as the centre was gradually de-centered weakening and dissolving.

Huang Zongxi, a well-known thinker and philosopher at the turn of the Ming and Qing dynasties, had criticized the feudal idea taking *tianxia* as a family property. In terms of the relationships between a monarch and his subjects or the people, whoever should be the host and whoever should be the guest? As Huang Zongxi argued, the people were the master of *tianxia* and the monarch was only a servant in the ancient history. In the feudal autarchies, this relationship was upset, and a monarch could cruelly torment and separate or disperse people of *tianxia* just for his own personal benefit and desire. According to Huang Zongxi, the laws in and before the Three Ancient Dynasties had been established for the sake of *tianxia*, while the laws in the feudal era after the Three Ancient Dynasties were made only for the monarchs themselves. Therefore, he called upon to abolish the laws of monarchs and restore the laws of *tianxia*.

In the eyes of Gu Yanwu, another famous thinker in China, *tianxia* was more a geographic concept, than a kind of cultural identification. In his work known as *Ri Zhi Lu* 日知录 (*the records of daily progressive knowledge*), Gu Yanwu differentiated the subjugation of a state and that of *tianxia*:

There is a difference between the subjugation of a state and that of *tianxia*. Then how to tell the difference? When a dynasty is replaced by another, it is a change of family name and we say it is the subjugation of a state; and when the benevolence and righteousness are overridden so much so that even animals are directed to eat people and that even human beings become cannibals, we call it the subjugation of *tianxia*... Therefore, if one knew how to safeguard *tianxia*, he then knew how to

safeguard a state. It is upon the duty of a monarch and those who enjoy wealth and power to safeguard a state, while as with the security of *tianxia*, even a person as humble as an unlearned commoner should shoulder the responsibility. (Gu 1994, p.471)

Gu Yanwu lived in a turbulent period when the Chinese nation was facing its threat. Later, his words were condensed as a pithy saying implying a moral view “Even the humblest commoner is responsible for the fate of *tianxia*”. During that period, the Chinese nation was in a critical period of life and death. In the tumultuous years during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, Gu Yanwu devotedly himself to exploring the way to regulating the government and bringing peace to *tianxia* and to saving and strengthening the country on its way to prosperity.

Gu Yanwu’s social political claim was to make the monarchy relinquish power and his privilege of taking *tianxia* as personal property, simplifying redundant political formalities for people’s conveniences, tapping resources and improving the strengths of the nation. Although Gu Yanwu advocated the system of hereditary chiefs at prefecture and county levels, which was somewhat progressive and represented the wishes of civil society, his proposal was not practical at all. Despite of this, as a man of lofty ideals and a man who placed national interests above anything else at the critical juncture of national crisis, he did play a role in initiating a new kind of thinking of that era.

Comparatively, the English word “nation” (in the sense of nation-state) has been a concept of cultural philosophy and ethnology over the last hundreds of years in the West. It contains mutual historical traditions, cultures, languages and ideas of independent sovereignty for the Europeans. The expression “Those none other than our race” was employed to suggest the awareness of discriminating the distinction between those consanguineous tribes in the primordial stage. As time elapsed, the involvement of this concept had extended out of the sphere of the Chinese *tianxia* thought, to referring to all the nations including China. Judging from this point, this conception was shaped due to the fact that China was comparing itself with other nations in the world and through this comparison; the self-identity of China gradually came into being. From the casual use of such concepts as “*tianxia*”, “*hainei*” (four corners within the sea) and “*siyi*” 四夷 (barbarians in four directions) to the reference of “nations” and “state”, the Chinese displayed its national awareness and identification with the Chinese nation. Thus, “nation” and “state” have been merged as one, and the ideas about them have been deeply implanted upon the people’s sub-consciousness.

Now that “*tianxia*” had become a “nation-state”, then was it necessary to hold on to the Confucian tradition or the *daotong* (道统) which had persisted for thousands of years? “A nation must always remain faithful to its own history and its own culture in order to maintain an independent existence on earth. For a people to keep faith with itself and progress courageously, it ought not to renounce its own old civilization lest it become like a river without a source or a tree without roots. While wishing to assimilate the new knowledge of western civilization, we ought to give it as a base the principles of Confucius.” (Levenson 1958, p106) In the mind of the traditionalists, Confucianism was a unique national character in China. If it was done with, the nation would perish, and so it was not possible for the nation to survive. Kang Youwei and his cohorts often quoted the history of Jews to encourage China, and referred to the history of the Mexicans to warn the Chinese people: the reason that the Jews could still exist is that they have been holding on to Judaism, although their country had perished; whereas the Mexicans were increasingly losing their vigor and became an imitator of other nations because they had been Hispanicized and abandoned their own religion. What Levenson was concerned with was whether Confucianism as a national religion would continue to exist or become an exhibit in a museum. Although “China as *tianxia*” in terms of geographical range was primarily a geographic concept, for a nation of long historical and cultural tradition, the identification with the tradition was a spiritual plea. And only in the interweaving of the new and the old, the texture of history could be woven and renewed.

Doubtlessly, the Chinese nation has become a unique great cultural system independent of the forest of nations in the world due to the exchange, collision and combination with other ethnics over the last thousands of years. From the proliferation and expansion of the culture of the Zhou Dynasty in the middle China, to the collision and gradual combination of the Chu culture in south China during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, and from the Buddhist culture transplanted from abroad to the absorption and assimilation of European culture, the Chinese culture was not exclusive in character, but had absorbed these cultures with its open-mindedness, just like streams flowing into a sea, which have enriched the contents of *tianxia* notion in Chinese culture. It had fully displayed the tenacity, cohesion, comprehensiveness and receptivity of the Chinese cultural system, of which Confucianism as a dominant culture played a significant role in shaping the Chinese character, for it has not only the commitment and obligation to shoulder the responsibility of *Dao* under *tianxia*, but also the sentiments of cherishing its compatriots and country. This is where we should objectively reflect, examine and think over, and this

is where we as Chinese should take pride on. In an era of globalization of diversities (a new kind of *tianxia* perspective), the cultural values along with its cultural tradition of the Chinese nation integrating with the strengths both of the Western and Eastern cultures, will certainly form a new kind of distinctive culture with Chinese characteristics in the near future.

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