

# Which *tianxia* 天下? And When?: A Preliminary Review of the Concept of *tianxia* in Scholastic Literature since 1950

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## Introduction

In academic literature of the past two decades, the Sinitic phrase *tianxia* 天下 “under heaven” has been experiencing something of a minor renaissance.<sup>1</sup> In the two decades after 1950, scholars of modern international relations writing in English had used the term, culled from early Sinographic works of classic historiography and philosophy produced in the Chinese tradition, to describe and analyze what was presented as a traditional or pre-modern Chinese view of the “world order”—that is, the nature of state sovereignty, principles for understanding and carrying out inter-state relations, and notions of interiority and exteriority vis-à-vis cultural and political communities in and outside of East Asia—that was ascribed to the leaders and statesmen of Chinese state entities and successive dynasties since the fifth century BCE or so up until the last century of the Qing 清 period (1644-1911). After those decades in the middle 20th century, interest in the term *tianxia* and the views of the world that it stood for became for the most part the concern of antiquarians as they carried out historical studies of early China, but in the past twenty years or so, the concept of *tianxia* has once more become a central focus of the analyses of scholars who seek to describe the contemporary state of affairs in China and trends in its relations with the rest of the world. Since the term has become a core node of studies that either interpret what might be termed the “traditional Chinese view of the world order,” critique such interpretations, or track the influence of that traditional view today (and at times seek to reinvent it for practical application in our own age), it seems worthwhile to review the history of the term *tianxia* as it has appeared in early Chinese Sinographic texts and to recall how the term has been analyzed in modern scholarship.

This is a formidable undertaking, and what follows is an attempt to patch together a working overview of this subject. I have limited the number of sources included here

<sup>1</sup> The phrase *tianxia* has been conventionally translated into English using the prefixed pronoun modifier “all,” yielding the most commonly used coinage of “all under heaven” (along with its variant “all under the sky”). It should be noted that nothing in the term itself explicitly denotes the meaning “all.” Other English translations have been “the world,” “throughout the world,” “the kingdom,” and “empire.”

in order to allow for a faithful treatment of the studies summarized. It is in no way an exhaustive review of all sources that have touched on the term *tianxia* and its meanings throughout history, but is intended as a rough introduction to how the term *tianxia* appeared in primary sources and has been treated in secondhand literature (and by those who claim to be writing directly in a putative tradition of *tianxia* thought).

### A Diachronic History of *tianxia*: The First Millennium BCE to the Republican Period

The phrase *tianxia* has a long history. As with so many terms found in early Sinographic texts, the question of exactly how long is difficult to resolve.

One scholar who has attempted to track the early beginnings of that history for *tianxia* is early China scholar Yuri Pines. In his rigorous 2002 study titled “Changing Views of *tianxia* in Pre-Imperial Discourse,” Pines notes that for the earliest reliable evidence, the phrase *tianxia* appears a small number of times in the earliest layers of the *Shang shu* 尚書 (Book of Documents) and *Shi jing* 詩經 (Classic of Odes) textual traditions, which suggests that usage of the phrase can be dated back to sometime during the Western Zhou 西周 (c. 1045-771 BCE) or the early decades of the Eastern Zhou 東周 period (771-221 BCE).<sup>2</sup> However, as Pines notes, these occurrences are few and far between. Pines argues that in those earliest usages, the phrase *tianxia* seems to refer to lands that were directly under the control of the Zhou 周 king, as distinct from its later usages denoting a larger geographic space whose borders were defined by perceptions of the shared cultural identity of its inhabitants.

In contrast to those early layers of text, the most substantial evidence of the earliest usage of *tianxia* can be found in the parts of the *Zuo zhuan* 左傳 (Zuo’s Transmitted Account), a text much of whose contents (Pines argues) can be reliably dated to the Spring and Autumn period 春秋時代 (722-476 BCE).<sup>3</sup> Based on the *Zuo zhuan*, Pines observes “a gradual increase in the use of the term *tianxia*” during the Spring and Autumn period, and argues from the textual evidence that, amidst the political disintegration of that period, the elites of the different feudal states that made up the Zhou realm began to perceive themselves as possessing a certain cultural unity among them, and so used the term *tianxia* to refer to the physical space inhabited by those who shared this particular set of cultural traits and ethical values.<sup>4</sup> As an analogy for *tianxia*, Pines suggests the ancient Greek term *oikoumenē* (lit., “the inhabited [earth]”), which denoted the space demarcated by communities who spoke varieties of ancient Greek and shared what was perceived of as being the same culture.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Yuri Pines, “Changing Views of *tianxia* in Pre-Imperial Discourse,” *Oriens Extremus* 43 (2002): 101–102.

<sup>3</sup> Pines, 101-103.

<sup>4</sup> Pines, 102.

<sup>5</sup> Pines, 102.

Referring to Joseph Levenson's (1920-1969) study of the term (published in 1952), and using the conventional English rendering of the phrase *tianxia* as "all under heaven," Pines explicates the *tianxia* of the Spring and Autumn period thus:

The primary meaning of *tianxia* in the *Zuo zhuan* supports Levenson's observation of *tianxia* as a cultural realm, "a regime of value." The speakers often mention that certain behavior would be detested, or alternatively welcomed by All under Heaven, and the context invariably points at those segments of the world that possess common cultural values, i.e. the Zhou elite. In these instances, *tianxia* evidently refers to "public opinion," i.e. common values of the ruling aristocracy in *Chunqiu* 春秋 states.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to *tianxia* referring to a sphere of cultural similarity, Pines also observes from the *Zuo zhuan* that *tianxia* of the *Chunqiu* period denoted a limited zone that was distinct from other peoples of the known world, who were perceived as being culturally separate: "Examination of the occurrences of *tianxia* in the *Zuo zhuan* suggests that its limits never surpassed that of the Zhou world; alien tribes were apparently beyond the fringes of *tianxia*."<sup>7</sup>

Pines observes a significant change that appears to have come about in the Warring States period 戰國時代 (465-221 BCE) in terms of how the phrase *tianxia* was used and understood. Over the course of the fourth and third-century BCE, in texts like the *Mozi* 墨子, *Mengzi* 孟子, *Xunzi* 荀子, and *Han Feizi* 韓非子, *tianxia* is increasingly conceived of as a space that is to be subject to political rule and governed as a coherent political unit.<sup>8</sup> In Pines' words, "Tianxia was no longer a mere *oikoumenē*, an inhabited world, but rather it became a field of potentially unified political rule, an imperium."<sup>9</sup>

Pines also observes that in the Warring States period, alongside the idea of *tianxia* as a governed world, there can be seen two parallel but contradictory conceptions of what peoples and communities were to be included in the concept of *tianxia*. One of these is a universalistic conception of *tianxia*, which Pines finds to be evinced in the *Mozi* and the *Chunqiu gongyang zhuan* 春秋公羊傳 (Gongyang's Transmitted Account of the Spring and Autumn Annals). In the latter text, for example, there is expressed the view that "barbarian" peoples outside of the Zhou cultural zone were to be included in *tianxia*:

The *Gongyang zhuan* regards the 'barbarians' as inferior, but still sees them as an inseparable part of the would-be-unified realm. As Wu, Yue and other non-Xia entities became important players on the international scene, their incorporation into *tianxia* became inevitable. This process was further intensified due to the expansion

<sup>6</sup> Pines, 103.

<sup>7</sup> Pines, 103.

<sup>8</sup> Pines, 104-107.

<sup>9</sup> Pines, 106.

of the great powers of the Warring States, which were continuously absorbing new lands, inhabited by non-Xia peoples. *Tianxia*, accordingly, transcended its original boundaries and became an inclusive term that comprised both the Central States and alien lands. For most late Warring States thinkers *tianxia* was evidently identical to the entire known world.<sup>10</sup>

The other idea that ran parallel to the universalistic conception of *tianxia* in the Warring States period was a non-universalistic conception of *tianxia* that could exclude certain states and communities. This can be seen in texts belonging to the *Zhan guo ce* 戰國策 (Stratagems of the Warring States) and *Han Feizi* that discuss or imply the exclusion of Qin 秦 from being considered part of *tianxia*.<sup>11</sup> Pines explains that part of the reason for this view of Qin was cultural changes that were being experienced within Qin:

In the mid-fourth century BCE...Shang Yang's 商鞅 (d. 338 BCE) reforms changed the face of Qin. As this state abandoned significant aspects of Zhou ritual culture, its unique identity became more pronounced, resulting in abundant pejorative remarks about Qin's alleged "barbarianism" in Zhanguo texts.<sup>12</sup>

Pines proposes that after the consolidation of the Qin empire, Qin again reformulated the idea of *tianxia*, promulgating a notion of the Qin state as being the unifier of *tianxia*, and therefore by its own fashioning (and with the acts of force that accompanied the consolidation of the empire) reintegrated itself into the idea of *tianxia*.<sup>13</sup>

The contradiction that Pines notes is important. In the late Warring States period, the idea of *tianxia* was subject to both expansion (coming to be presented as inclusive of peoples that were traditionally viewed as being "external") and contraction (being presented as excluding a state—Qin—that had hitherto been part of the Zhou imperium). That is, in the same period of history, *tianxia* was used sometimes to articulate a universalistic ideology (one that was to be served by political absorption of peoples outside of what had hitherto been the zone of inclusion), and sometimes used to express the idea of a non-universal cultural field that excluded communities that electively fell outside the defined set of Zhou cultural practices.

Pines thus observes different meanings of *tianxia* at different points early in the timeline of Sinographic texts. He notes that *tianxia* separately denoted: (1) a mostly cultural sphere that did not include outside peoples; (2) a field of potentially unified political rule the bounds of which are not explicitly defined; and (3) a view of the entire known world as a space that favored a shared normative cultural ethos and unifying political regime that out of a kind of missionary interest could expand to

<sup>10</sup> Pines, 109.

<sup>11</sup> Pines, 109-110.

<sup>12</sup> Pines, 111-112.

<sup>13</sup> Pines, 113.

include and integrate hitherto outside peoples. In addition, he observes two contradictory ideas of *tianxia* circulating in parallel during the Warring States period: one that was universal and one that was non-universal. From these different meanings of *tianxia* at different points in time, he draws conclusions regarding “the flexibility of the boundaries of [the concept of] All under Heaven,” a flexibility that would define discourse that engaged the concept of *tianxia* throughout the Chinese imperial dynastic period (221 BCE-1911 CE):

The universality of *tianxia* was subject to continuous negotiation, and its meaning was influenced by both political and cultural considerations. This flexibility was present, albeit in a different form, in imperial discourse as well, when the universality of *tianxia* was occasionally questioned with regard to “barbarians.” The changing boundaries of *tianxia* and the coexistence of political and cultural dimensions of this term allowed imperial statesmen and thinkers to accommodate political changes in the map of East Asia, preserving the sense of normality even during times of dynastic decline and foreign conquest.<sup>14</sup>

To give a very elided account, during the imperial period that followed the consolidation of the Qin empire in 221 B.C.E., the term *tianxia* was used in similar textual contexts (historiographical and philosophic texts and official documents and proclamations). Its use has extended into the modern era, through the period of the Chinese Republic (1912-1949), and into the current period of People’s Republic (from 1949). Its use over the course of these successive dynasties and periods has also been the object of historical study (touched on below).

Perhaps the most prominent example of its use in the modern era has been Sun Yat-sen’s 孫中山 (1866-1925) embrace of the anthemic phrase *tianxia weigong* 天下爲公 “a public and common spirit prevails under heaven.” This formulation originally appears in a chapter of the *Li ji* 禮記 (Record of Rites)—a work with layers of texts from the Warring States, Qin, and Western Han 西漢(206 BCE-9 CE) periods—where the figure Gongzi 孔子 presents an ideal model for human society in which its individual members possess a spirit of citizenship and labor for the common good. Sun embraced the phrase as a central motto that expressed his vision for the modern Chinese nation-state: a society in which the needs of commonfolk were reflected in the decisions made by their rulers. In his 1924 speeches that expounded his “Three Principles of the People” 三民主義, Sun quotes the phrase from the *Li ji*, explaining that in that classic work it summarized an ideal that “advocates for a grand unified world of the people’s rights” 主張民權的大同世界.<sup>15</sup> Sun cites this as proof that

<sup>14</sup> Pines, 113.

<sup>15</sup> The phrase *tianxia weigong* appears in the first of his speeches on the principle of *min quan* 民權 “the people’s power”, delivered on March 9, 1924. See Sun Zhongshan 孫中山, “Min quan zhu yi di yi jiang” 民權主義第一講 in Sun Zhongshan, *San min zhu yi* 三民主義, 三民主義/民權主義第一講 – 维基文库, 自由的图书馆, accessed December 9, 2025. The phrase also occurs frequently as a central

“Chinese people had already more than two thousand years ago come in their thinking to an understanding of the people’s rights” 中國人對於民權的見解. 在二千多年以前. 已經老早想到了.<sup>16</sup> Sun is more focused on *min quan* 民權 “people’s rights” than in defining the spatial or conceptual limits of *tianxia*, but his expiatory language suggests a naturally vague delineation of the term as meaning *shi jie* 世界 “the world” as a kind of utopia where all humans were united in their working for the common good. However, his repeated focus in his “Three Principle” speeches on “the Chinese state” (*Zhong guo* 中國) as the site for realizing political ideals suggests that, for Sun, while *tianxia* denoted a universal ideal that could be envisioned for all of humanity, discrete nation-states, limited in their scope to serving the nations from which they emerged (and therefore in the modern view, circumscribed by language, culture, and a commonly held imaginary conception of national community), should be tasked with the responsibility of delivering this ideal to their constituent members (composed of the “national people” 國民). Absent from Sun’s discussion of *tianxia* is any idea that this role should be invested in a single state entity to govern all humanity.

### Conclusions to be Drawn from a Critical Diachronic Study

It can be seen from the diachronic (and somewhat elided) account above that the phrase *tianxia* has had a kind of perennial existence in Sinographic texts of political philosophy since the Spring and Autumn period up until the modern period until at least the end of the Republican period in 1949. One might well marvel at the longevity of the term and wonder why this has been the case. Part of this might have to do with the fact that the language of the phrase itself is simultaneously encompassing and vague. The word “sky” or “heaven” 天 denotes a vast but undefined space, and the word “below” 下 only conveys a relative location to that indefinite vastness. One might well ask if “under heaven” is intended to denote the entire space of the earth under heaven, just a significant part of it, or only a particular patch of it somewhere. The answer, of course, is that it could be any of these meanings, to vary with context and explicit qualification. This ambiguity endows the term with the kind of flexibility that Pines observes, and this has allowed it to take on the contours of the historical setting in which it was deployed as well as to serve as an expression of the cultural, geographic, political, or philosophic space (be it limited or boundless) that a given speaker intended. Also, by a certain point time, the term, featured in what had become canonized texts, acquired an antique feel that doubtless gave it a certain ring of authority and timelessness. These reasons together made *tianxia* a viable term for indicating the boundaries (or non-boundaries) of shared cultural or community spaces in statements delineating putative commonality or, alternately, the regions of the

logical motif in Sun Zhongshan’s works of calligraphy. See, for example, Sun Zhongshan 孫中山, “*Tianxia weigong*” 天下為公, [First public display of Dr. Sun Yat-sen’s calligraphy work, “Tian Xi Wei Gong,”](#) accessed December 9, 2025.

<sup>16</sup> See Sun Zhongshan 孫中山, “*Min quan zhu yi di yi jiang*” 民權主義第一講 (cited above).

human geography that could be endowed with putative rights or designated as putatively legitimate objects of government domain by state entities. Since any human action (collective or individual) must take place in some kind of physical space, the formulation *tianxia*, by virtue of its vagueness, was able to modulate with the changing scope and nature of the contemporaneous known world and serve as the object of desired political action or ideological view.

### Scholarly Discourse since 1950

Since 1950, academic literature has shown varying degrees of interest in the topic of *tianxia*. Such interest has taken two forms. The first one is the adoption of an historical, positivistic view. This consists of studies that have attempted to describe how the phrase *tianxia* has been used at different points in time in the history of Sinographic texts and what concepts it has been made to stand for. The first two parts of the present paper comprise such a study, and most of the studies that have been done about *tianxia* fall into this category. They consist of one or some combination of the following kinds of analysis in relation to time: synchronic analysis (evaluating the phrase as it was used at a certain point in time), diachronic analysis (evaluating changes in its use over time), and panchronic analysis (attempting to describe constancies or commonalities in its usage through time). The second form of interest in *tianxia* has been a kind of normative view. This has been to present *tianxia* and a particular definition of it as a way in which the world ought to be viewed. The following provides a brief account of the history of the discourse of *tianxia* since the mid-twentieth century.

#### Positivistic *tianxia*

Joseph Levenson, writing in 1952 (in the early days of the Cold War), authored a short study contrasting a “traditional” Chinese view of the concept of *tianxia* with a “modern” understanding of the term and modern attitude towards it.<sup>17</sup> The title of Levenson’s work, “*T’ien-hsia and kuo, and the ‘Transvaluation of Values’*” is an allusion to a central concept (in German, *Umwertung aller Werte*) in the moral philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) that called for the critical evaluation of traditional Western values in the context of burgeoning modernity in Europe in the late 19th century. Levenson’s study presents the understanding of *tianxia* embodied in the works of early Qing dynasty thinkers Huang Zongyi 黃宗義 (1610-1695) and Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613-1682), where Levenson argues that it stands for all of Chinese civilization. Levenson observes that Huang and Gu advocated a protective stewardship of *tianxia* as a cultural entity (that is, one informed and structured by the traditional

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Levenson, “*T’ien-hsia and kuo, and the ‘Transvaluation of Values’*,” *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 11.4 (Aug. 1952): 447-451.

values of Chinese civilization), rather than as a state entity. Levenson summarizes Liang Qichao's 梁啓超 (1873-1929) critique of this traditional view thus: because embedded in this view was the idea that the cultural entity *tianxia* was the entirety of the civilized world, it was no longer viable in the modern, multicivilizational world and was therefore hobbling the newly emerging *guo* 國 Chinese nation-state. Expressing Liang's critique, Levenson writes, "China, in short, must deem itself not a world but a unit in the world. Unless it chose to come down from its pedestal, its view of itself as *tianxia*, and to stand as a *guo* among *guo*, it would be smashed."<sup>18</sup> Levenson's essay portrays the idea of *tianxia* as having been part of a mindset that understood the world as consisting of, on the one hand, a limited regional space constituted of the "civilized" world and its inhabitants, and on the other, the "uncivilized" world that was everywhere and everyone else.

John Fairbank's preface ("A Preliminary Framework") to the seminal 1968 volume that he edited, *The Chinese Traditional World Order: China's Foreign Relations*, includes *tianxia* as a fundamental concept in its description of a traditional "international order composed of China and states or peoples in contact with China," that "flourished until the Western powers intruded into East Asia in the mid-nineteenth century."<sup>19</sup> Fairbank observes that in order to describe this system in modern English terms, it is necessary to first "find out how it was understood by Chinese and other East Asian peoples in their own languages at the time."<sup>20</sup> This view grew out of the following insight:

The traditional Chinese world order can hardly be called international because the participants in it did not use concepts corresponding to the Western ideas of nation, or sovereignty, or equality of states each have equal sovereignty. In our research we therefore had to develop quite consciously from the outset two distinct systems of terminology, one derived from East Asian languages to represent the theory and practice of this order as understood by those who participated in it at the time and one to present our own analysis of it in English.<sup>21</sup>

Fairbanks lists *tianxia* as one of fifteen concepts (many of which are, like *tianxia*, expressed in terms culled from Chinese) to describe this "traditional Chinese world order." Fairbank explains that the term referred to a cultural entity that had for millenia also been a unified political entity:

The Chinese world (*tianxia*) never lost its sense of all-embracing unity and cultural entity. Even in China's "feudal" age (the Warring States of 403-221 BCE), the many walled centers that functioned politically as multiple units of equal states, retained

<sup>18</sup> Levenson, 451.

<sup>19</sup> John Fairbank, "A Preliminary Framework" in John Fairbank, ed. *The Chinese Traditional World Order: China's Foreign Relations* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1968), pp.4-5.

<sup>20</sup> Fairbank, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Fairbank, 5.

the theory of their subordination to the Zhou dynasty ruler. In 221 BCE they were actually unified in the Qin empire. Chinese ethnocentrism and unity were reaffirmed. Outward movement continued to push the frontier southward and to maintain Chinese outposts in Korea, North Vietnam, and Central Asia.<sup>22</sup>

Fairbank's description of *tianxia* coheres with Levenson's idea of traditional *tianxia* as a cultural region. Fairbank's explanation also incorporates two aspects: (1) an explicit idea of unifying political control (in mentioning the Qin empire); and (2) suggestion of a spatial limitation to *tianxia* (through a description of frontiers), though in Fairbank's account the space that was limited was constantly expanding. Fairbank's analysis is a panchronic perspective that understand *tianxia* to be a conceptual view that informed views of the world in communities that are conventionally labelled as "Chinese" through time since the Zhou period up until the mid-nineteenth century.

There appears to have been a lull in attention to the conception of *tianxia* in English literature on international relations after the U.S.-led Western rapprochement that was initiated with the People's Republic of China in 1972 (and continued to be formalized over the course of the 1970s), but in the context of the growing economic and political influence of China in the early 2000s, consideration of the concept of *tianxia* revived. Yuri Pines' study of the phrase as it occurs in early Sinographic texts (described in detail above) that was published in 2002 grew it seems primarily out of sustained interest in early Chinese political philosophy that has characterized the field of early Chinese history and textual studies, but it is a landmark in modern scholarship for providing a close analysis of the subtly changing meanings of *tianxia* from the Western Zhou to the Qin period and is closely grounded in rigorous textual analysis. As stated above, one of its important insights is that based on the textual record from early China, there can be observed diverse (and at times contradictory) conceptions of *tianxia*. Pines' study is to be commended for its delicate treatment of diverse conceptions of *tianxia*, and I would only add that it might be possible to develop from Pines' foundation an even more complex view of the Warring States intellectual milieu in which some *tianxia* discourse was a site for discussion of human values that were posited as being universal without necessarily entailing a form of political control.

Interest in the concept of *tianxia* continued through the 2010s to the present day. Notable positivistic studies of the traditional view of *tianxia* in this period include Zhang Feng's "Regionalization in the *Tianxia*? Continuity and Change in China's Foreign Policy," published in 2016 in the volume *China and the Global Politics of Regionalization* edited by Emilian Kavalski. Zhang, taking his start from observations of Fairbank, begins with a panchronic conception of a "traditional Chinese worldview" in which the notion of a *tianxia* is understood as having a central place: "In the traditional Chinese worldview there was no conception of 'region.' Instead, the

<sup>22</sup> Fairbank, 5.

distinctive concept used by the Chinese was *Tianxia*.<sup>23</sup> Importantly, Zhang points out that the common translation of the term *tianxia* as “all under heaven” is problematic for the reason that *tianxia* was not understood as being identical to the whole world:

Chinese rulers, by claiming to be ‘overlords of the *Tianxia*’, did not intend to lay their suzerainty over the entire known world. Rather their *Tianxia* was more circumscribed, generally referring to the Chinese empire and the adjacent areas with which the Chinese interacted—roughly corresponding to what we today know as Northeast and Southeast Asia and parts of Central Asia.<sup>24</sup>

Like Fairbanks, Zhang proposes that *tianxia* was traditionally understood as being a limited zone composed of a space of direct political rule combined with exterior regions of influence and interaction. Zhang moves on to analyze additional concepts and views that informed Ming dynasty (1368-1644) foreign policy and tribute relations with surrounding states and polities.

Other recent works that discuss or integrate the topic of *tianxia* include Mark Lewis and Mei-yu Hsieh’s “*Tianxia* and the Invention of Empire in East Asia,” published as part of the 2017 collection of essays edited by Ban Wang and titled *Chinese Visions of World Order: Tianxia, Culture, and World Politics*.<sup>25</sup> Pang Laikwan’s 2024 study of “the historical roots of Chinese sovereignty,” *One and All: The Logic of Chinese Sovereignty* also includes discussion of the history of the concept of *tianxia*.<sup>26</sup>

Notable also is Victor Fong’s study of delineations of state territorial domain and notions of internality and externality embedded in the Tang Code 唐律 as part of his essay “Law, Territory, and Statehood: The Legal Conception of *Guo* in the Tang Code,” published this year (2025) in the present journal.<sup>27</sup> Like Zhang, Fong expresses concern that the use of the term *tianxia* as a fundamental concept for understanding pre-modern conceptions of Chinese imperial authority can easily lead an observer to incorrectly assume that pre-modern Chinese imperial states claimed jurisdiction over the entire known world. In light of this, Fong uses views of limited territorial domain of *guo* 國 present in the Tang Code to propose a complex view of how the Tang state understood its own authority. As Fong points out, language in the Tang Code in places does certainly gesture at assumptions of some kind of extra-territorial authority in certain cases—for example, the use of *tianzi xinbao* 天子信寶 “son of heaven letter seals” in the conscription of troops from *fan guo* 番國 “foreign states”.<sup>28</sup> However, the

<sup>23</sup> Zhang Feng, “Regionalization in the *Tianxia*? Continuity and Change in China’s Foreign Policy” in Emilian Kavalski, ed., *China and the Global Politics of Regionalization* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2016, Kindle Edition), p.17.

<sup>24</sup> Feng, 17.

<sup>25</sup> See below for bibliographic information of Lewis and Hsieh’s chapter.

<sup>26</sup> Pang Laikwan, *One and All: The Logic of Chinese Sovereignty* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024), pp.42-47.

<sup>27</sup> Victor Fong, “Law, Territory, and Statehood: The Legal Conception of *guo* in the Tang Code,” *Journal of Sinographic Philologies and Legacies* 1.3 (2025): 38-45.

<sup>28</sup> Fong, 46-47.

overwhelming trend in the Code is to recognition on the part of the Tang state of territorial limits to its control and jurisdictional domain; its power to administer laws was understood as not extending beyond its own borders and the existence and legitimacy of foreign state entities was clearly recognized.<sup>29</sup> Based on the evidence that Fong cites, even the claims of the Tang state to extra-territorial authority functioned only on the level of rhetoric and theatrical presentation and were not manifested in foreign states in any substantial form (such as the presence of bureaucracies or state agents administering territories abroad). While Fong's findings are entirely consistent with the interpretation of the *tianxia* concept as being a limited space that Fairbank and Zhang propose, his synchronic study applies an evidence-based methodology to provide a stable case example that complements Fairbank's panchronic account (with *tianxia* as an analytical tool) of pre-modern Chinese views of the world order and contributes to scholarly discussion of worldviews embraced by past Chinese imperial state entities.

### Normative *tianxia* and Its Critics

In addition to the positivistic studies listed above, in the past two decades scholastic literature has also seen the emergence of a concept of *tianxia* being proposed normatively as a foundational principle for a world order alternative to currently prevailing international frameworks. The works of philosopher-historian Zhao Tingyang 趙汀陽 perhaps best represent this contemporary normative view (and Zhao himself may very well be the originator of this view). Zhao's 2005 Chinese-language work *Tianxia tixi* 天下體系 (which might be translated as "A *Tianxia* System") was an early published version of his ideas.<sup>30</sup> A version of his ideas was first published in English in 2012 in the form of the essay "All-Under-Heaven and Methodological Relationism: An Old Story and New World Peace," which was part of the volume of essays *Contemporary Chinese Political Thought: Debates and Perspectives* (edited by Fred Dallmayr and Zhao himself).<sup>31</sup> A full-length translation of his 2005 book was published in 2021 under the title *All under Heaven: The Tianxia System for a Possible World Order*. Zhao in his preface to the 2021 English edition describes his project in the following way: "My effort has been to trace back to an understanding of the ancient concept of *tianxia*, rethinking its ambition to formulate an all-inclusive world system under a world constitution that would ensure world peace."<sup>32</sup> Zhao's studies analyze the concept of *tianxia* as it existed in history and reinvent it as a model for the modern world. It suffices here to provide this brief summary of Zhao's work, but it is worth

<sup>29</sup> Fong, 38-45.

<sup>30</sup> See below for the bibliographical information for *Tianxia tixi* 天下體系.

<sup>31</sup> See below for the bibliographical information for "All-Under-Heaven and Methodological Relationism."

<sup>32</sup> Zhao Tingyang, "Foreword to the English edition" in *All under Heaven: The Tianxia System for a Possible World Order*, trans. by Joseph E. Harroff (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021, Kindle Edition).

noting that his views have drawn a substantial amount of adverse criticism. Thoughtful and measured reviewers of Zhao's ideas, such as William Callahan and Odd Westad (the latter of whom wrote one of the prefaces to the 2021 English translation) summarize the points made by critics and also express well-considered doubts of their own regarding the viability of Zhao's propositions.<sup>33</sup>

### Conclusion

This has provided a brief account of the history of the term *tianxia* in Sinographic texts and an initial, non-exhaustive survey of how the term has been analyzed and taken up in scholarly literature since 1950. As the reader may have noticed, the secondhand sources summarized and placed in order above are for the most part written in English. Ideally, a detailed history of the term would be more inclusive of discussion of its use in medieval and late-imperial sources and in Sinographic textual traditions outside of China (as in Korea, Japan, or Vietnam), and the survey of modern scholarship would include studies composed in Chinese, Korean, and Japanese. Despite these shortcomings, I hoped that this overview provides the broad outlines for further study into the subject of *tianxia* in the Sinographic textual traditions of East Asia and the ideas that have been connected to its use regarding views of the world order and relations among states.

For *tianxia*, as for any subject, studies like those of Pines and Fong that remain closely tied to textual evidence and synchronic moments of thought-evidence provide models for the development of an understanding of the world order as viewed by the leaders and ministers of East Asian state entities in pre-modern times. What emerges from this initial survey is that *tianxia* was a term that was open to negotiation and redefinition based on who was using it, when, and for what purpose. If one were to draw a preliminary conclusion, it would be that there was a diversity of meanings applied to the term *tianxia* at different points in time and by different authors. Any totalizing interpretation of the term based on its use in one source would doubtlessly run aground on alternative treatments in other sources, and so to build a history of historical *tianxia*, it is best to proceed on a case-by-case basis.

<sup>33</sup> William Callahan, "Chinese Visions of World Order: Post-Hegemonic or a New Hegemony?" *International Studies Review* 10.4 (Dec. 2008): 756-759; Westad, "New Foreword: Zhao Tingyang and the Tianxia World" in Zhao Tingyang 趙汀陽. *All under Heaven: The Tianxia System for a Possible World Order*, trans. by Joseph E. Harroff (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021, Kindle Edition).

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