

# THINKING THROUGH *TIANXIA*

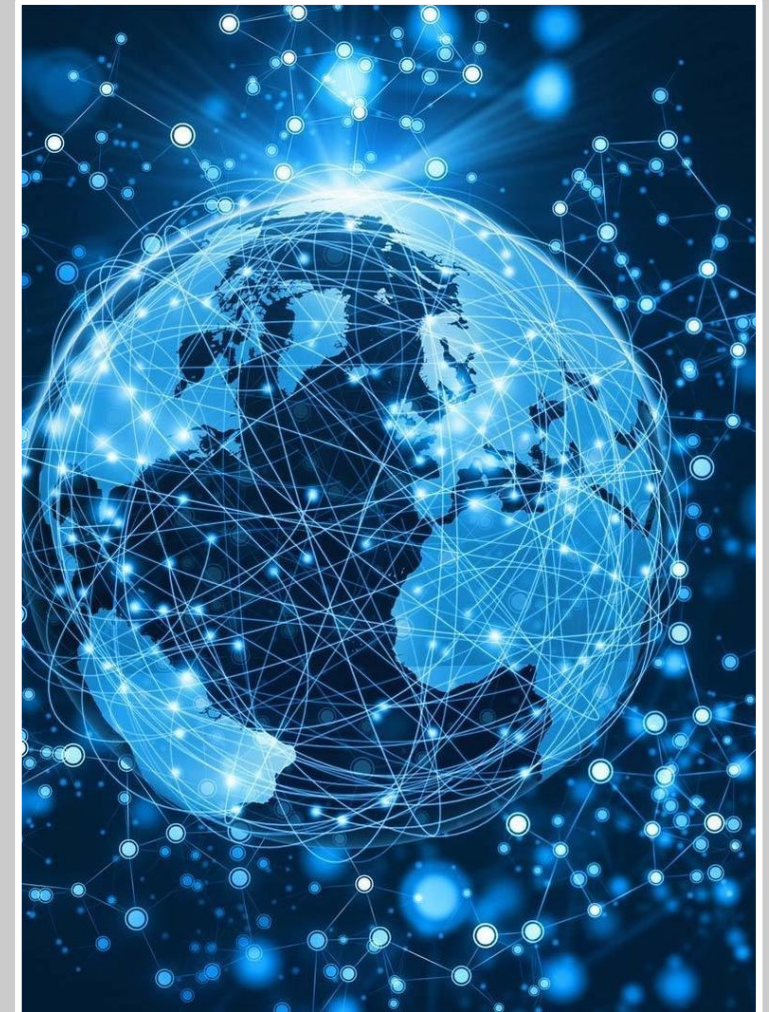
A NEW/OLD HEURISTIC FOR  
WORLDWIDE HIGHER  
EDUCATION

LILI YANG, SIMON MARGINSON  
AND XIN XU  
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# THINK THE WORLD AS WHOLE

- In the last three decades, we have seen a great growth of cross-border activities in higher education, and the emergence of global knowledge
- 'International', as 'inter-' national, between nations, is limited.
- How can we conceive **the world as a whole**, a world with *no outer boundary*, as a positive environment for all within it?
- How can we perceive global or world-wide higher education in a less pejorative, less limiting, more inclusive and more equitable manner than is suggested by the practices of global market, global ranking, White Supremacy (Shahjahan and Edwards 2021), or Anglo-American knowledge hierarchy (Marginson and Xu forthcoming)?
- What is the emerging world? What are the *possible* worlds?
- *Tianxia* provides a transformative approach, one that begins from present realities, and fosters new collaborative social relations at world level in parallel to the inter-dependent global ecology.





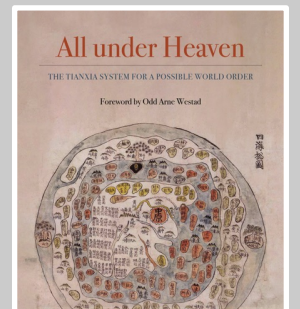
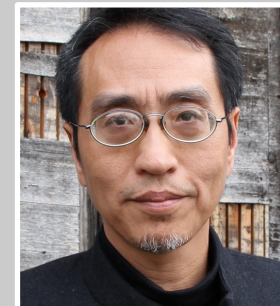
# OPEN ONTOLOGY: THE EVER-EMERGING REAL

The world is changing fast. Global convergence and integration in a world of difference makes it *essential* to address world governance. **But the world as a whole is understood only geographically, not politically, and it is not valued in common:**

- ‘... with respect to the political, only nation-states are deemed significant. It is for this reason that the world has only been exploited as a “common” resource and treated as a domain to be fought over and abused ... This is especially the case within ideologies of hegemonic nation-states, where other nation-states and even the high seas are conceived of as just so much territory to be dominated’ (Zhao Tingyang 2021, pp. 185, 187).



Zhao Tingyang, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, modern expert on *tianxia*



# OPEN ONTOLOGY II: THE PARTICULAR AND THE UNIVERSAL

Qian's (2012), three kinds of universalism:

1. The life-and-death struggle between dominator and the dominated, the realisation of 'universality through the denial of the other.'
2. Transcending the other by avoiding them, and pursuing a kind of 'universality beyond others', neutral to both oneself and the other
3. 'The universality that acknowledges and respects the other' – recognising the universality between oneself and the other through mutual recognition and respect, and actively seeking dialogue and consensus.

*He er butong* (unity of diversity; harmony with diversity) speaks to the equilibrium between seemingly opposing positionalities. We acknowledge the geo-cultural particularity of the *tianxia* idea, with its Sinic roots, and we also see the potential of *tianxia* to travel beyond China and address universal questions about the world.



# TWO CHINESE IDEAS ABOUT THE SPATIAL GOVERNANCE OF HUMAN SOCIETIES

- **Thinking through the nation:** the centralised nation-states.
  - From Qin dynasty (221-206 BCE)
- **Thinking through the world:** *tianxia*, thinking on the basis of the world as a whole, and its governance on the basis of consensual values.
  - Part of the Western Zhou dynasty (1047-771 BCE);
  - It was the mode of statecraft in China until Qin dynasty replaced the politics of the world with the politics of the nation.
- But *tianxia* thinking is still active and has revived in the modern period, partly because of the writings of Zhao Tingyang (e.g. 2021)
- Thinking through the nation and thinking through the world co-exist in China.



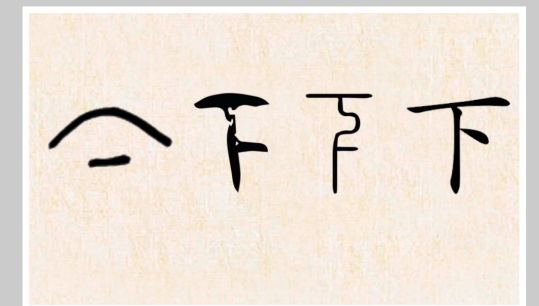
Qin Emperor, as portrayed later in Qing dynasty



Western Zhou Emperor Wen, as portrayed later in Ming dynasty

# TIANXIA AS AN EVOLVING AND LIVING CONCEPT

- Tian (天), literal meanings as sky, heaven, nature, God.
  - The material and natural ‘heaven’, coming from Chinese people’s observation of ‘sky’;
  - A supernatural ‘heaven’ associated with Chinese people’s notions of worship (Gao 2012).
- Xia (下), literal meanings as under, below, down.
- Tian xia (天下): all under heaven.





# STRANDS OF AND DEBATES CONCERNING *TIANXIA*

- An ecological imagining of all human beings and creatures on earth (Liu 2006; Ge 2002).
  - China, or the Central Plain in Northern China, was located in the centre of *tianxia*.
- Cultural constitution and understanding of the world order.
  - A civilisational imagination of the world (Watanabe 2008; Gan 2018);
  - A political structuring of *tianxia* (Watanabe 2008).



# STRANDS OF AND DEBATES CONCERNING *TIANXIA* 2

- Yang & Chen (2020) reveal eleven meanings of *tianxia* in pre-Qin (221-206 BCE):
  - Zhou Dynasty's territory, political and social order, the regime, the supreme power, time and space, all human beings, people's welfare and fortune, routine business, all creatures and things, the territory where people of *Hua* (华) and *Xia* (夏) lived, and political situations.
- Zhao (2011) finds three meanings of *tianxia*:
  - A geographical meaning, the psychological meaning, and the moral/political meaning.
- Gan (2019) points to three facets of the classic idea of *tianxia*:
  - (1) Geographically speaking, *tianxia* means all areas under heaven, or within the four seas;
  - (2) *tianxia* refers to order of governance; (3) *tianxia* points to the recognition of the values underlying the order.
- Wang (2017): *tianxia* as a normative appeal and in realpolitik.
- Critiques on hierarchy and the distinction between 'inner-' & 'outer-' China (Gan 2019, p. 116; Liang 2016).





# DE (德), VIRTUES

- ‘Governance based on virtue is like the North Star taking its place in the sky, while all the other stars revolve around it.’ (*Analects*)
  - “为政以德，譬如北辰居其所，而众星共之。”（《论语·为政》）
- ‘I have heard it said: Win over the disaffected with respect and embrace distant peoples with virtue. With virtue and respect unchanging, there is no one that will not be embraced.’ (*Zuo’s Commentary on The Spring and Autumn Annals*)
  - “管仲言于齐侯曰：臣闻之，招携以礼，怀远以德，德礼不易，无人不怀。”（《左传·僖公七年》）
- ‘The Duke of Zhou found the bond [to connect all people under heaven], *de* (virtue). The universality of *de* made it transcend and tolerate local diversity, and became a centripetal force that connected all together.’ (Li 2012, p. 135)

A large, bold, black Chinese character '德' (De) is centered within a white square frame. The character is written in a traditional, slightly calligraphic style with thick strokes. The top part of the character consists of a curved line on the left and a more complex structure on the right, while the bottom part is a large, rounded shape that tapers to a point at the bottom.

## DE (德), VIRTUES II

- ‘Use the small to govern the great’ (Zhao 2021, p. 43).
- Consensus about shared values, rituals and benefits.
  - The values encompass inclusion, respect for diversity, mutuality and respect for others, and governance based on the consent of people.
- ‘Purely moral exemplars have a difficult time exercising influence unless they are at the same time exemplars of success’ (Zhao 2021, p. 74).



# TIANXIA AND MODERN NATIONALISM, CHINA, AND THE WORLD

- **Conflicting views about the relationship between *tianxia* and nationalism**
  - ‘If we are going to bring peace and harmony to *tianxia* in future, we first need to restore nationalism and the status of our nation, to use our inherent morality centring around peace as a foundation to bring the Great Harmony to the world. ... This is the true spirit of our nationalism’ (Sun 1906/2011, p. 67)
- **Two sets of notions of *tianxia*: China-centred notions and world-centred notions.**
  - ‘Rethinking China’ (*chongsi zhongguo*) (Zhao 2011)
  - Danger of China ‘claiming the *tianxia* idea, which is a true nationalism, as a new cosmopolitanism’ (Ge 2015, p. 54).
  - *Tianxia* as a projection of a global hegemon, and potential danger of forming new a centre-periphery order (Callahan 2008; Callahan and Barabantseva 2011)
  - ‘Reject the illusion of returning to the past “Chinese Empire”, and strive to save the ideals of the world from the disillusionment of China-centrism – while ... inherit and reinterpret certain ideas embodied in the idea of *tianxia*’ (Liu 2015, p. 9)
- **The commonness shared by humanity and human beings’ belongingness to the community (Gan 2019)**
- **‘Thinking through the world’ (Zhao 2011, p. 3; also Zhao 2003, 2018, 2019)**





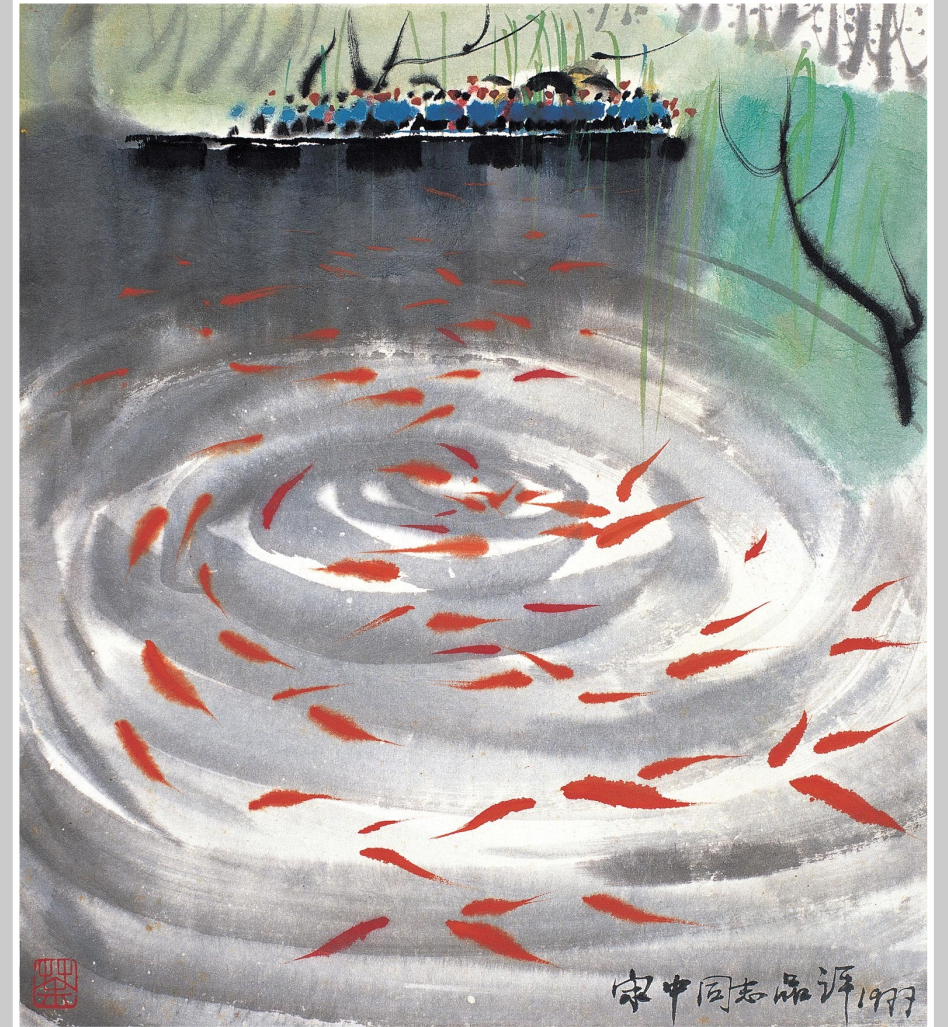
# TIANXIA IN HIGHER EDUCATION STUDIES, A HEURISTIC

- A small number of relevant studies about *tianxia* and higher education. Some focused on *tianxia* and Chinese higher education, others with global scope.
- For instance:
  - **Rui Yang (2015, 2016)** examines paradoxes within the Chinese epistemology of *tianxia*. Yang suggests that the *tianxia* concept is a heuristic key to unlocking the paradoxical internationalisation of Chinese higher education, a perspective that has influenced our paper.
  - **Lili Yang and Lin Tian (2022)** review a range of scholarships on *tianxia* in the Chinese and English languages and discuss its relation to higher education.
  - **Lili Yang (2022)** compares Anglo-American and Chinese approaches to the ‘public’ dimension of activity in higher education, and suggests *tianxia weigong* (‘All under heaven belongs to all and is for all’) as an alternative to the ‘Western’ notion of global public or global common good.



# TIANXIA IN HIGHER EDUCATION STUDIES, A HEURISTIC II

- Multiple scales in higher education and science at the intersections between materiality, imagination and interpretation, and social practices (Marginson and Rhoades, 2002; Marginson, 2011, 2021, 2022).
- *Tianxia* offers a way to escape the national container in higher education (Shahjahan and Kezar, 2013).
- *Tianxia* functions as a description of existing social relations, a mode of interpreting social relations, an ideal form of social relations, and a call to practice that ideal.
- ***Tianxia* as a heuristic for understanding, interpreting and shaping global higher education and research:**
  1. 'Thinking through the world'
  2. Connectivity and collaborative '*tianxia* as one family' (*tianxia yijia*)
  3. *He er butong*, embracing both universality and diversity
  4. Tensions between equality and (structurally open) hierarchy
  5. Active consent of the participants in higher education
  6. Inclusion of nature, ecological thinking and sustainability frameworks
  7. The role of ritual





# TIANXIA AS GLOBAL GOVERNANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

- What could it mean to create a *tianxia* mode of global governance in today's higher education, enabling voluntary collaboration across the world, with no outer boundary, grounded in virtuous practices?
- **We suggest eight common principles of voluntary conduct -**





# CORE VALUES OF A *TIANXIA* ORDER IN HIGHER EDUCATION

1. Respect for knowledge and inquiry as profoundly important ends in themselves, and the source of potential applications and uses for social and global betterment.
2. The free worldwide flow of academic information in a common networked system.
3. Academic freedom to learn, to inquire and to teach, free from constraint and with adequate resource support and scope to exercise intellectual agency.
4. Freedom of higher education and research institutions to manage their affairs free of coercion.
5. Respect for persons in higher education at all positions and from all cultures and languages as potential contributors to common knowledge.
6. Inclusion of all bona fide scholarship and science as part of an accessible global repository of knowledge, including the extension of translation functions so that all available knowledge is recognised in the global pool.
7. Open sharing of papers and data unless there is a compelling and agreed case for non-transparency.
8. Support for continuous exchange of academics and students across the world.



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