

Rethinking the global collective good in higher education  
through *tianxia weigong*  
(all under heaven is for/belongs to all)

**Speaker:** Lili Yang (Oxford University), [lili.yang@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:lili.yang@education.ox.ac.uk)

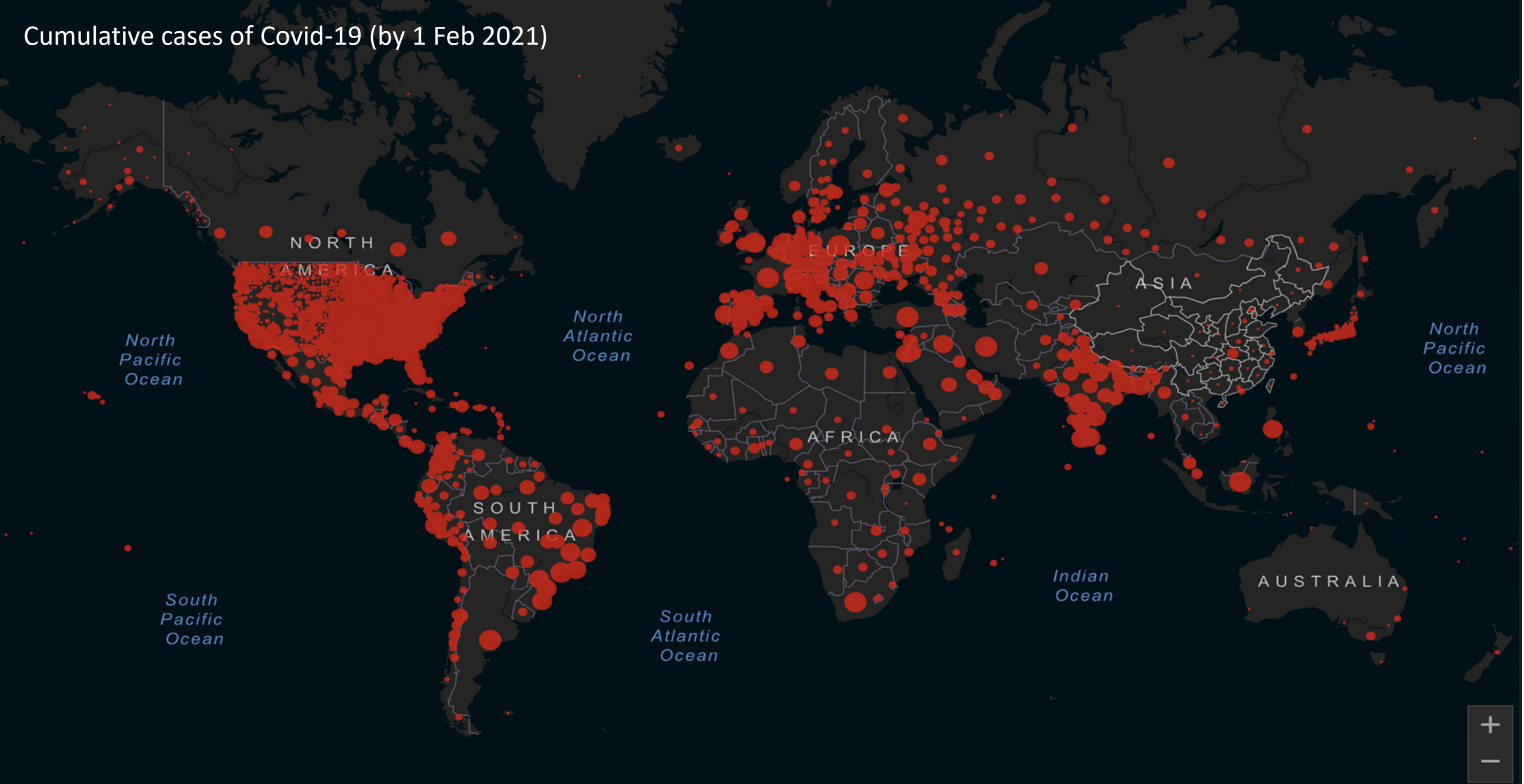
**Respondent:** Lin Tian (Hunan University)

CGHE webinar, 4<sup>th</sup> Feb 2021

## Similarities and differences between notions of ‘public’ in the Sinic and liberal Anglo-American traditions, and the implications for higher education

Public (good) in higher education and related phenomena	Higher education and the individual	<i>Xiushen</i> (self-cultivation) and <i>Bildung</i> in higher education
	Higher education and society	<i>Gongping</i> /equity in higher education
	Higher education and the state	<i>Zhi</i> (the free will) and liberty in higher education
	The resources and outcomes of higher education	<i>Gong</i> /public and <i>si</i> /private in higher education
		<i>Tianxia weigong</i> (all under heaven belongs to all/is for all) and global collective goods of higher education

# Cumulative cases of Covid-19 (by 1 Feb 2021)



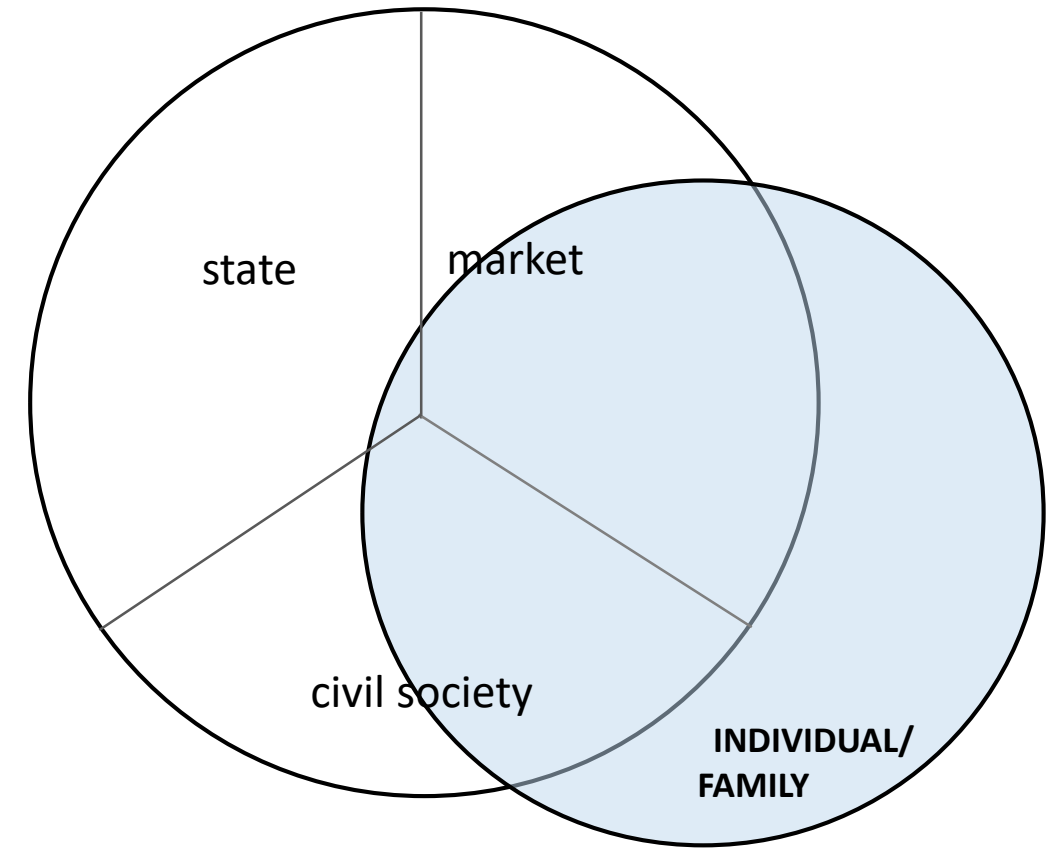
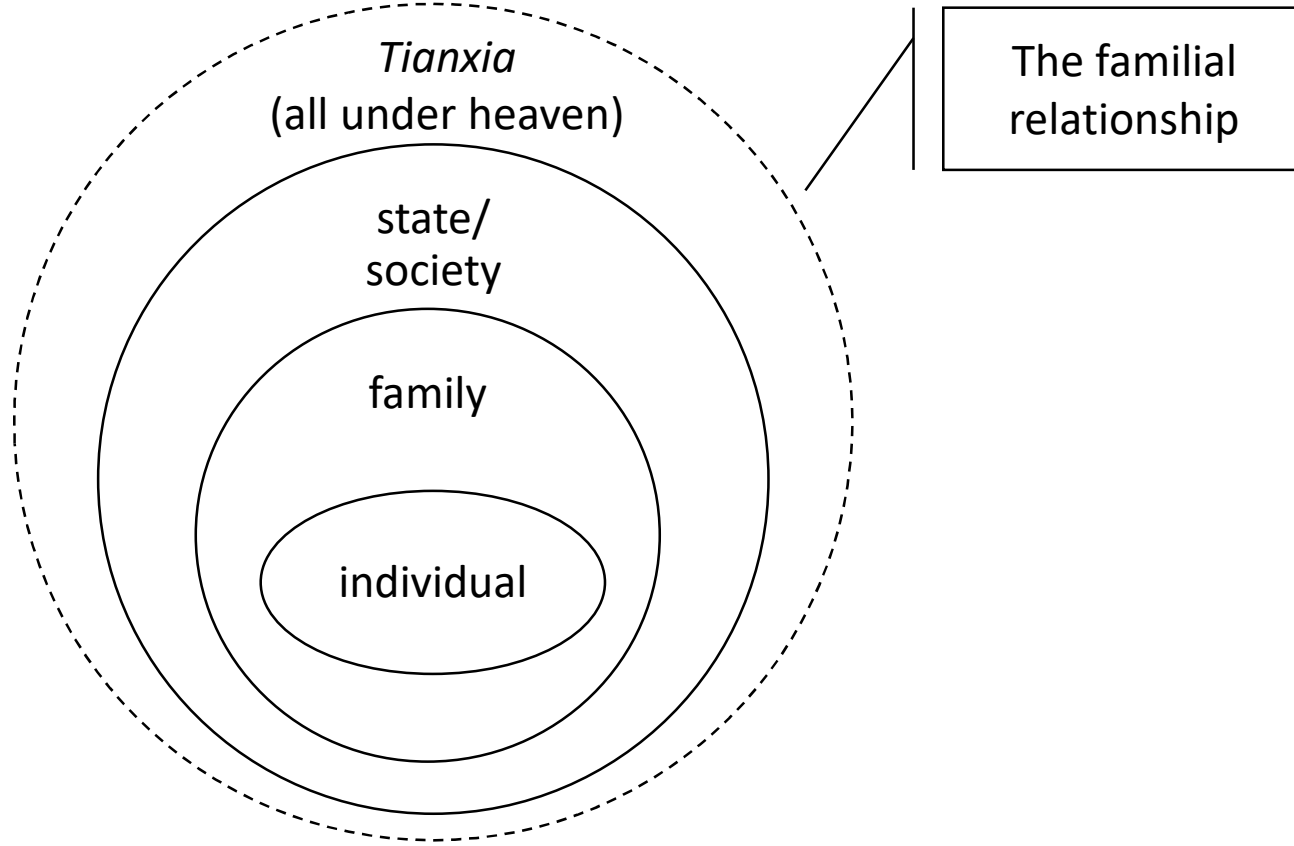
Source: <https://www.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/bda7594740fd40299423467b48e9ecf6>  
(accessed on 1 Feb 2021)



Martin Jacques: *The cultural roots of China's success against Covid-19*

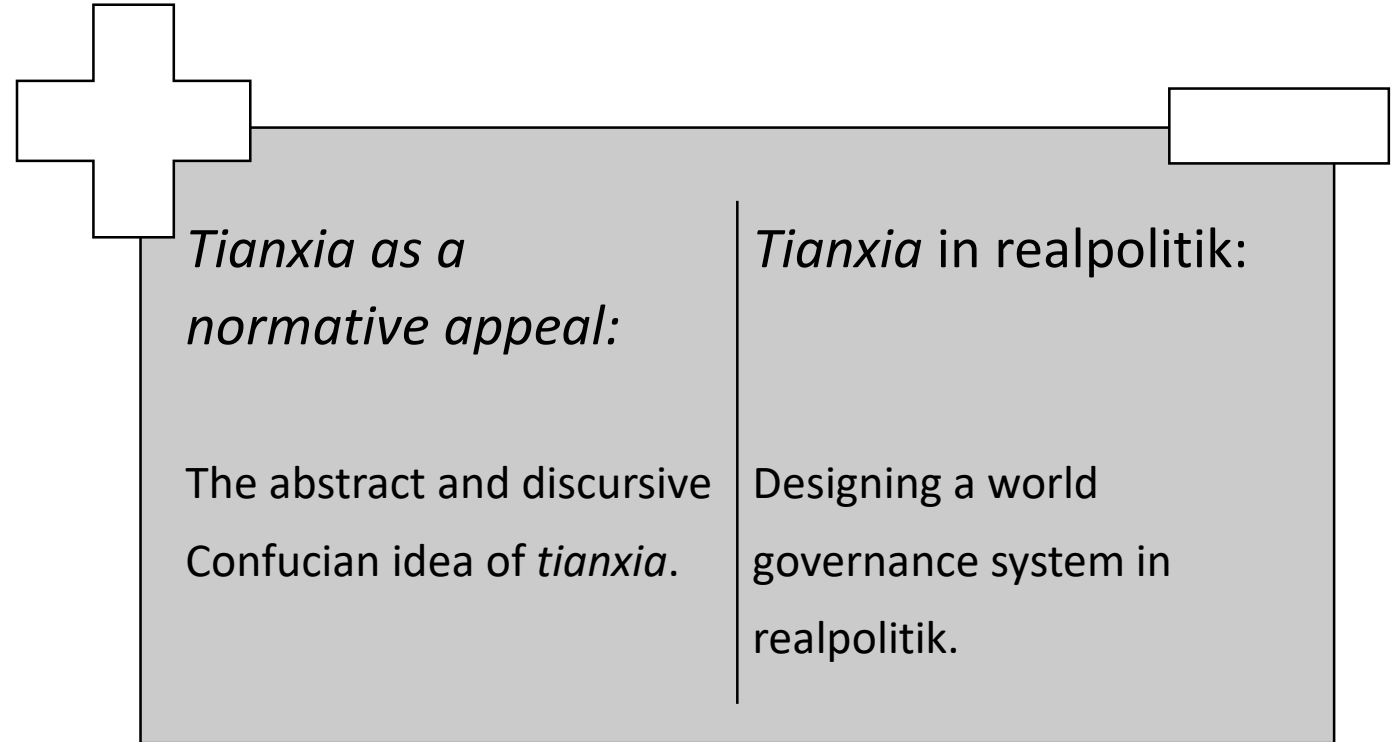
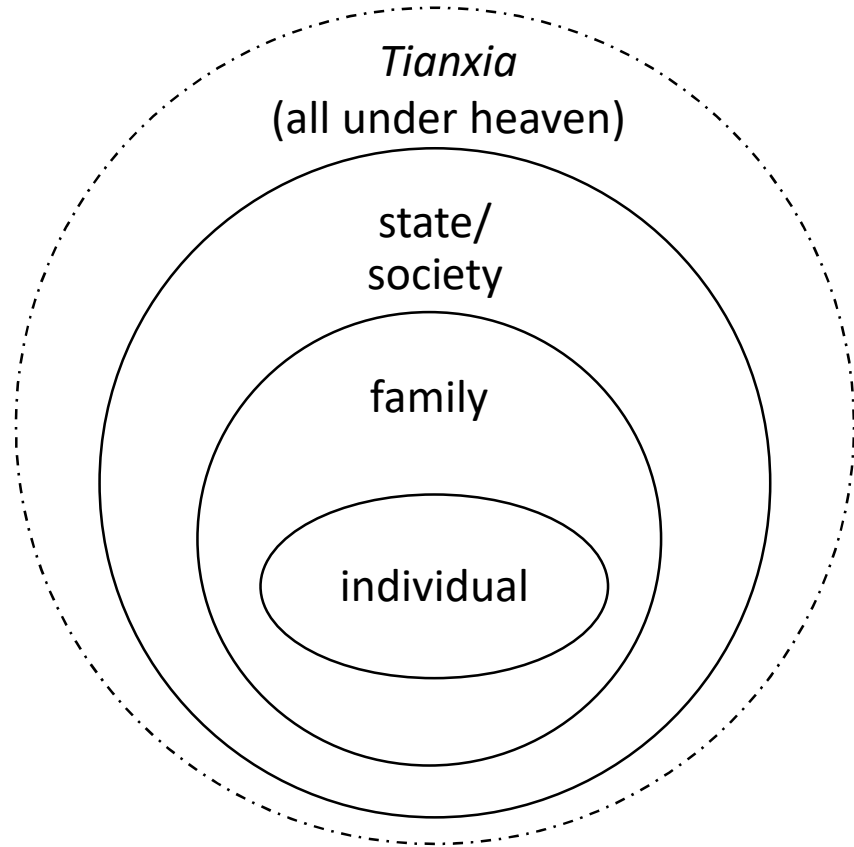
'There is a degree of **harmony, of intimacy, of coordination, of understanding between the people and government, between government and society**, which just doesn't exist in anything like the same way in the west. The closeness between people and government has been absolutely crucial to what has been achieved. ... [Chinese people] see the government as a part of the family, the head of the family. ... There is this **familial relationship between the individual, society, and government**, and you could never say that in the west. And in this pandemic I can think of no better example in the last several decades of why this matters and why it's so important, and what it can achieve in the case of China, ... and also in other countries [including] Vietnam and South Korea who also have done a very good job in relationship to the pandemic.'





The Confucian anthropocosmic worldview/  
Social imaginaries in the Chinese tradition

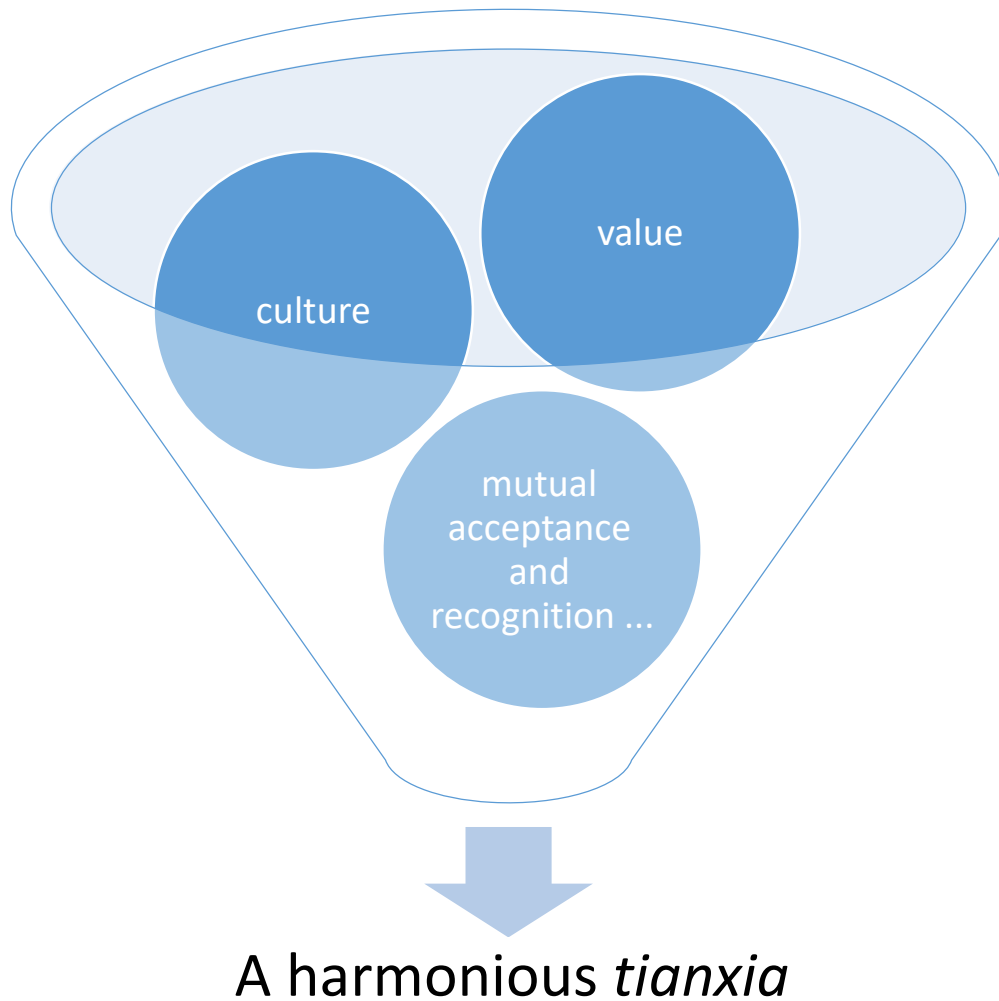
Social imaginaries in the Anglo-American tradition



## *Tianxia* as a normative appeal

- *Tianxia* is a symbolic ideal reflecting a universal civilisational order.
- For Confucianism, the ultimate aim is to bring harmony and peace to all under heaven.
- *Tianxia weigong* (all under heaven belongs to/is for all) demonstrates an idea of ‘no other’ .

‘*Tianxia* refers to a system of governance held together by a regime of culture and value that transcends racial and geographical boundaries.’ – Wang (2017: 1)



The '*inter-national*' world *vis-à-vis* *The world per se*

### Values:

- Pursuit of order and harmony
- Embrace of diversity (Harmony without conformity, 和而不同)
- Confucian moral values: benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and integrity (仁义礼智信)
- .....





Tingyang Zhao, 赵汀阳 (2011: 3)

To think *through* the world, rather than to think *of* the world.

- to understand the world as a **collective agent** shared by human beings as well as all other creatures on earth.
- the priority for the different levels of entities, or spheres, is **the good of *tianxia*** rather than parochial interests.
- thinking through the world paves the way for discussing **global/world citizenship**. In the perspective of *tianxia*, the national identity of the individual is secondary to being a member of *tianxia*.

**The global collective good & The good of *tianxia***

## *Tianxia* in realpolitik



Duara (2017: 70)

‘In Zhao’s view, the contemporary extension of the *tianxia* model would involve a world government controlling a larger territory and military force than that controlled by the autonomous substates. These substates would be independent in most respects, except in their legitimacy and obligations, for which they would depend on the recognition of world government. Rather than being based on force and self-interest, **the cultural empire would use ritual as a means to limit the self and its interests.** *Tianxia* is a hierarchical worldview that **prioritizes order over freedom, elite governance over democracy, and the superior political institution over the lower level.**’

## Critics of *tianxia* in realpolitik

- Equality between states: the Sino centric tributary system.
  - ❑ The 'inner' and 'outer' relationships is a structural parallel of centre-periphery relations today (Callahan, 2008; Liang, 2018).
- The potential for major countries to influence or dominate weaker ones.
  - ❑ *Tianxia* is not a regime of culture and authority, but the projection of a global hegemon (Callahan & Barabantseva, 2011).
  - ❑ *Tianxia* is one way for China to establish its own discourses about the world order – the Belt & Road Initiative (Ding, 2018).

While a *tianxia* system might be hierarchical, there would not be coercion by the country with greatest power (Wang 2017: 17).





**Mutual trust and respect** are the core requisites for the *tianxia* idea in realpolitik.

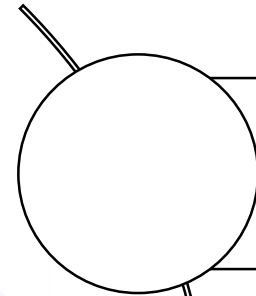
- Self-cultural awareness: ‘an appreciation of one’s own culture, an understanding and appreciation of other cultures, and mutual respect, would result in people’s living together harmoniously, which then leads to the status of harmony without conformity.’ (Fei, 2015: 50)

Although scholars/researchers may argue that a *tianxia* system would work on the basis of **voluntary participation rather than coercion**, however, the *tianxia* idea may be **vulnerable to coercive mechanisms of domination**. Perceptions of this danger can prevent it from being employed in the contemporary world.

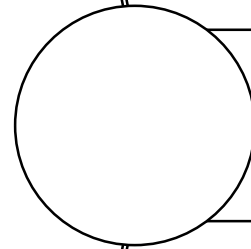




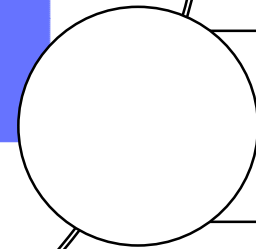
‘Unfortunately, [*tianxia*] is either a utopian imagining or an “invented tradition”. In history, we have a hard time finding a monarchy that possessed this tripartite legitimacy. Under the ancient Xia dynasty, “when Yi sought the throne, Qi killed him”. The consolidation of the Zhou dynasty required killings to the point that “the blood ran down the halberd”. The Han was created out of the terrible battles between the Han and the Chu. ... The legitimacy that establishes a monarchy is based at least in half on military might.’ (Ge, 2017: 11)




Stability *versus* liberty



Meritocracy *versus* democracy



Norms & values & rituals *versus* law & contract



Despite the difficulty in employing the *tianxia* idea in realpolitik, the problems of the current world order, including **unresolvable power struggles** and **the under-provision of global collective goods**, point to the value of considering the idea of *tianxia* as a normative appeal.

Beck (2016: 257) proposes a cosmopolitan sociology that addresses the ‘fundamental fragility and mutability of societal dynamics shaped by the globalization of capital and risks today’:

- ‘Firstly, by criticizing methodological nationalism; second, by introducing the concept of cosmopolitanization; third, by re-mapping social inequalities; fourth, by discussing risk society in the context of East Asian development; and fifth and finally, by proposing a cosmopolitan vision’. (Beck, 2016: 257)

Cosmopolitanism can be consolidated and rendered more effective when the normative layer of the *tianxia* worldview is added (Beck, 2016; Han, Shim, and Park, 2016).

# Implications for higher education

- Limitation 1: while *academic freedom* is nationally nuanced (see for example Marginson, 2014) it also has a common global aspect. All faculty share a commitment to the pursuit of truth. Yet in many countries, for reasons such as public accountability requirements, national security considerations, and other governmental regulations, official policies interfere with free academic decision making (Palfreyman, 2007; Traianou, 2015).
- Higher education should work towards a common global commitment to academic freedoms.





# Implications for higher education

- Limitation 2: there is often (though not always) an emphasis on addressing national issues when providing *research funding* for higher education.
- To better respond to global challenges and issues, it is essential to provide national government and non-government financial support for research on global topics. For example, the anthropocosmic worldview of the Sinic tradition, which stresses the harmonious balance between humanity and nature, provides a framework for global ecological research grounded in *tianxia*.



# Implications for higher education

- Limitation 3: the *privatisation of knowledge*, which to a certain extent is reinforced by the Intellectual Property Rights regime (Cozzi & Galli, 2011; UNESCO, 2015, p. 80), arguably hampers the global dissemination and reproduction of knowledge produced by higher education. This is against the idea that knowledge is a global collective good shared by all humanity.
  - Knowledge is a global collective good belonging to all under heaven. There is a need to better balance the relationship between knowledge available for humanity and protecting intellectual property rights.
- 



# Implications for higher education

- Limitation 4: national governments may focus strongly on higher education's role in preparing students as *national citizens* (Li, 2006; Qi & Shen, 2015).
  - While higher education is often effective in preparing national citizens, states need to further emphasise the importance of preparing global citizens and consolidating individual's responsibility for the collective good of *tianxia*.



# Implications for higher education

- Limitation 5: *international mobility* is a global collective good, but countries' immigration and visa regulations often contain barriers restricting mobility (Neumayer, 2006). Mostly, the more influential is the nationalist strand in politics, the stricter will be the visa regulations.
  - In *tianxia*, there is no 'other' and belongingness is not based on locality, race, and culture. Regulations limiting international mobility of academics and students, and international research collaboration, rarely have an intrinsic justification and need to be reconsidered.
- 





# References

- Beck, U. (2007). The cosmopolitan condition: Why methodological nationalism fails. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 24(7-8), 286-290.
- Beck, U. (2016). Varieties of second modernity and the cosmopolitan vision. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 33(7-8), 257-270.
- Callahan, W. A. (2008). Chinese visions of world order: Post-hegemonic or a new hegemony? *International Studies Review*, 10(4), 749-761.
- Callahan, W. A., & Barabantseva, E. (2011). *China orders the world: Normative soft power and foreign policy*. Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press.
- Chernilo, D. (2006). Social theory's methodological nationalism: Myth and reality. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 9(1), 5-22.
- Chernilo, D. (2011). The critique of methodological nationalism: Theory and history. *Thesis Eleven*, 106(1), 98-117.
- Duara, P. (2017). The Chinese world order and planetary sustainability. In B. Wang (Ed.), *Chinese visions of world order: Tianxia, culture, and world politics* (pp. 65-85). Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Ge, Z. (2017). Imagining 'All Under Heaven': the Political, Intellectual and Academic Background of a New Utopia (Yixiangtiankai: Jinnianlai dalu xinruxue de zhengzhi suqiu). *Thought (Sixiang)*, 33, 241-285.
- Kaul, I., Conceicao, P., Goulven, K. I., & Mendoza, R. U. (2003). *Providing global public goods*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Margsinson, S., & Yang, L. (2020). The role of higher education in generating 'public' and 'common' goods: A comparison of Sinic and Anglo-American political cultures. *Centre for Global Higher Education Working Paper*, No. 52. Oxford: University of Oxford.
- Wang, B. (2017). *Chinese visions of world order: Tianxia, culture, and world politics*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Xu, J. (2017). *Family, nation and all under heaven (Jiaguo tianxia)*. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing (Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe).
- Yan, X. (2011). *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* (E. Ryden, Trans.). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Zhao, T. (2011). *The tianxia system: An introduction to the philosophy of world institution (Tianxia tixi: Shijie zhidu zhexue daolun)*. Beijing: Renmin University Press (Zhongguo Renmin Daxue Chubanshe).



A close-up photograph of a globe of Earth being held gently in two hands. The hands are positioned at the bottom of the frame, with fingers spread to support the globe. The globe shows the Americas, with North and South America visible in shades of green and yellow, surrounded by blue oceans and white clouds. The background is dark, making the globe and hands stand out. In the top left corner, there is a small orange horizontal bar.

Thank you!

---