

What is Tianxia?

The term “Tianxia” is one of the hot topics and research concerns of social sciences and humanities circles in recent years, especially when it correlates with Chinese and East Asia Studies. Since the middle of last century, this topic has raised great interest among scholars who are curious about the state form of traditional China. As studies go on and reveal, the state form of traditional China is known clearer as neither imperialistic like its western counterparts, nor nationalistic like the modern states. Since China used to refer to itself as Tianxia historically, the concept of Tianxia can be borrowed as the key to understanding the form of traditional Chinese regime. The article entitled “From Heaven to Earth: Tianxia Theories and International Relations in East Asia” attempts to review and analyze the traditional Chinese state form and international relations in East Asia from a new perspective.

Empire Studies have gained increasing attention in recent years, and, undoubtedly, ancient China used to be one of the most important empires in history. However, the prevailing empire theories all originate from the history of western powers. Therefore we even used to apply the imperial paradigm from the western academic world to interpret imperial China. Although there have been scholars starting to view traditional Chinese state form based on the concept of Tianxia since the middle of last century, the influence of western empire theories remain standing in the way of a correct interpretation of the term Tianxia. For instance, the current Tianxia theory

imagines Tianxia in imperial China as “Suzerain - vassal states - colonies”, which is at most an oriental version of a modern western empire. It is quite clear that Tianxia is a unit of a political society and it follows a monistic order, and in some respects, resembles the modern national states. Discussion of Chinese history in this period should not be defined by the concept of the western empire anymore, and the imperial China should be explored with reference to a concept used by agents in Chinese history. And the concept is constituted by “tianxia- guo - jia” (or tianxia - state - oikos).

The article “From Tianxia to

the World” seeks to review the political history of East Asia before the 10th century in a new Tianxia theory of “tianxia - guo - jia”. We should adjust the investigation from past focus to a new concern about jia, or the main body of political actions. Jia is a term referring to local political and economic units, also known as oikos. As the ancient Chinese classical theory states “(a man should) cultivate himself- regulate his jia- govern his state- and rule Tianxia”, a process of moral cultivation which is the progress of political actions as well. Individuals (agents) ready to act from their own jia were grouped and formed into a larger community, (guo), which, in turn, constructed



Figure 1. The East Asia has been divided into many political / cultural geographic areas since ancient times. In 221 B.C., Emperor Qin's regime started. It declared its dominated territory as Tianxia, the area in red slash, and this defines the territory of what we call imperial China. One of the major researches in the East Asian history is to study how the imperial China integrates various geographic regions within its territory, and maintains political relations with the geographic regions outside it territory.

a final space of Tianxia, in a certain historical context.

The article points that Tianxia is not an established and unchanged political unit, but instead a composition of guo and jia. Thus in the Chinese history, sometimes, it existed as a collective form or one Tianxia, such as in Han and Ming dynasties; but other times, it could also exist simultaneously in many compatible governments such as in Southern and Northern Dynasties and the Five Dynasties and Ten States; and in other cases such as Tang, Yuan and Qing dynasties, it was in a constantly expanding form. Many regimes outside China, take the countries on the Japanese archipelago and Korean Peninsula for instance, joined Chinese Tianxia due to objective circumstances or subjective wills. Even so, we should not forget that the main body of political actions, or agent, is still jia, a political organization of regional society. Therefore we must re-adjust our focus from the

central regime to regional agents, or in other words, we should pay more attention to local social political organizations and their political decisions.

On the other hand, the article also discusses the sovereign institution (Imperial systems) in Han Dynasty on how to build up a typical traditional Chinese regime (polity of Central state), with official positions and administration in Chinese as its basic elements. In early third century, when the Han dynasty headed for its doom, state establishment movements became a mainstream in East Asia. Many East Asian countries established their own regimes, whether within or outside the former Han territory, even in Japan and Korea, following the system model of Han regime. The founders claimed their regimes to be Chinese (Central state) and their governed territory Tianxia, while accepting the co-existence of many central states, Tianxia in plural form. We can say that this is a secession

of traditional China, but we can also take it as an expansion of imperial China. In 581, the Sui Dynasty was established, and in 618, the Tang Dynasty was established. Although the two Tianxias were governed by different governments, they both followed the traditional Chinese regime and claimed itself as a governed Tianxia inherited from Han.

References

Kan, Huai-chen. (2018). From Heaven to Earth: A review of Tianxia theories and pre-modern international relations in East Asia. *The NTU Journal of East Asian Culture*, 5, 289-317. DOI:10.6579/NJEAC.201804_(5).0016. (<http://ntuj-eac.blog.ntu.edu.tw/2018/04/26/> 臺大東亞文化研究 - 第五期 /)

Huai-chen Kan

Professor, Department of History
kan@ntu.edu.tw



Figure 2. The Ancient Japan has also applied a Chinese regime (polity of Central State) in its founding, by claiming its establishment as ruling Tianxia. An iron sword excavated in Japan in 471, with an inscription of the Japanese King "ruling Tianxia" engraved. The picture comes from Saitama Prefectural Museum of the Sakitama Ancient Burial Mounds's homepage (<http://www.sakitama-muse.spec.ed.jp/>).

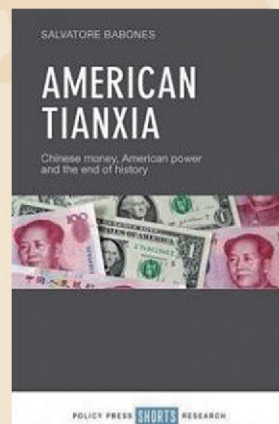


Figure 3. Tianxia has become a neologism in the study of polity and international relations. This book is a publication specialized in the study of America and its international relations issued in recent years, entitled American Tianxia.