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Author(s)	Arakawa, Masaharu
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Osaka University

# China's View of the World

ARAKAWA MASAHARU

Osaka University

## ABSTRACT

In examining China's view of the world, the idea of *tianxia* plays a key role. This idea generally refers to the world as a whole. It is important to understand what the idea specifically signified. The word *tianxia* has been used in two different ways. Firstly it can represent the whole globe. In this all-embracing usage, *tianxia* stretches out beyond China, and the one who rules it is the lord of the world. Alternatively, it is confined to China. Consequently, its extension is limited to the area which actually stood under the rule of the Chinese dynasties.

Most Chinese historical sources, in particular those since the time of the late Former Han (202 BCE - 8 CE) and the early Later Han (25 CE - 220 CE), use the word in the latter meaning. In pre-modern China, *tianxia* often signified the state. Meanwhile, non-Han countries and peoples around China were seen as not belonging to *tianxia* and the inhabitants were called "barbarians". The Chinese differentiated this area depending on the distance from China: (1) the "neighbouring regions", to which the Chinese rule extended, and (2) the "remote regions", which stood completely outside Chinese influence.

At times, in particular when the territory of the dynasty expanded dramatically, as under the Han, the Tang or the Qing, *tianxia* was taken to include the "neighbouring regions". Still, the idea of *tianxia* was related to the sovereignty of the emperor. It delimited the area that he effectively governed by means of the central administration as well as the census registration and the map in the provinces and counties.

There were two views about what relation *tianxia* had with the vast surrounding area including the "neighbouring" and the "remote regions". One regarded the dynasty's capital in which the emperor resided as center of the whole world. The other, which equally existed through the ages, saw it in the Kunlun Mountains to the West of China and positioned *tianxia* to their southeast. The former perspective is often seen as typifying Chinese perspectives on the world, but it is interesting to note that there was also a competing relativistic paradigm.

中国が世界をどう捉えてきたかという問題を解明するにあたって、鍵となるのが「天下」の観念である。「天下」は世界を意味する。したがって、その内容を正確に理解することが中国の世界観を解明するうえで決定的に重要である。

従来、「天下」について二つの見方が並び立ってきた。一方は、地球上のすべてを包含するという包括的な理解である。すなわち、それは天の下の地上をすべて含み、中国を越えて広がるものである。したがって、「天下に王たる」ことは、全世界に君臨することになる。他方、「天下」は中国国家そのものの謂いだという理解がある。これによれば、「天下」は中華王朝が支配する、東西南北に限界をもつ限られた領域に限られることになる。

漢籍史料に伝えられる「天下」は、基本的には後者の意味であった。こうした「天下」観が形成されたのは前漢末から後漢初の時期である。したがって、中国の前近代社会にあつては、「天下」とは今日の国家に近い意味をもっていたと言ってもよい。一方、中国の周囲に存在した外国や異民族は、「天下」から外れた存在であり、夷狄と呼ばれた。もともと、夷狄の世界にも中国との距離によって区別があり、(1)中国の支配がおよぶ地域(蕃域)と、(2)それがおよばない地域(絶域)とに分けられていた。

たしかに、漢、唐、清朝のように大きく中国の領土が拡張した時代には、「天下」は蕃域を含むように理解されることもあつた。しかし、その場合にも「天下」はあくまでも中華王朝の支配が及ぶ範囲のみを指していた。つまり、現実に共有される法令にもとづき、王朝の統治機構と州(郡)県の戸籍・地図によって具体的に掌握される実効支配の領域を意味していたのである。

では、周辺の蕃域・絶域を含めた広大な世界に対して、「天下」はいかなる関係にあるのだろうか。これについては、二つの構想が存在した。一つは天子の統治する王城をこの広大な領域の中心と見る。これは中国を中心として構想される世界観である。他方、中国の西方にある崑崙山を世界の中心とし、その東南に中国の「天下」を位置付ける世界観があつた。中国の世界観と言え、中国が世界の中心となる中華思想的な世界観だけを思い浮かべるが、それを相対化する世界観が、中華思想的世界観の形成時期においてすでに存在していたのである。

How have the Chinese viewed the world? There has been much discussion about this question, all of which has been underpinned by a certain perception shared by the Chinese. According to this shared perception, China conceived of itself as a place where a virtuous person who had received the mandate of Heaven ruled all under Heaven (*tianxia*), and viewing its own sphere of rule as the centre of the world, it called this *Zhonghua*; further, it espoused “civilized/barbarian thought”, looking upon the regions surrounding this *Zhonghua*, or China, as the world of barbarian peoples and considering itself to be in a position to bring civilization to the culturally backward

world of barbarian peoples. The traditional tributary relations between Zhonghua and the surroundings were formed naturally on the basis of the Chinese dichotomic view of the World<sup>1</sup>. This understanding is in itself basically not mistaken, but in order to gain an accurate grasp of China's perception of the world, it is necessary to elaborate on this in a little more detail. In the following, I wish to present in brief the worldview espoused by traditional China.

### WHAT IS *TIANXIA*?

In China the word *tianxia*, or “(all) under Heaven”, is used to refer to the “world”. It was frequently used in an already well-established meaning during the Warring States period (403 BCE - 221 BCE) before the start of the Common Era, and thereafter it continued to be used throughout successive dynasties right down to the end of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) in the early 20th century. In order to consider how China has historically viewed the world, it is first of all necessary to have an accurate understanding of the world as denoted by this term *tianxia*.

Broadly speaking, there have until now been two different interpretations of the word *tianxia*. One interpretation considers *tianxia* to refer to the world extending beyond the borders of China. This was first pointed out by Tazaki Masayoshi (1926), the first person to undertake a systematic examination of the notion of *tianxia*. He argued that *tianxia* signified the whole world and referred to limitless land. This understanding of *tianxia* was subsequently adopted by many researchers. For example, Hiraoka Takeo (1951, etc.) considered *tianxia* to signify the world and to represent an idea transcending ethnicity and regionality, while according to Nishijima Sadao (1983, 1985), *tianxia* was literally the world below (*xia*) heaven (*tian*), i.e., everything on earth, and corresponded to the world itself, and being the ruler of *tianxia* was equivalent to ruling over the entire world. Nishijima also pointed out that when this Chinese notion of *tianxia* was introduced to Japan, it no longer signified the entire world and changed into the reduced and limited meaning of all of Japan. He thus argued that the notion of *tianxia* differed in China and Japan. This view of Nishijima's could be said to have exerted a tacit influence on subsequent researchers of ancient Japanese history and Chinese history.

In contrast to the above interpretation, there is also the view that would understand *tianxia* as referring to China itself. A representative proponent of this view is Watanabe Shin'ichirô (2003). Having carefully summarized past research on the notion of *tianxia*, he examined this notion on the basis of actual historical sources and argued that *tianxia* is a concept referring to China's traditional state. In other words, according to Watanabe, *tianxia* refers to a delimited area circumscribed in the north, south, east, and west and is confined to the area over which China's dynasties had effective control.

It is clear from Watanabe's examination of actual historical sources that *tianxia* appearing in Chinese sources is basically used in this second meaning, and China's successive

dynasties also took it in this sense. According to this standpoint, foreign countries and other peoples living on the periphery of China were basically excluded from China's *tianxia*, and China referred to them as barbarian peoples. But a distinction was drawn in this barbarian world depending on the distance from China. That is to say, it was divided into (1) neighbouring states and peoples under the control and influence of China and (2) states and peoples over which China had no control or influence. In particular, it is considered that in the case of (1) China regarded them as states and peoples that had come under the civilizing influence of Chinese culture and so permitted them to bring tribute to China and entered into political relations with them, whereas the states and peoples falling under (2) were regarded as states and peoples to which Chinese culture had not spread and these were left to their own devices. In other words, using the degree of acceptance of its own superior culture as a yardstick, China ranked the barbarian peoples in the surrounding world of barbarians under the aegis of *tianxia* centred on China. In the following, I shall refer to the area covered by (1) as "neighbouring regions" and (2) as "remote regions"<sup>2</sup>.

As we have seen in the above, in China's pre-modern society *tianxia* may be regarded as a term that was used in a sense close to the modern word "state". From the Warring States period through to the end of the Qing dynasty, it was the designation that defined most comprehensively old China's political society in spatial and structural terms.

We have so far focused on the discussion about the theme in Japan, but it goes without saying that it is being dealt with intensively among Chinese historians as well. They are interested particularly in the aspect of ethnicity of the theme, that is, what the boundary was between the Han Chinese and the non-Han over time. Moreover, it is a big issue how the extension of the "State in the Middle" (*Zhongguo* or *Zhonghua*), changed in the whole course of Chinese history. It seems, however, that the discussion among Chinese scholars leaves something to be desired. First of all, they are apparently not giving enough thought to the exact definition of *tianxia*. Q. Edward Wang (1999), for example, takes it to signify the entire human world in the concluding remarks of his work. In the introduction, however, he argues that the concept refers to a united Chinese world, based on moral conformity of the society. Similar incongruities can be found with other researchers.

#### THE EXTENSION OF *TIANXIA* TO NEIGHBOURING REGIONS

As was explained above, *tianxia* corresponded to the area over which China's dynasties had effective control, but on occasion it also encompassed the neighbouring regions immediately outside China. Historical sources indicate that this expansion of the notion of *tianxia* occurred during the time of the Qin (221 BCE - 206 BCE) and Han (202 BCE - 220 CE) dynasties. This was because, unlike the Warring States period when the term *tianxia* began to be used, the area under China's effective control expanded dramatically during the Qin-Han period, and under the rule of the emperor, once the uni-

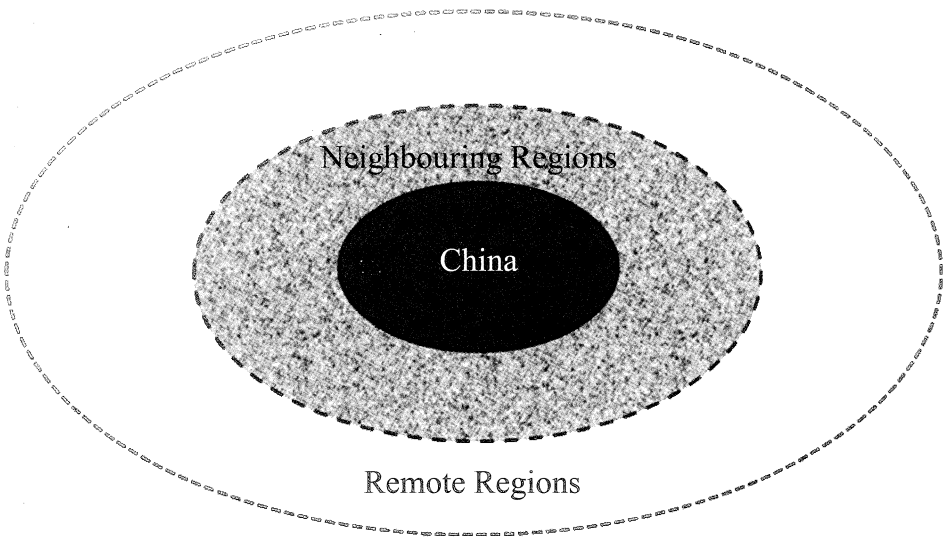


Fig. 1  
China's view of the world.

fied Qin-Han state was established in the 3rd century BCE, its territory clearly came to include neighbouring regions. In particular, following the active strategy towards other countries adopted by Wudi of the Han, the Han state used investiture to win over foreign countries in neighbouring regions as vassals and positioned them as outer vassals in contrast to inner vassals within China. The emergence of these outer vassals on the outer periphery of China had a decisive effect on the expansion of the notion of *tianxia*.

During the Tang dynasty (618-907) too, which acquired an enormous territory, as had the Han, *tianxia* clearly extended to surrounding regions. In other words, in times when the area controlled by China expanded, there were instances in which *tianxia* went beyond China and encompassed neighbouring regions.

Hori Toshikazu (1993), taking note of this phenomenon of the extension of *tian-xia* to neighbouring regions, argues that *tianxia* was a world made up of China and barbarian peoples arranged concentrically and that it became a reality in the form of a Sinocentric world empire during the Sui-Tang period (581-907). Like Hori, Ishigami Eiichi (1996) has also clearly pointed out that *tianxia* represented a conception of the world as an empire made up of China and barbarian peoples.

But even though the territory designated by *tianxia* may have extended to neighbouring regions, *tianxia* was still basically confined to the area under the effective control of Chinese dynasties. For instance, even in the case of the Tang, which brought a vast area

under its control, its *tianxia*, which had extended to the world of barbarian peoples, was composed of prefectures and counties located within China and prefectures and counties that had been newly established in areas inhabited by barbarian peoples. *Tianxia* referred, in other words, to the area of effective control that was secured in a concrete form by the dynasty's governing structure and the household registers and maps of prefectures (or commanderies) and counties on the basis of actually shared laws. The area encompassed by *tianxia* fluctuated during the course of history in accordance with the ebb and flow of dynastic power, and there were times when the existence of barbarian peoples within the *tianxia* was sanctioned<sup>3</sup>, but its base should be understood to have remained in China.

Therefore, it is not correct to understand *tianxia* as a notion that encompassed barbarian peoples as one of its inherent constituent elements. *Tianxia* corresponded to the area of established effective control governed autocratically by the dynastic authorities through the system of prefectures (or commanderies) and counties.

#### TIANXIA AND THE WORLD OF REMOTE REGIONS

As was explained above, *tianxia* was not a limitless world, but a delimited area. At times *tianxia* also included neighbouring regions, but beyond these neighbouring regions there was envisioned a vast area where China exercised no control or influence whatsoever. This corresponded to the "remote regions". This idea developed from the late Former Han (202 BCE - 8 CE) to the early Later Han (25 CE - 220 CE) around the start of the Common Era, which also coincided with the period when the formulation of the notion of *tianxia* was brought to completion. It is to be surmised, in other words, that together with the notion of *tianxia* there was also developed a view of the world that extended beyond *tianxia*. Since *tianxia* possessed a delimited area, the establishment of the notion of *tianxia* conceptually demanded of necessity the existence of a world extending beyond it.

It is often said that China's attitude towards this world of remote regions lying far beyond *tianxia* was one that pitied and looked down on it as representing the ends of the earth unreached by Chinese culture. But this has not in any way been proved historically, and it can be inferred from China's official histories that China actually adopted the opposite attitude towards these regions.

For example, it is recorded in the *Hou Hanshu*, an official history, that during the Later Han, when the formulation of the notion of *tianxia* was brought to completion, there existed a foreign country called Daqin. This corresponded to the eastern part of the Roman empire, i.e., Egypt and Syria, which clearly belonged to the remote regions. As well as recording that Daqin produced plentiful gold, silver, and rare and precious goods, the *Hou Hanshu* also includes the following information:

The king of the country of Daqin always had an attendant holding a bag follow his chariot, and if anyone wished to express his opinion about something, he was made to place his written opinion in the bag. After having returned to the palace, the king would take it out,

examine it, and decide on the merits of the opinion. In addition, there are in this country thirty-six generals, who all gather together to discuss state affairs. The position of king is never hereditary, and wise men are always selected and made king. Moreover, the people are all easygoing, upright, and orderly in appearance and conduct. They resemble the people of China, and that is why this country is called Daqin.

It is evident from this account that the writer had no disdain or pity at all for the country of Daqin, which belonged to the remote regions, and there has in fact been projected in this account the image of a civilized or utopian country similar to China. It is surmised that since China was constantly receiving elements of an advanced culture from the west via the Silk Road, it sought in the remote regions of the west, about which little accurate information reached China, a civilized or utopian country similar to China.

### A NON-SINOCENTRIC VIEW OF THE WORLD

As has already been explained, a vast area called the remote regions was envisioned outside *tianxia*, and there existed two views regarding the position of the area corresponding to *tianxia* within this worldwide area. According to one view, the royal capital governed by the son of Heaven, or emperor, was the centre of the world, which extended outwards in a multistratified fashion to encompass in succession China, neighbouring regions, and remote regions. This was a worldview conceived of with China at its centre, and it may be described as a Sinocentric view of the world. The diagram “China’s view of the world” presented earlier was based on this view.

In contrast, there also existed a view of the world that relativized this worldview. This was a worldview that placed the Kunlun Mountains to the west of China at the centre of the world and positioned China’s *tianxia* to the southeast of these mountains. Zhang Heng, a renowned man of letters who lived in the first half of the Later Han and was also well-versed in astronomy, wrote a treatise entitled *Lingxian* in which he set forth his own views on the world and the universe, and in this work he writes about China in the following terms:

To the southeast of the Kunlun Mountains [at the centre of the world] there lies Shenzhou (China). Here there are wind and rain with each season, and heat and cold are suitably regulated. Outside this region, the heat is excessive in the south, the cold is excessive in the north, wind is excessive in the east, and clouds are excessive in the west. Therefore, the sage-kings [of China] do not live in these regions.

According to this account, Shenzhou, governed by the sage-kings of China, lies to the southeast of the Kunlun Mountains and is the only region in the world blessed with a harmonious climate. The Kunlun Mountains were mountains that had been widely believed from the Warring States period through to the Qin-Han period to lie to the far west of China, and they were regarded as the source of the Yellow River and also as a jade-producing area where the Queen Mother of the West, a mythological goddess,



lived. Although China's *tianxia* is here extolled for its fine environment, it is clearly not the centre of the world.

As was noted earlier, it is to be surmised that in the late Early Han and early Later Han there developed together with the notion of *tianxia* a view of the world that extended beyond *tianxia*, and this conception of a worldview centred on the Kunlun Mountains dates from the same period. This means that at a time when a Sinocentric worldview developed there also existed a view of the world that relativized this Sinocentric worldview.

Especially interesting in this regard is that once Buddhism was introduced to China in the 1st century during the Later Han, Mount Sumeru, the centre of the world in the Buddhist worldview, came to be identified with the Kunlun Mountains. In fascicle 10 of the *Shiyiji* composed by Wang Jia of the Former Qin (351-394) in the 4th century it is stated that "in the west the Kunlun Mountains are called Mount Sumeru".

Mention of China's view of the world usually brings to mind only a Sinocentric worldview in which China lies at the centre of the world. But it should not be forgotten that, even though it did not become a mainstream view among intellectuals, there also existed alongside this worldview another view of the world that relativized this Sinocentric worldview.

Officially, contemporary China rejects the traditional worldview. Under the leadership of the Communist Party regime, the state adheres to a worldview based on Marxist concepts. Yet it can be claimed that in reality the traditional worldview, especially Sinocentric one, far from having disappeared, continues to exist as an undercurrent within the thinking of the country's ruling elite.

## NOTES

Please note: The Japanese personal names are written in the Japanese way in which the surname precedes the given name.

- <sup>1</sup> Many scholars such as Fairbank, Mancall or their like have concentrated their attention on discussing the Chinese tributary systems to make clear the Zhonghua world order. See J.K. Fairbank (ed.), *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Relations*, Cambridge Mass. 1968; M. Mancall, *China at the Center: 300 Years of Foreign Policy*, New York 1984; Yihong Pan, *Son of Heaven and Heavenly Qaghan: Sui-Tang China and its Neighbors*, Washington 1997.
- <sup>2</sup> Tan Sitong (1865-1898), an eminent revolutionist and advocate of liberal reform in the late Qing times, also divided the world into three groups in the same way. See his "治言 *zhuyan*" (1898). He adhered to strong Sinocentrism under the influence of Wang Fuzhi (1619-1692), who at the end of the Ming times had harshly denounced the rule of the rising Qing dynasty of the Manchus as that of barbarians.
- <sup>3</sup> In the reign of non-Han dynasties, the idea gained ground that *tianxia* was made up of the "barbarians" as well. See "大義覺迷錄 *Dayijuemilu*" by the Qing-emperor Yongzheng.

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