

Tianxia Studies: A Narrative Review of Domestic, East Asian, and Euro-American Scholarship

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Abstract

The Tianxia concept is central to traditional Chinese political thought. It carries deep meanings such as great unity and the Hua-Yi distinction. Despite growing multidisciplinary interest, a systematic review of the research landscape remains lacking. This paper adopts a narrative review method to synthesize domestic and international scholarship on the Tianxia concept. Domestically, three research paradigms emerge. The first is a philosophical construction led by Zhao Tingyang. The second is historical contextualization, represented by Ge Zhaoguang and Liu Zifan. The third is institutional practice with ethnological perspectives, advanced by Liu Xiaodong, Xie Bo, Xi Jing, and Yang Nianqun. Internationally, Japanese scholarship shows three intellectual traditions: cultural homology, rupture theory, and Japan-centered discourses. A Marxist-influenced Asiatic discourse shifted from critique to colonial justification. Korean scholarship centers on the Little China ideology, evolving from admiring China to honoring Ming and resisting Qing. Euro-American research has two main orientations: theoretical dialogue with International Relations and critical/hegemonic analysis. The paper finds that these diverse interpretations reflect each scholar's national intellectual traditions. It calls for an open and inclusive attitude toward this diversity, which aligns with the Chinese vision of a community with a shared future for mankind.

Keywords

Tianxia, Hua–Yi distinction, comparative intellectual history, East Asian world order, global International Relations theory

1. Introduction

The foundational political concept of Tianxia originated from the ancient Chinese perception of a hierarchically ordered world centered on political and cultural authority. Fundamentally, it is a Confucian construction in the Han Dynasty—a political utopia, not a realistic or operational political system [1]. From the political integration of great unity, to the ethnic rethinking of the Hua-Yi distinction, and to the deep cultural idea of harmonizing all nations, the Tianxia concept runs through the historical, political, cultural, and diplomatic development of ancient China. In recent years, scholars have hotly debated its core connotations and formal changes, yielding abundant research results. At the academic history level, domestic scholars form the main body of Tianxia research, developing different paradigms such as philosophical construction, historical contextualization, and institutional practice. Meanwhile, foreign scholars have studied Tianxia based

on its transmission paths and China's unique worldview. Japanese academia, influenced by long-term Chinese civilization, has developed a unique academic tradition of the Tianxia-type state. Euro-American scholars have mostly discussed Tianxia within the framework of the tributary system. Overall, there is a lack of comparative analysis that places domestic and international research under a unified framework. Through literature retrieval, thematic classification, and comparative analysis, the collected literature is categorized by school, region, and topic, Tianxia studies can be understood along the dimensions of normativity, historicity, and power relations. and identifies research gaps and future directions.

2. Three Major Paradigms in Domestic Research

By selecting highly cited and widely discussed papers from the past five years, domestic academic research on the Tianxia concept can be summarized into three main paradigms: the philosophical-speculative construction paradigm, the historical-process paradigm, and the institutional practice and ethnological paradigm.

2.1 Philosophical Construction Paradigm

This paradigm is grounded in the integrity, organicity, logic, and vitality inherent in Chinese philosophy and the thought of Chinese philosophers [2]. It adopts a normative and speculative approach, regards Tianxia as a normative political philosophy with universal applicability, and offers a non-Western alternative for contemporary global governance, distinguishing itself from historical or empirical research paths. However, such an approach faces three interrelated criticisms. Their core does not lie in a misunderstanding of idealism itself, but in ambiguous theoretical boundaries, disconnection from real politics, and insufficient attention to the interplay between history and power. Zhao [3] has been accused of distorting historical resources or paying insufficient attention to historical texts. Yuan's [4] reasonable response is that Zhao's work is essentially a theoretical construction rather than a historical narration. Therefore, this criticism reflects a fundamental difference in research focus rather than a theoretical flaw. On the other hand, the universal philosophical paradigm proposed by Zhao is fundamentally constructed on the factual basis of China's entire historical process, which cannot guarantee its adaptability to the different historical foundations of other countries. Hence, the definition of its universality is inappropriate. The Tianxia theory is often dismissed as utopian or overly idealistic. However, this criticism misinterprets the nature of the theory: since its construction by Confucian scholars in the Han Dynasty, the Tianxia conception has been essentially a virtual political design. Judging a normative political conception by the standard of feasibility is therefore a category mistake. The function of the Tianxia theory is not to provide practical programs, but to expand the horizon of political thinking. Thirdly, criticism from the ideological dimension: Zhao's discourse carries an obvious Chinese standpoint, and his intensive critique of Western strategies easily leads readers to excessive ideological associations, resulting in an obvious standpoint conflict.

2.2 Historical-process Paradigm

Scholars of this school maintain that the concept of tianxia (all-under-heaven) ought to be interpreted through concrete official practices within distinct historical periods. Nevertheless, whether examining its emergence in the pre-Qin period, where tianxia described the supreme authority of the Son of Heaven and the formalized Five-Submission system, the distinction between broad [5] and narrow geographical boundaries in the Tang dynasty [6], or the shift toward realization, politicization, and instrumentalization in governing ideology during the early Qing dynasty [7], as well as the interpretation of historical realities such as the distinction between Hua and Yi and the tributary system [8], such research within historical paradigms, despite its extensive citation and textual research of historical sources, lacks sufficiently flexible reflection. When the idea of tianxia is inherently a normative ideal in Confucian classics, employing such historical materials to verify historical reality risks falling into circular reasoning. A more fundamental problem lies in a widespread dispute between historians and anthropologists: historical studies often treat sources as transparent containers, yet insufficient attention is paid to the constructed nature of the materials themselves, including who produced them, under what circumstances they were written, and which ideology they served. Meanwhile, although the philosophical paradigm has put forward theoretically enlightening conceptions of global order, it tends to oversimplify historical complexity. Fundamentally, this arises from an informational asymmetry between two distinct types of inquiry: what predecessors argued versus how later generations interpret them, reflecting the

deep methodological divergence between the two schools. Historians cannot use conclusions from descriptive research to deny the legitimacy of normative theoretical construction; nor can philosophers replace careful engagement with historical contexts with abstract theoretical speculation. Future research on tianxia may shift toward the critical use of historical sources. On the premise of acknowledging the active constructive nature of historical materials, reflection should focus on who employed tianxia, for what purposes, and in what ways within different historical contexts, as well as the political effects generated by such usages. Only in this way can studies of tianxia strike a balance between historical depth and theoretical elevation.

2.3 Institutional Practice and Ethnological Paradigm

This research paradigm mainly adopts empirical analysis and ethnographic approaches, with three methodological characteristics: first, it conducts theoretical abstraction based on China's local historical experience, avoids the academic presuppositions of Western theories, and refines analytic concepts with local explanatory power from the long-term historical practice of Grand Unification [9]; second, on the basis of sorting out existing ideological history concepts, it further examines how the concept of Grand Unification is transformed into specific institutional designs, governance practices, and power operation processes [10]; third, through cross-dynastic comparison, it summarizes structural paradigms with universal explanatory power [11]. Overall, its methodological orientation is quite consistent with the basic ideas of anthropological functionalism and structuralism. This paradigm clearly reveals the inherent logic and historical continuity of the development of the Grand Unification concept, and explores its inheritance and transformation relationship with the modern concept of the Chinese Nation. However, from an anthropological research perspective, this analytic paradigm derived from literature still has some common issues worthy of further discussion. First, there are certain limitations in the research perspective and historical data foundation. The empirical materials relied on by the three documents are mostly concentrated in official records and elite-level discourses, with insufficient attention to the investigation of Grand Unification in borderland history. Moreover, existing historical materials themselves possess the attribute of power construction. If only such materials are used to demonstrate the continuity and stability of Grand Unification, it is necessary to carefully define the boundary between normative ideals and historical facts to avoid the tendency to simplify historical complexity. Second, Zhang's research [10] exhibits an obvious functionalist tendency. Most existing analyses uniformly interpret various institutions, discourses, and rituals as serving the overall goal of Grand Unification. In fact, the multi-faceted interpretations of Grand Unification also involve various explanatory perspectives such as cultural relativism and symbolic anthropology. From the perspective of anthropological practice theory, discourses and orders are continuously negotiated, challenged, and reshaped through two-way interaction in daily interactions. This dynamic process has not been fully explored in the existing paradigm, which only focuses on the one-way transmission from the center to the periphery. Third, there is a conflict between theoretical generalization and historical complexity. Both political concepts such as Umbrella-Style Society and Political Grand Unification are highly generalized summaries of complex historical facts. However, any highly generalized theoretical model will inevitably simplify specific historical scenarios, regional differences, and the agency of individuals and groups. Overall, this research paradigm focuses more on the explanation and interpretation of history. It is very enlightening for understanding the historical formation of the Chinese Nation Community. In particular, Yang's research [9] has greatly enriched the theoretical depth and inclusiveness of the paradigm. Nevertheless, from an anthropological perspective, there is still room for further development in presenting the complex landscape of historical practice, focusing on the independent actions of various subjects, and deepening interdisciplinary theoretical integration. Based on the above scholars' views, it can be concluded that the three paradigms arise from different research perspectives: the philosophical construction paradigm focuses on the universal connotations of the Tianxia concept; the historical-contextual paradigm focuses on the particularities of specific historical stages; the institutional-practice paradigm focuses on how the Tianxia concept is implemented. The three are interdependent and complementary, together constituting a multidimensional understanding of the Tianxia concept. This evolution reflects a broader shift in Chinese academia from abstract theorization toward empirically grounded and historically informed analyses.

3. Research Trends in Tianxia Studies: East Asian and Global Perspectives

Throughout history, the external dissemination of Chinese civilization has relied on its strong geopolitical radiance in the East Asian region. Since the Qin and Han dynasties, political concepts and institutional systems

centered on Confucianism gradually spread to neighboring areas, forming a Sinocentric tributary system. Within this framework, countries such as the Korean Peninsula and Japan actively absorbed Chinese institutions and ideological traditions, shaping a shared political and cultural foundation of the Chinese character cultural circle. However, their understandings of the Tianxia concept diverged significantly. Starting in the fourteenth century, the Korean Peninsula modeled itself on the Ming Dynasty. The Song people even referred to Koreans as Little China. This identity was deeply internalized during the Joseon Dynasty. After the fall of the Ming, the Korean Peninsula refused to recognize the Qing Dynasty as the legitimate successor of Chinese civilization and instead strengthened its Little China identity to maintain cultural continuity in the East Asian political sphere. Japan, by contrast, developed a Japan-centric vision of Tianxia. After the Ming-Qing transition, it was called China Hua-Yi aberration, positioning itself as the true heir to East Asian civilization. These fundamental differences in historical cognition profoundly shaped the research orientations of Japanese and Korean scholars on Tianxia in modern times.

3.1 The Tradition of Korean and North Korean Scholars

Domestic scholars studying Korea's Little China ideology primarily focus on cultural identity formation after the Ming-Qing transition. Through rituals such as establishing the Grand Prayer Altar, worshipping the Ming Emperor, and covertly adopting the Chongzhen era name, Korea developed the Little China consciousness as an alternative orthodoxy, aligning it with modern Confucian principles of upholding righteousness and rejecting heresy [10]. However, the Korean literati's cultural self-esteem remained confined to a monolithic worldview of the world, never genuinely claiming legitimacy as Chinese orthodoxy [11], yet demonstrating enduring influence beyond political realities. Analysis of historical documents reveals that most research still relies heavily on official archives, including scholar collections, official histories, and diplomatic records like the Yanxinglu, while paying insufficient attention to grassroots responses. In contrast, domestic academia has increasingly focused on frontier regions and expanded historical research on ethnic minorities in recent years. Meanwhile, some studies have shown that the concept of Little China was a product of power reinforcement under the unique international environment of the 19th century, but few have discussed the reasons for reinforcing such consciousness. However, in recent years, Huang [12] has introduced methods from political anthropology to attempt to answer these questions: Little China is not a description of historical facts but a functional construction of self-identity aimed at mediating the conflict between political reality and cultural ideals. On the methodological level, Wang Yunzhou questions whether the concepts proposed by Korean scholars truly align with the thinking patterns of the Korean literature. Yet, when discussing how Korea understood China, the scholars' own problem awareness and theoretical frameworks also deserve scrutiny. The image of Korean Little China currently observed in domestic academia is largely a product constructed under Chinese academic theories. In summary, research on Korean Little China generally leans toward historical paradigms and also faces potential issues of perspective asymmetry.

3.2 Three Orientations in Japanese Scholarship

Japanese research on Chinese civilization has long been shaped by three interwoven intellectual trends. The study of China civilization in Japanese academia has long been influenced by three intertwined ideologies: the theory of cultural affinity emphasizes the continuity of Chinese and Japanese traditions; the theory of rupture argues that China civilization was interrupted by conquering dynasties, leading Japan to develop an independent identity; and the Japan-centered view claims that Japan is the true and even superior inheritor of East Asian civilization. These three orientations reflect the wavering intellectual positioning of Japanese academia between cultural dependence, autonomy, and regional centrality, collectively forming the academic background for Nobuo Watanabe's nation-state of the world theory. Although both belong to the East Asian region, Japan's concept of the world is entirely distinct from the inherited worldview of China and North Korea. It is closely tied to Japan's divine state ideology and its cultural psychology of admiring strength. On one hand, retro-national scholars represented by Motooka Nobunaga established the narrative of Amaterasu Omikami's eternal lineage as the a priori superiority of the divine state of Japan through studies such as the Kojiki Biography, thereby constructing a conceptual framework of the Huaxia-Yi order that positions Japan as the ancestor of all nations [13]. On the other hand, the essence of this cultural psychology reflects the trait of admiring strength, when China was prosperous during the Sui and Tang dynasties, Japan actively learned from and worshipped Chinese culture; when the transition from Ming to Qing dynasties was perceived as a decline of Chinese civilization, Japan turned to self-worship and even attempted to leave Asia and enter Europe [14].

In other words, Japan's cultural psychology is not an absolute anti-China or invasion-oriented mindset under conventional thinking, but rather a flexible self-positioning based on power comparisons. Choosing China as a benchmark may simply be due to its shared geographical location within East Asia. Essentially, it employs the Huaxia-Yi distinction mindset to construct Japan's national identity and cultural nationalism. Furthermore, the discourse on Asia within Japan's left-wing academic circles presents another analytical perspective. Zhou notes that the term Asia evolved from a geographical concept in the 1930s into a descriptor of pre-modern backwardness, closely tied to the dissemination of Marxist historiography [15]. Scholars of the Lecture School initially employed the Asian feudalism theory to critique feudal remnants in Japanese society, but this concept was later incorporated into the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere, providing theoretical justification for colonial expansion. This shift from critical to colonial Asian perspectives reflects the pervasive interplay of cosmopolitanism and nationalism among Japanese scholars.

3.3 Research Orientations of European and American Scholars: Tianxia as a Challenge to Western IR

The inclusion of Tianxia into such frameworks of international relations theory has led to three main discussion directions: Tianxia as an alternative world order challenging Western centrism [16], as an epistemological perspective supplementing the deficiencies of the Westphalian system [17], and as another theoretical construct for building the China School. Although these research perspectives vary, they all essentially employ the same conceptual category of Western hegemony and cosmopolitan IR to explain the academic presuppositions of the Tianxia concept. Consequently, this presupposition raises at least three issues. First, interpreting the Tianxia concept as anti-hegemony or new hegemony still remains within the previously mentioned center-periphery framework, failing to truly transcend the Western thinking patterns it criticizes. Second, when defining the Tianxia concept using categories such as realism and liberalism, it is necessary to explain it in conjunction with its historical developmental origins. Third, existing discussions almost entirely focus on China, neglecting the different evolutions of the Tianxia concept in Japan and Korea. These internal variations within East Asia can precisely test whether Tianxia is a concept with universal explanatory power or merely a product of China's particularism. The theoretical value of the concept of 'the world' may not lie in its ability to supplement the Western IR system, but rather in its capacity to compel us to reflect on the cultural presuppositions inherent in IR theory itself. This reflection requires a shift from 'translating the world through Western concepts' to exposing the boundaries of Western concepts within the framework of the world.

4. Limitations of Existing Research

Based on the above literature review, current research on the Tianxia worldview is plagued by the following deficiencies. Firstly, there is a lack of interdisciplinary integration. Scholars in philosophy, history, and ethnology conduct research in their respective silos without effective academic dialogue. Secondly, the application of historical materials is overly simplistic. Research relies excessively on classic documents such as Records of Great Righteousness Awakening the Deluded and Comprehensive Gazetteer of the Qing Dynasty, while insufficient exploration has been made of local chronicles, collected works of senior ministers and other historical sources. Thirdly, there is a lack of systematic review of overseas research. Insufficient attention has been paid to the complex landscape of Japanese academia (including left-wing Asianism theories), the Little China tradition in Korean and DPRK academia, as well as the critical perspectives of European and American academic circles. Fourthly, research on the dynamic evolution process is weak. Most studies focus on the pattern of the High Qing Dynasty, ignoring the construction process and transformation mechanism of the Tianxia worldview concept.

5. Conclusion

Through this literature review, a consistent conclusion emerges: interpretations of the Tianxia worldview are profoundly shaped by scholars' ideological traditions and historical experiences. Chinese scholarship often draws on politicized Confucian frameworks; Japanese perspectives reflect shifting processes of regional self-positioning; Korean and North Korean studies emphasize cultural identity maintenance; while Western research is largely driven by efforts to interpret China's rise. These differing approaches reveal how intellectual inquiry is embedded in broader projects of civilizational self-positioning and value formation during

modernization. Although framed as a discussion of Tianxia, this field ultimately engages fundamental questions of human existence—who we are, where we come from, and where we are heading. This explains its capacity to transcend disciplinary boundaries, spanning history, political science, philosophy, and ethnology, while contributing to broader reflections on civilizational self-understanding. Future research should advance along both conceptual and methodological lines. Conceptually, greater clarity is needed regarding the epistemological boundaries of Tianxia, particularly the distinction between its traditional meanings and modern reinterpretations. Methodologically, several directions are promising: integrating ethnological perspectives grounded in empirical studies of interethnic interaction; expanding historical sources to include local chronicles and non-elite materials; fostering cross-cultural dialogue within global intellectual history and International Relations theory; examining the transformation of traditional concepts into modern state and global frameworks; and strengthening comparative research across East Asia. Ultimately, the diversity of interpretations reflects plural epistemologies and cultural standpoints, each possessing its own historical rationality and contemporary relevance.

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Funding

This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgment

This paper is an output of the science project.

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