I am delighted that this book has been translated into English and is being published in the United States, making it now available to the largest population of readers in the world. As this world in our own historical moment is suffering from a global pandemic and the economic and political turbulence that has followed in its wake, I hope the positive message of this book is meaningful and will prove useful. This book is a deliberate analysis of the future possibility of a tianxia “All under Heaven” system as a philosophy of world order. Doing philosophy is rather strange in the sense that philosophers create more problems than they solve. Actually it is precisely because none of the basic philosophical problems have thus far been resolved that philosophers have a good reason or perhaps an excuse to continue their investigations.

Many readers of this work have repeatedly asked me three questions. Who will lead this tianxia world? Is this a Chinese ambition or even a Chinese threat to the rest of the world? And what will be the concrete institutional arrangement of a tianxia world? In response, I feel obliged to explain the methodology applied in my investigation of a tianxia system. My approach has been one of “taking no sides” (wulichang 无立场). That is, I assume the perspective of an extraterrestrial anthropologist.
who comes to Earth and does anthropological fieldwork on our planet. The horizon of such an investigator must quite reasonably be the world as a whole rather than any particular nation. I try in this way to present a theory of tianxia that is meant to speak to the world in general and to go beyond any particular population or nation-state.

My reinvention of the ancient concept of tianxia, literally “All under Heaven,” connotes a system for world order that is both of and for all of the world’s peoples. The concept of tianxia was the political starting point of China some three thousand year ago and stands in contrast to the Greek polis as the political starting point of European culture. It suggests that the Chinese political thinking of this era had in a quite unusual way begun from a sense of “world” rather than of “state.” It developed into a concept of “world governance” that proved to be too early for its own time, but at the same time, might have some relevance for the modern world. Indeed, it is because the Chinese tianxia system ended in 221 BCE that I have not had recourse to discuss much of post-tianxia China and have had very little to say about China’s “tributary system” in the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries that seems to interest Western scholars so much. Just to be clear, the tributary system provides some explanation about post-tianxia imperial China but definitely not about the tianxia system itself. My real interest has been in discovering the best possible implications of our historical resources, and to think through the most meaningful possibilities they might imply for our future world, with little interest at all in ancient relics that are of no more use today. In short, I revisit the wisdom of the tradition rather than its tombs.

There have been two triggers for my reinvention of tianxia. The first has been my long time trust in the Kantian search for peace that has been challenged in our time by Huntington’s clashes of civilizations. This tension exposes a larger problem beyond the Kantian notion of peace with respect to issues of shared values, religious beliefs, and the political regimes defining of nations. The second trigger has been the utter failure of international politics. As it stands, it is and continues to be an ineffective game that brings with it the hostile strategies of deterrence, sanction, interference, the balancing of powers, cold wars, and even war itself—all of which only serve to make the world even worse off than it was.
Contrary to much popular yet misleading thinking, the concept of the political when it works does not mean the recognition of an enemy, and the concept of war cannot be defined as the continuation of politics by other means. In fact, the event of war is the precise proof of the failure of politics. Instead the political should be understood as the art of changing hostility into hospitality. Politics does not make any sense if it offers no change to a hostile situation. My effort has been to trace back to an understanding of the ancient concept of tianxia, rethinking its ambition to formulate an all-inclusive world system under a world constitution that would ensure world peace.

Up until now, the world has remained a nonworld in its “original state” not far from the Hobbesian state of nature, full of conflicts and hostilities that portend ominous clashes of civilizations. The anarchy that prevails in the world today is wholly at odds with the notion of a world of well-organized states. It is a failed world that is lacking in world-ness. The tianxia system is meant to address the world-size problems of a global time, including those of technologies, economies, climate, and indeed of civilization itself.

A tianxia system is to be established on the basis of three constitutional concepts: (1) the internalization of the world, inclusive of all nations in a shared system that constitutes a world with no negative externalities; (2) a relational rationality that gives priority to minimizing mutual hostility over the maximizing of exclusive interests and stands in contrast to individual rationality and its pursuit of the maximization of self-interest; and (3) Confucian improvement requiring one improves if-and-only-if all others improve. It is a nonexclusive improvement for all and is thus more compelling than Pareto’s improvement. In other words, Confucian improvement is Pareto’s improvement not for one person but for everyone.

There is obviously a distance between concepts and their practice. I have been trying to develop some practical ideas for a tianxia system in recent years following the publication of the Chinese edition of this book in 2016. In this English edition I have included the sketch of an argument for a “smart democracy” that might serve as a practical choice for a possible tianxia. This smart democracy suggests a knowledge-weighted democracy and is thus different from the modern notion of democracy. It anticipates a democracy designed to become institutionally intelligent, as
if it were “automatically” smart by itself, free of the democratic mistakes made by collective irrational choices.

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Zhao Tingyang 赵汀阳
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