

One Asia Foundation International Lectures, Fall 2019 Semester
“Humanities General Education: The Asian Community:
The Construction and Transformation of East Asiaology” Lecture Series (11)

Title: From “Tianxia” to Asian Community

For the 11th lecture, we invite Professor Kan Huai-Chen from the Department of History, National Taiwan University (NTU) as guest speaker. Professor Kan received his Ph.D. from the Department of History, NTU and he has served as Executive Director of the Center for the Study of East Asian Civilizations at NTU, Associate Dean of the Department of History at NTU, Co-convenor of the history discipline at the Ministry of Science and Technology. Professor Kan’s specialties are ancient history in China, political history in East Asia, and emperor system and Confucianism. The summary of the lecture is as following:

Professor Kan first explained the main topic of this lecture is to discuss what is traditional concept of “Tianxia” (天下) and what function does the concept “Tianxia” bring to our future in Asia. Professor Kan stated humorously that he is a salesman to sell the importance of concept “Tianxia.” “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,” he quoted from the opening sentence in *A Tale of Two Cities* a famous novel by Charles Dickens. This quote represents that the progress of the time might also bring the upheavals in the society and world. In modern times, the democracy system in the West created new nation-states; however, the confrontations in the society became more severe. Professor Kan argued that forcing citizens to “identify” who they are is the reason behind increasing social frictions, confrontations and contradictions. Modern people gain recognitions from others or society through interchanging symbols like adopting fashionable makeup or hair and then identify their meaning of existence. To expand individual identity to an extreme, it is national identity and state identity. It is because an individual was given a new identity as a “nation” after the construction of modern nation-state. The identity of nation and state is the main reason of unrest in the world nowadays.

Professor Kan continued to state that to solve the difficulties facing the world, we should think about alternatives to Western system. In other words, we might reconsider and think about the systems in Asia before modern times and find theory to construct new order from these systems. Thus, the concept “Tianxia” is the keyword. The concept “Tianxia” was originated in the early Western Zhou dynasty period and it became core thought in the emperor system in Han dynasty. Japan adopted this concept and called its territory of regime and governances as “Tianxia” since 5th century. Japan fully accepted the view of “Tianxia” in the Tang dynasty in its period of the Law and Code System (律令制) in 8th century. Traditionally, the concept “Tianxia” refers to the world (人間) under the rule of the “heaven” and it is a concept of “territory.” “Tianxia” is formed by various autonomous and

independent political units and it is a self-assumed name of East Asian region in pre-modern times. This concept of “Tianxia” does not need unification of blood, language, region, culture and does not pursue the unity of identity.

However, the traditional “Tianxia system” in China and Japan ended due to the invasion of Western power in mid-1990s. In fact, the global political system constructed by Western imperialism emphasized the problem of identity and resulted in serious confrontation among different nations and states, and even led to the outbreak of large-scale war. In the light of this, scholars begin to review the context of Chinese history and discuss various phenomena in Chinese history in recent years. Scholars expect to find new political theory from the previous “Tianxia system” in East Asia in pre-modern times for the purpose to protect the prosperity and security in Asia in the future. That is the main reason why the studies of “Tianxia” became important in humanity and social science disciplines.

At last, professor Kan recognized the contribution of Western system for creating new nation-state. Nonetheless, for solving the conflicts in the world, countries should not enlarge and emphasize nationalism but should reconsider the concept of “Tianxia” and construct a system in which citizens are the main body extracted from “Tianxia system” in the context of pre-modern times. A unity that all citizens in East Asia are the citizens of the “heaven” can be formed in Asian region and citizens can accept the differences of each other within the commonality. In other words, all citizens in East Asia under the “Tianxia” concept not only form the identity but also recognize and accept the difference in various cultures.¹ Accordingly, constructing new Asian community from traditional “Tianxia” concept can create a stable, peaceful, and prosperous future in Asia.

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(Written by Meng-Jung Lin, Associate Professor of the Department of Japanese Language and Literature)

(English Version Translated by Wenting (Florence) Yang, Post-doctoral Research Fellow, Institute of International Relations, National Chengchi University)

¹ (Footnote by translator) The translation of “identity” in Chinese is “認同” which refer to recognize the similarity. Thus, Professor Kan created a contrast between “identity” and recognizing the difference.