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Comparative Outline of the Terms “Great Unification”, “China”, and “All-under-Heaven”

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Abstract

The concepts “Great Unification” (*Dayitong* 大一統), “China” (*Zhongguo* 中國), and “all-under-Heaven” (*Tianxia* 天下) are all research topics which continue to attract the focus of the Chinese historical community. The three concepts are both related and different. This paper conducts a preliminary comparative analysis of the content of the three concepts and the role that they play in specific historical studies. It finds that the concept “China” emphasizes the origin of *Huaxia* 華夏 civilization and its significance as a center for expansion and Sinicization of surrounding ethnic groups. The concept “all-under-Heaven,” meanwhile, places more stress on the overall political governance relationship between the center and the periphery. Finally, the concept “Great Unification” focuses on the process by which a dynasty establishes its legitimacy in terms of both ideology and practice. Only by examining the three concepts together can we fully grasp the overall direction and characteristics of Chinese history.

Keywords

Great Unification – China – all-under-Heaven – *Zhuxia* – *Yidi*

In recent years, the three concepts “Great Unification” (*Dayitong* 大一統), “China” (*Zhongguo* 中國), and “all-under-Heaven” (*Tianxia* 天下) have gained attention in Chinese historical research. If we examine their connotations and extensions, the three concepts are both related and different. In general, explanations of “China” start by going back to the origins of recorded civilization and integrating new archaeological discoveries to explain the emergence and

migration of the *Huaxia* 華夏 ethnic group, as well as the historical trajectory of smaller ethnic groups gradually merging into a multi-ethnic community with the *Huaxia* at its core. Research on the concept “all-under-Heaven” typically focuses on ancient people’s imagination and construction of the peripheral world. In general, it is difficult to draw correspondences between the concepts “China” and “all-under-Heaven,” on the one hand, and any specific practices, on the other. By contrast, from its earliest citation, the concept “Great Unification” served to secure emperors’ “legitimate” (*zhengtong* 正統) status. It has more complex ideological and practical implications. “Great Unification” is not only an ideological formation, but also a concrete political practice. Consequently, understanding the similarities and differences between the three concepts “Great Unification,” “China,” and “all-under-Heaven” should be a core task of current historical research. This paper proposes to use it as an entry point for preliminary analysis.

1 “China”: A Concept That Is Difficult to Define

In recent years, the concepts “China” and “all-under-Heaven” have been the objects of frequent and fierce debate within the scholarly community. With respect to the debate about “China,” there have been many recent, relevant research works.¹ These writings make clear that there is not yet any scholarly consensus about how to define and understand the concept. This makes the concept “China” even more vague and indistinct.

In the era before the Qin dynasty (221–207 BCE), the concept “China” distinguished ethnic boundaries by relying on geographical orientation and ritual culture. Its scope was the *Zhuxia* 諸夏 fiefdom and area of activity, with the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE) royal court at its core. Such vassals, located in remote areas, could only be considered “barbarian.” In pre-Qin records, the concept “China” often appears paired with concepts like “barbarian.” In terms of spatial distribution, the concept of “China” represented by the term *Zhuxia* stood mainly in structural opposition to the surrounding “barbarian” groups

1 To cite a few examples: Ge Zhaoguang 葛兆光, *Zhai zi Zhongguo: Chongjian youguan “Zhongguo” de lishi lunshu* 宅茲中國：重建有關“中國”的歷史論述 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011); Xu Zhuoyun 許倬雲, *Shuo Zhongguo: Yige buduan bianhua de fuzha gongtongti* 說中國：一個不斷變化的複雜共同體 (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2015); Xu Hong 許宏, *Heyi Zhongguo: Gongyuan qian 2000 nian de Zhongyuan tujing* 何以中國：公元前2000年的中原圖景 (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2016); Huang Xingtao 黃興濤, *Chongsu Zhonghua: Jindai Zhongguo “Zhonghua minzu” guannian yanjiu* 重塑中華：近代中國“中華民族”觀念研究 (Beijing: Beijing shifan daxue chubanshe, 2017).

known as *Yidi* 夷狄. With respect to cultural meaning, the concept “China” emerged in contrast with the cultures of other ethnic groups.²

The term *Yidi* must be understood in conjunction with *Zhuxia*; without reference to each other, the idea of “China” is obscure. Confucius (551–479 BCE) stated, “Even the barbarian states (*Yidi*) with their lords are not as civilized as those states of the middle plains (*Zhuxia*) without lords.”³ *Zuo zhuan* 左傳 also includes the passage: “It is through virtue that the people of the Middle State (*Zhongguo*) maintain peace and order; it is through punishments and coercion the surrounding wild tribes (*si Yi* 四夷) are kept in order.”⁴ Both passages clearly place *Zhuxia* and *Yidi* in opposition to each other.

It can be said that the opposition between *Zhuxia* and *Yidi* is a prerequisite for defining the concept “China”; however, the dynamic nature of the geographical space between them presents a problem. In the pre-Qin period, this elastic standard could accommodate changing circumstances. Confucius and Mencius (ca. 372–289 BCE) held quite different attitudes towards this issue. Confucius advocates weakening the boundaries between the two: *Yidi* and *Zhuxia* can mutually communicate and adapt, with *Yidi* progressing toward “China” and “China” regressing toward *Yidi*. Mencius, on the other hand, insists that most *Yidi* are intransigent, and that *Zhuxia* must civilize *Yidi* in a one-way process.⁵ The difference between Confucius and Mencius on the question of relations between *Yidi* and *Zhuxia* shows how the concept “China” is often suspended in an alternating, evolving state between self-isolation and openness to diversity. From the point of view of literature, during the early Qin, Song (960–1279), and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties, discussions of “China” largely excluded minority groups. Except for the Han (206 BCE–220 CE), Tang (618–907), Yuan (1279–1368), and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, most mainstream opinions on “China” remained bound up in the opposition between *Yidi* and

2 Wang Ermin 王爾敏, *Zhongguo jindai sixiang shi lun* 中國近代思想史論 (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2003), 371–2.

3 Liu Baonan 劉寶楠, *Lunyu zhengyi* 論語正義, coll. Gao Liushui 高流水 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), 84. The English translation follows James Legge, *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and the Doctrine of the Mean* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1893), 3.5, <http://oaks.nvg.org/analects-legge.html>.

4 Hong Liangji 洪亮吉, *Chunqiu Zuozhuan gu* 春秋左傳詁, coll. Li Jiemin 李解民 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), 323. The English translation follows James Legge, *The Chinese Classics: With a Translation, Critical and Exegetical Notes, Prolegomena, and Copious Index* (London: Trübner, 1861–1872), <http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/saxon/servlet/SaxonServlet?source=xwomem/texts/chunqiu.xml&style=xwomen/xsl/dynaxml.xsl&chunk.id=d2.11&toc.depth=1&toc.id=0&doc.lang=English>.

5 Jiao Xun 焦循, *Mengzi zhengyi* 孟子正義, coll. Shen Wenzhuo 沈文倬 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), 315–445.

Zhuxia. Particularly in the Song through Ming dynasties, the concept of “using *Zhuxia* to change *Yidi*” slowly evolved into a theory of Han assimilation. This theory is a model of interpretation centered on the history of the Han people. It posits that backwards “barbarians” could only be transformed (meaning civilized) with the help of *Zhuxia* rituals and civilization; influence in the opposite direction was impossible. Modern Han chauvinists have found it easy to make use of this inherited point of view.

Some scholars of the “New Qing History” in the United States distinguish the Qing dynasty from “China” by making use of an argument dating to the Song through Ming dynasties that *Yidi* and *Zhuxia* were mutually incompatible. Some of these scholars note that Manchu rule in the northeast and northwest was completely different from rule by Han-led dynasties. They argue that the Qing dynasty should be seen as a “Manchu empire,” and that “China” was only one part of it. It is undeniable, however, that this view of the Qing dynasty stemmed directly from the “China perspective” of Song through Ming dynasty Confucianism. Under the influence of the Song through Ming debates about *Yidi* and *Zhuxia*, some present-day Chinese scholars continue to use the concept of “Han assimilation” as a historical framework. During the Song through Ming, due to continued military pressure from northern, non-Han ethnic groups, the dynasty in the Central Plains did not achieve true “Great Unification” in the geographical and political domains. The senior official stratum of the School of Principle (*lixue* 理學) had no alternative but to shift to a position emphasizing “Chinese” identity, and to mobilize it in a spiritual appeal to resist the northern ethnic groups.

The psychological impasse caused by the mutual hatred between *Yidi* and *Zhuxia* was finally solved by the intervention of the Qing emperors. When discussing the relationship between *Huaxia* and *Yidi*, they paid homage to Confucius’ original position. The Qing emperors’ analysis of the contrast between *Yidi* and *Zhuxia* did not focus on whether it was about “Chinese” identity, but rather on proving the Confucian legitimacy of the Qing dynasty’s capture of “all-under-Heaven” from the perspective of “Great Unification.” It is worth noting that the Qing emperors rarely used the term “China”; even though the word “China” appears occasionally in official documents, it was usually formulated cautiously, from the perspective of a “unified” territory.

The Qing emperors used the name “China” not to prove that they possessed the kind of “Chinese” identity promoted by the Song through Ming scholars, but rather to highlight the Manchus’ historical achievement in uniting “all-under-Heaven.” When promulgating imperial edicts, they used the term “Great Unification” more frequently than “China”; their underlying consideration in using “China” as a regional designation was to oppose and revise

the Song through Ming scholars' view of *Yidi* and *Zhuxia*. Emperor Qianlong 乾隆帝 (r. 1736–1795) criticized Han people for “never having heard of the *Yidi*, who ruled ‘all-under-Heaven’ from the Central Plains.” He said directly, “‘All-under-Heaven’ belongs to the people of ‘all-under-Heaven’; no part is exclusive to the South, the North, the Central Plains, or to outsiders,” expressing his dissatisfaction with the interpretation that Han people were the sole occupants of “China.”⁶ From the tone of these statements, it can be inferred that the Qing emperors remained preoccupied with the lingering psychological shadow of the Han people's intentional monopolization of “Chinese” identity.

In the official records of the early Qing dynasty, the word *zhongguo* generally appears in relation to negotiating borders with foreign countries and drawing up treaties. When Emperor Kangxi 康熙帝 (r. 1662–1722) signed the Treaty of Nerchinsk with Russia, the text of the treaty consistently used the term *zhongguo* in parallel with “Russia,” indicating that the Qing dynasty possessed legitimate sovereignty. When promoting its governance and military accomplishments to domestic audiences, however, the Qing emperor preferred to use the concept of “Great Unification.” After the Opium Wars (1839–1842 and 1856–1860), when the Qing emperors dealt with foreign countries, they would also occasionally use the word “China,” with the intention similar to that of the Kangxi period: to show that they held absolute sovereignty over a vast territory. Here, *zhongguo* was more like another way of saying “Great Unification.”⁷

The concept of *zhongguo* carries a particular implication of ethnic antagonism. As soon as we use it as a basic unit of analysis to study China's dynastic history, it immediately becomes tainted with the political philosophy of certain groups of thinkers, such as the New Confucians of the Song and Ming dynasties. Perhaps the concept “China” is only applicable to the interpretation of a particular historical period, but it remains difficult to explain the Qing dynasty's capture of the Central Plains as a non-Han regime, and the complex historical reasons for its succession to the throne. More recent scholars have held a similar view. For example, Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929) directly criticized the Song dynasty view. With respect to distinguishing *Yidi* and *Zhuxia*, he noted, “Subsequent generations have used the name *Yidi* to denote their geographical location and ethnicity; however, in *Chunqiu* 春秋, *Yidi* denotes their politics, customs, and behavior.” He states further that the Song interpretation of the

6 See Guo Chengkang 郭成康, “Qingchao huangdi de Zhongguo guan” 清朝皇帝的中國觀, in *Qingchao de guojia rentong: ‘Xin Qingshi’ yanjiu yu zhengming* 清朝的國家認同: “新清史”研究與爭鳴, ed. Liu Fengyun 劉鳳雲 and Liu Wenpeng 劉文鵬 (Beijing: Zhongguo Renmin Daxue chubanshe, 2010), 236–7.

7 See Guo Chengkang, “Qingchao huangdi de Zhongguo guan,” 222.

meaning in *Chunqiu* as a “repulsion of the barbarians” is a misreading; he advocates returning to Confucius’ view that there could be a mutually influential relationship between *Yidi* and *Zhuxia*.⁸

Many researchers have pointed out that, historically, it has been difficult to fix the precise scope of “China” due to the constant movement of its boundaries – a movement reflected not only geo-spatially, but also in terms of change and adaptation in cultural psychology; consequently, it is difficult to draw general conclusions.⁹ In recent years, the Chinese academic world has developed several new interpretative methods. Some scholars have tried to bypass the old-fashioned framework of “connotation analysis” and blaze a path toward new interpretative perspectives. More influential views include “China from the periphery,” “*Huaxia* periphery theory,” and “East Asian association theory.”

As the chief proponent of “China from the periphery,” Ge Zhaoguang 葛兆光 believes that the process of “China” becoming a “nation-state” began as early as the Song dynasty. Due to pressure from non-Han ethnic groups in the north, Song scholars gradually formed a clear sense of boundaries and a cohesive “feeling of cultural identity.” It was precisely because non-Han ethnic groups served as a point of reference as “others” that the Song dynasty took the first steps toward forming the spatial subjectivity implied by the modern concept of the nation-state.¹⁰ This discourse gave the Song dynasty’s “conception of China” a quality like the “nation-state,” but completely equating the boundary consciousness of ancient ethnic groups with the modern concept of the nation-state obviously seems anachronistic. After all, the “conflict between *Yidi* and *Zhuxia*” was not a conflict in the sense of conflict between modern nation-states.

Wang Mingke 王明珂, on the other hand, suggests that, in order to accurately answer the question “what does ‘China’ mean,” in-depth research is necessary on the “historical temperament” of minority ethnic groups. He attempts to reconstruct the historical memory and self-identification of the groups that were peripheral to *Huaxia* (mainly the Qiang ethnic group). In particular, he explores the implications of “China” in the memories of peripheral ethnic groups by tracing the transmission of myths of brotherhood and ancestry. Broadly speaking, this is also a “China from the periphery” perspective. Wang

8 Liang Qichao 梁啟超, *Liang Qichao quanji* 梁啟超全集, ed. Tang Zhijun 湯志鈞 and Tang Ren 湯仁 (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2018), 250–1.

9 Luo Zhitian 羅志田, “Yi Xia zhi bian de kaifang yu fengbi” 夷夏之辨的開放與封閉, *Zhongguo wenhua* 中國文化, no. 2 (1996): 213–24.

10 Ge Zhaoguang, *Zhai zi Zhongguo*, 25–26.

has said the notion of a “circle” arose after an observer first saw a concrete circle, which only later formed the impression and understanding of an abstract “circle.” Using a concave or convex mirror as a metaphor, Wang describes how, by moving the mirror, observing the changes on its surface, and discovering the regularities of those changes, we can determine the nature of the mirror (such as whether it is concave or convex), as well as roughly determine the shape of the object under the mirror.¹¹ However, this method of observing a concave or convex mirror, although helpful for understanding the history of the formation of “the *Huaxia* periphery,” is no substitute for coming to grips with the unique, internal historical characteristics of “China.”¹²

Another perspective on “China” can be called the “East Asian theory” or “East Asian association theory.” This perspective manifests in three broad types. One type is the Confucian perspective, which unites China, the Korean peninsula, and Japan in a highly abstract way through the framework of “Confucianism” and demonstrates the universality of the fundamental Confucian values in this area. Its chief flaw, however, lies in removing Confucian values from their historical context to perpetuate a historical fantasy of China as the leader of East Asian civilization.

A second type views East Asia as a unique region that overtakes and opposes the West in its pursuit of modernization. In this line of thinking, “China” – a backward country – is drawn into an “East Asian modernization” order led by Japan, to become a “regional unit” of an East Asian community opposing the West. In this way, the narrative of “China” has been superseded by the concept of “East Asia.” The difficulty with this perspective is the question of who should represent East Asia. It conceals an ideological struggle over the right to lead the modernization of the region and can easily reawaken painful memories among Chinese people of Japan’s promotion of a “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere” during its invasion of China in the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945).

Relatedly, the third type of perspective on the “East Asian theory” is the traumatic memory of the war, which constitutes the psychological background of the discourse about East Asia as a whole. This perspective of “war memory” is scaffolded by the associative framework of the three nation-states China, Japan, and Korea (that is, the Korean Peninsula). This makes it impossible

11 Wang Mingke 王明珂, *Fansi shixue yu shixue fansi: Wenben yu biao zheng fenxi* 反思史學與史學反思：文本與表徵分析 (Taipei: Yunchen wenhua shiye gufen youxian gongsi, 2015), 273.

12 Wang Mingke 王明珂, *Huaxia bianyuan: Lishi jiyi yu zuqun rentong* 華夏邊緣：歷史記憶與族群認同 (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2006), 163–84.

to find the precise position of “East Asia” that stands closest to the history of “China” in our spiritual and ideological world. As a result, many concrete case studies lack a vector to translate effectively into an ideological resource for China’s intellectual community.¹³

2 The Problem of “All-under-Heaven”

Unlike “China,” at the time of its origin “all-under-Heaven” was mainly a geo-spatial concept. From this perspective, the scope of “all-under-Heaven” is broader than “China,” but because “China” is at the center, it has the implication of commanding everything around it and absorbing the resources of “all-under-Heaven.” What people commonly refer to as “all-under-Heaven” actually originates in the geo-spatial view evident in the “Yugong” 禹貢 section of “Xishu” 夏書 in *Shujing* 書經. “Yugong” is divided into descriptions of the nine provinces (*jiu zhou* 九州) and five domains (*wu fu* 五服). The boundaries of the nine provinces follow the patterns of natural geography, indicated by famous mountains and rivers, divided into nine major regions – namely, the nine provinces of Ji 冀, Yan 兗, Qing 青, Xu 徐, Yang 揚, Jing 荊, Yu 豫, Liang 梁, and Yong 雍. Among the five domains, the five hundred *li* 里 circumference of the royal capital is designated as the *dian* 甸 domain. A series of concentric circles, each spaced at a distance of five hundred *li*, form successively the *dian* domain (central governing district), the *hou* 侯 domain (the governing district of the feudal vassals), the *sui* 綏 domain (the pacified area), the *yao* 要 domain (the peripheral area), and the *huang* 荒 domain (the uncivilized area).¹⁴

The “all-under-Heaven” view of the world, based on the nine provinces, is a scholar’s idealized image of the surrounding world. By contrast, the five domains seem to be a political metaphor. Only by grasping the cultural implications contained within the five domains schema of concentric circles can we understand the deep meaning behind the geography of the nine provinces. The five domain system recorded in such sources as *Guoyu* 國語 is a kind of narrative framework for the space shared by *Zhuxia* and *Yidi*. In *Guoyu*, “Zhouyu” 周語 notes:

13 Sun Ge 孫歌, *Women weishenme yao tan Dongya: Zhuangkuang zhong de zhengzhi yu lishi* 我們為什麼要談東亞：狀況中的政治與歷史 (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2011), 18–23.

14 Zhou Zhenhe 周振鶴, *Zhongguo lishi zhengzhi dili shiliu jiang* 中國歷史政治地理十六講 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2013), 78.

The system of the ancestral king was as follows: the land within the state was called the *dian* domain. The land outside the state was called the *hou* domain. From the *hou* domain to the defenses was called was called the *bin* 賓 domain. The *Yi* and *Man* 蠻 lands outside the *bin* domain were called the *yao* domain. And the *Rong* 戎 and *Di* lands outside the *yao* domain were called the *huang* domain. The feudal vassals of the *dian* domain shall supply offerings to the king for his grandfather and father. The feudal vassals of the *hou* domain shall supply offerings to the king for his great-great-grandfather and great-grandfather. The feudal vassals of the *bin* domain shall supply offerings to the monarch for his remote ancestors. The feudal vassals of the *yao* domain shall supply offerings to the monarch for the gods. The feudal vassals of the *huang* domain, for their part, shall have audiences with the monarch.¹⁵

It also emphasizes that the ruling order should expand concentrically from the monarch's capital. Clearly, what is being described is not actual administrative control, but rather closer and more distant degrees of cultural transmission.

The nine provinces geo-spatial view is also an imaginative schema for the study of the Confucian classics. Ancient classical studies had a quite different understanding of this than modern classical studies do. Modern classical studies recognize the territorial extent of the nine provinces as only 3,000 square *li*, which basically coincides with the territory of ancient "China." Ancient classical studies, by contrast, also included the territory of the four "barbarian" border tribes, for an extent of 10,000 square *li*.¹⁶ Compared with "China," the nine provinces and five domains geo-spatial concepts focus more on coexistence under a hierarchical structure than on confrontation and contention.

During the period from the Wei (220–265) and Jin (265–420) dynasties through the Song dynasty, the geographical and cultural boundary between *Hua* 華 and *Yi* 夷 was not in sharply differentiated confrontation. Qian Zhongshu 錢鐘書 (1910–1998) has said that people in the Han dynasty called themselves *Hua* and regarded the Xianbei 鮮卑 people as "northern barbarians" (*hulu* 胡虜). Then the Xianbei in the Wei dynasty called themselves *Hua*, and regarded the Rouran 柔然 people as "eastern barbarians" (*yilu* 夷虜). Subsequently the Xianbei of earlier-established Qi regarded the Xianbei of later-origin Zhou as

15 Shang Xuefeng 尚學鋒 and Xia Dekao 夏德韜, trans. and annot., *Guoyu* 國語 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2007), 5.

16 Watanabe Shinichiro 渡邊信一郎, *Zhongguo gudai de wangquan yu Tianxia zhixu: Cong Ri-Zhong bijiao de shijiao chufa* 中國古代的王權與天下秩序：從日中比較的視角出發, trans. Xu Chong 徐衝 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008), 52.

“northeastern barbarians” (*Yidi*). Then people in the Northern Qi dynasty (550–557) called themselves *Hua* and regarded those from the Southern Dynasties (420–589) as “eastern barbarians” (*Yi*). Afterwards, during the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279), northern people in the Jurchen Jin Dynasty (1115–1234) considered themselves *Hanjie* 漢節 or *Huafeng* 華風 when speaking to the Mongols, and so on.¹⁷

Before the Song dynasty, the understanding of ethnic relations was closer to the concept “all-under-Heaven” and did not give much weight to the connotations of “China.” This was because, in the eyes of different ethnic groups, the borders of *Huaxia* were in constant flux. Only when a ruler was unable to form a unified territory would he emphasize the central position of “China” and the Han people among all ethnic groups and strictly distinguish ethnic boundaries. In *Wenxian tongkao* 文獻通考, Ma Duanlin 馬端臨 (1254–1323) insisted that the scope of the “nine provinces” laid out in “Yugong” was within the Great Wall. The aim was to distinguish it from the Yuan dynasty concept of “Great Unification.” This was a covert, strained argument that, while the Song dynasty might have had a narrow territory, it possessed the legitimacy of moral authority. Zhang Tianfu’s 張天復 (1513–1578) *Huangyu kao* 皇輿考, Wang Shixing’s 王士性 (d. 1598) *Guangzhi yi* 廣志繹, Gu Yanwu’s 顧炎武 (1613–1682) *Tianxia junquo libing shu* 天下郡國利病書 and *Zhaoyu zhi* 肇域志, and Gu Zuyu’s 顧祖禹 (1631–1692) *Du shi fangyu jiyao* 讀史方輿紀要 all take this perspective.¹⁸

During Emperor Qianlong’s reign, following the Qing army’s pacification of the Dzungar, the territory was largely unified and the scope of the nine provinces began to be recast. In “Ti Mao Huang *Yugong zhinan liu yun*” 題毛晃《禹貢指南》六韻, Emperor Qianlong wrote,

Today the twelve provinces are all parts of China’s territory. Are there places outside China that are not included? ... Now, the frontier has expanded all the way to Ili, Yarkent, Kashgar – several times larger than the area in “Yugong.”¹⁹

17 Qian Zhongshu 錢鐘書, *Guan zhui bian* 管錐編 (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2001), 4: 2310.

18 Wang Shixing’s understanding of the Ming dynasty’s territory was very realistic. He believed that, “The ancient and modern frontier was not large until the Han dynasty, was broadest in the Tang dynasty, then narrower again in the Song dynasty. The present dynasty exceeds the Song but does not reach the Tang in size.” Practically speaking, he admitted that the Ming dynasty did not possess the criterion of “Great Unification.” See Wang Shixing 王士性, *Guang zhi yi* 廣志繹, coll. Lü Jinglin 呂景琳 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), 2.

19 *Yuzhi shi si ji* 御制詩四集, in *Siku quanshu, jibu* 四庫全書·集部 (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 2012), 1307: 17-533.

Emperor Qianlong believed that those geographical boundaries – which he called “places that have not been reached since ancient times, things that the people have never seen” – were outside of the imaginary scope of the ancient nine provinces. Given the vast territory controlled by the Qing dynasty, if one held to the “nine provinces view” inherited from the Song through Ming dynasties, the Qianlong Emperor continues,

It would defy the original meaning of “defining borders” to continue to use the borders of the “nine provinces,” given that so many more territories have been added – greater in number, in fact, than the original “nine provinces” themselves.²⁰

From this point of view, “all-under-Heaven” should have a broader geo-spatial extent than “China”; however, “all-under-Heaven” as an analytical unit also has some limitations, mainly because it still belongs to the pre-modern scholars’ idealized political and geographical conceptual framework, considerably removed from the actual historical picture.

3 What Is the Importance of the Concept “Great Unification”?

Compared to the continuous attention scholars have devoted to the concepts “China” and “all-under-Heaven,” “Great Unification” was absent from historical research for a time. In the past, individual and sporadic studies of “Great Unification” mainly concentrated on sorting out the context of the interpretation and ideological history of the classical texts, and rarely attempted a full analysis of the concept as a phenomenon of ancient political culture that combined the ideology of rule and the practice of governance.²¹

20 *Yudi kao* 輿地考, in vol. 269 of *Huangchao wenxian tongkao* 皇朝文獻通考, vol. 1. Cited in Zhao Gang 趙剛, “Zaoqi quanqihua beijing xia sheng Qing duominzu diguo de dayitong huayu chonggou – yi *Huangchao wenxian tongkao* ‘Yudi kao,’ ‘Siyi kao,’ ‘Xiangwei kao’ de jige wenti wei zhongxin” 早期全球化背景下盛清多民族帝國的大一統話語重構 – 以《皇朝文獻通考·輿地考、四裔考、象緯考》的幾個問題為中心, in *Xin shixue* 新史學, ed. Yang Nianqun 楊念群 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2011), 5: 32.

21 For example, Yang Xiangkui 楊向奎 wrote *Dayitong yu Rujia sixiang* 大一統與儒家思想. It provides a continuous account of the Confucian ideology of “unification” from its pre-Qin origins up to Kang Youwei’s 康有為 (1858–1927) contemporary classical scholarship and his “Great Unity” (*datong* 大同) ideology. He carefully analyzes the relationship between the concept of “Great Unification” and the various factions of Confucianism. Yang Xiangkui 楊向奎, *Dayitong yu Rujia sixiang* 大一統與儒家思想 (Beijing: Beijing Chubanshe, 2011).

The difference between “Great Unification,” on the one hand, and “China” and “all-under-Heaven,” on the other, is that “Great Unification” does not emphasize the opposition between *Zhuxia* and the four “barbarian” border tribes in the way that the view opposing *Yidi* and *Zhuxia* does, nor is it limited to imagining the ruling order of the ancient dynasties as the “nine provinces” and “five domains.” Instead, it integrates the governance of territory with the construction of the relationship between politics and religion, forming a more elaborate and profound political stance.

The Qin through Han dynasties were more apt to use “Great Unification” to clearly demonstrate the “legitimacy” of their dynasties. Li Si 李斯 (280–208 BCE) praises Emperor Qin Shihuang 秦始皇 (r. 221–210 BCE), arguing, “It is entirely possible to annihilate all the feudal vassals, build the emperor’s great undertaking, and realize the ‘Great Unification’ of ‘all-under-Heaven.’ This was a unique moment in history.”²² Gathering all his ministers, the First Emperor of Qin says, “Everything within the four seas have become prefectures and counties, and only the emperor issues decrees.” In his reply, Li Si employs the political and geographical concept of “prefectures and counties”: “Now through His Majesty’s divine power, everything within the four seas has been unified and has become prefectures and counties.”²³ Li Si argues from the perspective of territorial governance. Jao Tsung-I 饒宗頤 (1917–2018) believed that: “The unified governance of ‘all-under-Heaven’ began in the Qin dynasty, therefore the geo-spatial sense of ‘Great Unification of all-under-Heaven’ may also originate in the Qin dynasty.”²⁴

This is similar to the “cardinal principles of righteousness” (*dayi* 大義) in *Chunqiu*. Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179–104 BCE) emphasizes that,

In *Chunqiu*, in the phrase *yi yuan* 一元 the character *yi* “one” means “the beginning of all things,” while the character *yuan* means “great.” Saying that “the beginning of all things” is “great” shows the beginning of greatness and aims to correct its source.²⁵

The fact that this passage explains the character *yuan* “great” in terms of the character *yi* “the beginning of all things,” and the character *yi* “the beginning of

22 *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), 87.2540.

23 *Ibid.*, 6.239.

24 Rao Zongyi 饒宗頤 [Jao Tsung-I], *Zhongguo lishi shang zhi zhengtong lun* 中國歷史上之正統論 (Shanghai: Shanghai yuandong chubanshe, 1996), 4.

25 *Han shu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 2502.

all things” in terms of the character *da* 大 “great,” it is best to view the meaning of legitimacy from a geo-spatial perspective.

Han dynasty Confucian esoteric literature (*weishu* 緯書) likewise regarded territorial jurisdiction as a prerequisite for “unification” (*yitong* 一統). *Yiwei qianzaodu* 易緯乾鑿度 states, “The sovereign is that which people of ‘all-under-Heaven’ return to, everything within the four seas is called ‘all-under-Heaven.’” It continues, “The ruler is above; the peoples of the four corners are each in their lands. The ‘five directions’ (East, West, South, North, and Center) conform to the current situation; the peoples conform to their natures.”²⁶ What appears on the mystical diagram – literally, a “river map” (*hetu* 河圖) – that the sage sovereigns of legend received when assuming the throne really was a map. The implication was that the new king should possess the geo-spatial orientation of “all-under-Heaven.”

Another important meaning of “legitimacy” is the “unification” of time, which comes out very clearly in *Gongyang zhuan* 公羊傳. In the section “Yin gong yuan nian” 隱公元年, there is a passage:

First year, spring, the monarch’s first month. What is the first year? It is the year in which the reign of the ruler of Lu begins ... Why does it first say “king” and then say “first month”? It is the first month of King Wen of Zhou’s 周文王 (ca. 1152–1056 BCE) royal calendar. Why does it say the “first month” of the [Zhou] royal calendar? To magnify the unified rule!²⁷

The main idea is that time is united by the monarch. Dong Zhongshu further develops this idea, and also explains that this “first month” marks the start of “legitimacy.”²⁸

The concept “Great Unification” frames the principles for the sovereign with respect to “all-under-Heaven” in, at a minimum, the following ways:

First, “Great Unification” is the starting point for the formation of political-religious relations in ancient China; one could say it is a forerunner in the elucidation of the “theory of legitimacy.” True “Great Unification” is the perfect

26 Yasui Kōzan 安居香山 and Nakamura Shōhachi 中村璋八, eds., *Weishu jicheng* 緯書集成 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei renmin chubanshe, 1994), 60.

27 Liu Shangci 劉尚慈, trans. and annot., *Chunqiu Gongyang zhuan yizhu* 春秋公羊傳譯注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2010), 1. English translation from Joachim Gentz, “Long Live the King! The Ideology of Power Between Ritual and Morality in the *Gongyang zhuan*,” in *Ideology of Power and Power of Ideology in Early China*, ed. Y. Pines, P. Goldin, and M. Kern (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 10 (in unpaginated reprint).

28 Su Yu 蘇輿, *Chunqiu fanlu yizheng* 春秋繁露義證 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2015), 7.193.

integration of space and time. “Great Unification” separately contains the two dimensions of “space” (heaven and earth) and “time” (ancient and present). The emperor not only commanded the vast natural geographical territory, but also ruled human society, and constructed a political-religious order by stipulating the beginning of time and the criteria for its functioning.

Second, the “Great Unification” advocated the ideal of universal sovereignty (*wangzhe wuwai* 王者無外, lit. “nothing outside the sovereign”). By creating the “theory of the three ages” (*sanshi shuo* 三世說), it put *Zhuxia* and *Yidi* into a theoretical framework of dynamic evolution. In this way, it broke through the ethnic dividing line which “distinguishing *Huaxia* and *Yidi*” had established. *Gongyang zhuan* inherited Confucius’ view that *Yidi* and *Zhuxia* could mutually adapt. Although this idea was born in the chaos of the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), it created for the future world a roadmap to unify “all-under-Heaven.” This concept was brilliantly promoted and developed through He Xiu’s 何休 (129–182) elaboration of “theory of the three ages in *Gongyang zhuan*.” He Xiu’s “theory of the three ages” describes a “hearsay age” (*chuanwen shi* 傳聞世) as an “age of disorder” (*juluan shi* 據亂世); a “heard age” (*suowen shi* 所聞世) as an “age of increasing peace-and-equality” (*shengping shi* 升平世); and a “seen age” (*suojian shi* 所見世) as an “age of complete peace-and-equality” (*taiping shi* 太平世).²⁹ Through the gradual evolution of these three ages, the relationship between *Zhuxia* and *Yidi* gradually becomes open and welcoming. In the age of disorder, the scope of Zhou rule was internal, and the surrounding *Huaxia* tribes were external; during this time, the Zhou royal house managed internal affairs. In the age of increasing peace-and-equality, the surrounding *Huaxia* tribes were internal, and the other surrounding ethnic groups were external;³⁰ during this time, “China” and *Yidi* were strictly distinguished and were on an enemy footing. During the age of complete peace-and-equality, by contrast, the phase of universal sovereignty and ethnic integration (*Yidi jin yu jue* 夷狄進於爵, lit. “*Yidi* are ennobled”). Finally, the ideal state of “Great Harmony” (*datong* 大同) was realized.

In some discourses, the discourse of “Great Unification” overlaps with that of “the view of all-under-Heaven.” According to the schema of the “theory of

29 The English translation follows Chen, A. H. Y., “The Concept of ‘Datong’ in Chinese philosophy as an expression of the ideal of the Common Good,” Conference Paper, 2011. http://www.ssm.com/link/U-Hong_Kong-LEG.html, cited in <https://www.slideshare.net/qiaokate/the-great-unity-da-tong-draft-2014-01-02bilingual>.

30 Wang Kaiyun 王闓運, *Chunqiu Gongyang zhuan jian* 春秋公羊傳箋, coll. Huang Xunzhai 黃巽齋 (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 2009), 149.

three ages,” the long-term vision for bringing “all-under-Heaven” into “Great Harmony” is the achievement of “Great Unification.” The perspective of “Great Unification” broke through the interpretive logic that placed “China” in confrontation with *Yidi*. The historical programmatic schema presented in the “theory of the three ages” also far exceeded the temporal and spatial scope of the expression “China.” At the same time, all the political-cultural concepts related to “China” were also incorporated into the interpretive framework of “Great Unification,” which became the starting point and prerequisite for discussing the relationship between politics and religion.

Third, the concept “Great Unification” contains the connotation of spatial and territorial expansion, while emphasizing that any military expansion must have sufficient moral legitimacy. This clarifies the difference between “Great Unification” (*dayitong*) and “Great Unity” (*da tongyi* 大統一), and distinguishes benevolent rule (*wang dao* 王道, lit. “the way of the king”) from despotic rule (*ba dao* 霸道, lit. “the way of the hegemon”). Although the Qin dynasty achieved the goal of “Great Unity” by integrating vast territory, it quickly fell from power due to its lack of sustaining moral integrity. Consequently, it is often cited as an example of a dynasty that lost “legitimacy.”

There are also those who distinguish different situations in which there is legitimacy but not unification, unification but not legitimacy, neither legitimacy nor unification, and so on. Correspondingly, the Ming dynasty, as well as the Han through Tang dynasties, featured “both unification and legitimacy.” Other regimes, such as the Yuan dynasty, possessed only “unification,” but not “legitimacy.” Regimes that insisted on “unification” often depended on “power” (*shi* 勢), while those that emphasized the principle of “legitimacy” mostly relied on “reason” (*li* 理).

Of course, the understanding of “Great Unification” varied from one dynasty to another, and there were often changes in norms. If some people were accustomed to distinguishing “unification” and “separatism” based on ethnic identity, others attached more importance to expanding territory and maintaining its integrity as the first condition for “unification.” Still others emphasized the crucial role of moral cultivation in the formation of “Great Unification.” Yet others subdivided the basic idea of “rule” (*tong* 統) into “five types of rule” (*wu tong* 五統): “legitimacy” (*zhengtong* 正統), “hegemony” (*batong* 霸統), “usurpation” (*jiantong* 僭統), “residual legitimacy” (*yutong* 余統), and “illegitimacy” (*bian-tong* 變統). They respectively identified the Han, Tang, and Ming dynasties with “legitimacy”; the Qin dynasty with “hegemony”; the Jin, Sui (581–617), and Song dynasties with “usurpation”; the Later Han (25–220), Eastern Jin (317–420), and Southern Song (420–479) dynasties with “residual legitimacy,” and the Yuan

dynasty with “illegitimacy.” Other “separatist” dynasties were excluded from the “five types of rule.”³¹

After the Song through Yuan dynasties, the idea of subdividing the concept of legitimacy with *Huaxia* at its center became pervasive in the discourse of some Ming dynasty scholars. For example, Wang Tingxiang 王廷相 (1474–1544) discussed the “legitimacy” of the Song, Yuan, and Ming dynasties as follows: in his view, the unification of *Huaxia* and *Yidi* might be called “Great Unification” (*datong* 大統), but there was a distinction between “legitimacy” (*zheng* 正) and “illegitimacy” (*bian* 變). Only such ruling houses as the Three Dynasties – that is, the Xia (ca. 2070–1600 BCE), Shang (ca. 1600–1046 BCE), and Zhou – as well as the Han, Tang, and Ming dynasties, could be characterized as “orderly, legitimate” (*shun ye, zheng ye* 順也, 正也) because “they ruled the four barbarian border tribes on the basis of China.” As for the Yuan Dynasty, because it was from the northern lands that it “entered China to rule the four barbarian border tribes” it was “disorderly” (*ni ye* 逆也) and should be classified as “illegitimate”. In a different case, the Song dynasty coexisted with Liao, Jin, and other *Yidi* ethnic groups in the same space; since “it did not fully rule China but ruled together with *Yidi*,” the Song dynasty can be characterized as having “lesser legitimacy” (*xiao zhengtong* 小正統).³² Another Ming dynasty literary figure, Zhong Yuzheng 鐘羽正 (ca. 1561–1636), however, recognized only the Han, Tang, and Song dynasties as legitimate. In his view, Duke Wen of Eastern Zhou 東周君 (d. 249 BCE), Liu Bei 劉備 (161–223) of the Shu Han 蜀漢 (221–263), Emperor Yuan of Jin 晉元帝 (r. 317–323), and Emperor Gaozong of Song 宋高宗 (r. 1129–1162) were “legitimate but not unified” (*zheng er bu tong* 正而不統). The First Emperor of Qin, Emperor Wu of Jin 晉武帝 (r. 265–290), and Emperor Wen of Sui 隋文帝 (r. 581–604) were “unified but not legitimate” (*tong er bu zheng* 統而不正).

Compared with Ming dynasty scholars, Qing scholars tended to focus their writings on the size and scale of “unification” and treated whether or not the ruling house had occupied a vast territory as a basic principle of “legitimacy.” Qing scholars believed that there was only one core criterion for “Great Unification”:

31 Xu Shizeng 徐師曾, “Shitong jinian xu” 世統紀年序, in *Lidai zhengtonglun baijian: Rao Zongyi guoshi shang zhi zhengtonglun shiliao bufen zengbu* 歷代正統論百篇: 饒宗頤國史上之正統論史料部分增補, ed. Chen Fukang 陳富康 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2020), 55.

32 Wang Tingxiang 王廷相, “Shenyan” 慎言, in *Lidai zhengtonglun baijian*, 50.

Only he who annexes the myriad states and rules them as sovereign can be called a monarch. The monarch achieves the “Great Unification”; otherwise, each state breaks off and sets up its own regime, each contenting itself with a portion of territory.³³

This view was quite common in the discourse of Qing scholars. For example, one scholar stated:

Whoever unifies all of China’s territory, acquiring it in an appropriate manner and governing it continuously for a long time, can be unquestionably called “legitimate.” Other ruling houses that contented themselves with a portion of territory, like the Shu Han, might have been legitimate, but we only call the Shu Han one of the “Three Kingdoms.” States that broke off and set up their own regimes, even starting with a good time as the “Prosperity of Yuanjia” (*Yuanjia zhi zhi* 元嘉之治), would still end like the Southern Qi and Liang dynasties. They all can be called “illegitimate.”

The author is clearly using the Southern Song dynasty as a paradigm for “partial unification” (*piantong* 偏統), comparing it to the “Great Unification” of the Qing dynasty.³⁴

What cannot be overlooked is that the Qing emperors’ emphasis on the “unification” of spatial territory does not mean that they ignored the need to uphold the concept of “Confucian legitimacy” (*daotong* 道統). For example, a portion of the Emperor Qianlong’s commandment quoted by Qing scholars states:

People born under Heaven, whether you are a sage or a fool has no relation to region, as long as your character is virtuous, you can rule “all-under-Heaven.” If an emperor’s legitimate son is unfit to succeed to the imperial throne, a sage can be chosen from among his illegitimate sons to inherit his legitimate rule. China is the emperor’s legitimate son; foreign *Yi* are his illegitimate sons. My dynasty has virtue, and I should be called lord of “all-under-Heaven.” Even if it originated among the eastern barbarians, is there any taboo?³⁵

33 Fang Junyi 方澹頤, “Sanguo biannian wenda” 三國編年問答, in *Lidai zhengtonglun baipian*, 199.

34 Wang Ruxiang 王汝驥, “Du Wei Shuzi Zhengtonglun” 讀魏叔子正統論, in *Lidai zhengtonglun baipian*, 123.

35 Xu Qi 許起, “Shengjin kaihuo” 聖襟開豁, in *Lidai zhengtonglun baipian*, 256.

This passage clearly states that, although the ethnic-Manchu emperor is *Yidi*, compared with sovereigns from ethnic-Han areas, his status is like the difference within a family between legitimate and illegitimate sons. It is not a case of irreconcilable ethnic hatred because Manchus are also entitled to succeed to the “Great Unification.”

Fourth, “Great Unification” is not simply a pure manifestation and expression of ideology, but also a complex process of political practice. It is the implementation of a whole set of techniques for governance and the practice of rule. Therefore, we cannot be limited to discussing the intrinsic meaning of ideological history, but rather must simultaneously explore in depth the specific, practical activities that externalize the concept and how they manifest it.

The Manchu ruling group achieved the reunification of the northern and southern territories by integrating military expeditions with keeping tight control of vassals. Their understanding of the meaning of “Great Unification” was completely different from that of the ethnic-Han dynasties. In Emperor Qianlong’s reign, the Qing dynasty’s occupation and practical control of the frontier area demonstrated an unprecedented element of performance. Emperor Qianlong summarized this as the “Ten Great Achievements of Military Force” (*shi quan wu gong* 十全武功).

The Qing dynasty’s achievements in frontier governance were consistently beyond the reach of their predecessors. Its expeditions to the frontier areas were clearly different from the colonial conquest of Western imperialism. After the Qing court completed occupation of the land, it carried out a mixed strategy of rule that combined administrative infiltration with respect for local customs. The Qing emperors tended to have dual secular and religious identities, and they also established diversified exchange mechanisms, such as annual imperial audiences, that had cultural and symbolic meanings. The Forbidden City was once the capital city of an ethnic-Han dynasty; the fact that the Qing emperor ascended to the throne and ruled from there symbolized an unbroken inheritance with the previous ethnic-Han regime. In addition, at their summer residence the Qing emperors received the reverence of the Mongolian aristocrats and the lamas of the ethnic-Tibetan areas, which demonstrates that Manchu emperors had frequent and intimate interactions with other ethnic minority groups outside of China proper (*guanwai* 關外, lit. “beyond the passes”). What emerged was the system of “court-garden dual government” without precedent in previous dynasties. This was clearly something that could not be replaced or covered by the quite unique function of the Forbidden City.

From the perspective of governing practice, “Great Unification” was also a set of techniques for text construction and historiography. During the “High

Qing” reigns of the Emperors Kangxi, Yongzheng 雍正, and Qianlong (combined r. 1683–1799), the dynasty consciously molded the norms for political writing on the basis of text compilation, through a series of activities to compile local records and ancient classics such as *Shengjing tongzhi* 盛京通志, *Huang Qing kaiguo fanglüe* 皇清開國方略, *Manzhou yuanliu kao* 滿洲源流考, and *Manzhou shilu* 滿洲實錄. By transforming the significance of compiling local records, they transformed documents characterized by local historical styles and accounts into universal records that conformed to the expressive framework of the “Great Unification” discourse.

The Emperor Qianlong convoked the whole state’s elite literati to compile *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書, while also translating the voluminous Chinese Buddhist canon *Da zangjing* 大藏經 into Manchu. This project was carried out almost simultaneously with the compilation and revision of *Siku quanshu*. The compilation of this work and the Manchu translation of the canon were both part of a holistic attempt to build a multi-ethnic political-cultural community. This illustrates that the establishment of the “view of legitimacy” in China proper (*neidi* 內地) and the feudatory region (*fanbu* 藩部) were largely synchronized. In addition, the Emperor Qianlong personally composed his *Yupi tongjian gangmu* 御批通鑒綱目, evaluated all kinds of historical figures, and established a unified standard historical evaluation. The compilation of local gazetteers for each locality was gradually regularized in content and form. These measures were important steps in implementing a literary and governing policy based on “Great Unification.”

The Qing dynasty concept of “Great Unification” not only had its unique characteristics, but also, like a huge magnetic field, possessed an almost irresistible attractive force to collect, compile, and edit all kinds of competing opinions in the intellectual world. It not only constructed the Qing dynasty’s higher political order and local governance model, but also shaped the everyday psychological state of the Chinese people. This influence has endured despite the violent shock of the late Qing revolution in 1911.

The “Great Unification view” not only forged a cognitive mindset in which Chinese people attached too much importance to overall political stability and neglected individual freedom, but also became the most reliable ideological resource for modern nationalists against the West. It is worth considering why only “Great Unification” possesses such a superior capacity to discipline people in institutional, physical, and psychological senses. Up to the present day, “Great Unification” remains the most useful slogan for Chinese people to inspire and consolidate nationalist sentiments or carry out social mobilization. This is quite different from the ideological model on which Western nationalist

social mobilization relies. Its successes and failures certainly require our serious reflection.

Translated by Brook Hefright

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