



Introduction: All under Heaven: Evolving Ideas on the Identity of China

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It is normal for an ancient civilization to have thought of itself as the center of the world at some point, but only China incorporated this idea into its own name: *Zhongguo* 中國, “the Middle Kingdom”. The subsequent world order, *Tianxia* 天下, or All under Heaven, with *Zhongguo* in the middle, was the basis for the identity of the Chinese civilization which would remain relatively stable and uniform from the bronze age until the nineteenth century. During the nineteenth century, under ideological and military attack from the West, China had to reexamine its supposed central position. It became just one of many nation states. Despite being forced to accept a new world order, the ancient idea of *Tianxia*, with China still at the center of its own space and destiny, has remained a strong part of Chinese culture and identity.

With the twenty first century rise of China and the ensuing shift in the world order, the shortcomings of the Western-based nation state system are becoming apparent, and the traditional concept of *Tianxia* is being reconsidered as a valuable conceptual alternative. Is this an outdated concept, or can it be adapted to the new century? In recent years Chinese historians and philosophers have been revisiting this important concept, trying to understand better its historical meaning and its modern value. The current issue presents five articles on these themes.

The first two articles both treat on the ideological underpinnings of “All under Heaven” as well as its modern utility. Yang Nianqun 楊念群 begins by differentiating the parameters of “the Middle Kingdom” and “All under Heaven”. After this he introduces another important principle that guided China’s dynastic policies for nearly two millennia: Striving for Unity (*Dayitong* 大一統). This idea helped the Chinese people look past the racial and ethnic differences within their borders and aim for social harmony. It is this same idea that serves

as fuel for much Chinese nationalism and anti-Western sentiment that is alive and growing today.

Ma Rong 馬戎 examines how China went from being the Middle Kingdom at the center of its own *Tianxia* system to being a modern nation state in a Western dominated world. His article emphasizes the linguistic aspect of how China came to redefine itself using a Western political science vocabulary.

The next two articles look at the origin and development of the “All under Heaven” concept from a historical perspective. Zhao Yongchun 趙永春 and Chi Anran 遲安然 examine the term *Zhongguo* and argue that, while its earliest recorded use is from the Western Zhou dynasty (1046–771 BCE), the Chinese people’s idea of seeing themselves as the kingdom in the middle of all others perhaps existed as early as the Xia dynasty (ca. 2070–ca. 1600 BCE). The earliest use of *Zhongguo* was for the sake of political discussion; later during the Spring and Autumn (770–476 BCE) and Warring States (475–221 BCE) periods it took on ethnic and cultural connotations.

Lin Gang 林崗 researches ancient maps to reveal two competing concepts of territory and identity. The author calls them the Central China system and the Peripheral China system, which happen to correspond perfectly with *Zhongguo* and *Tianxia*, respectively. By the Qing dynasty (1616–1911) these two systems merged into one and became the final version of ancient China’s “All under Heaven” geopolitical identity.

In the last article, Ran Jiantao 任劍濤 discusses the practical applications of the ancient concept *Tianxia*. He believes that this idea has always contained three aspects: a geographical identity, a political system, and a world view. The first two aspects are no longer relevant to international politics, but the third is. A political theory based on seeing the world with a certain amount of cohesion and commonality, seeing the world as All under Heaven, could help overcome two prevailing and equally prejudicial doctrines: the fast-emerging Sino-centric world view, and the Western-dominated nation state world order.