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The Earliest “China”: The Concept of *Zhongguo* during the Xia, Shang, and Western Zhou Dynasties

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Abstract

The inscription of “He Zun” 何尊 and the “Zicai” 梓材 in *Shangshu* 尚書, both of which record events during the early Western Zhou dynasty, are historical texts containing the earliest appearance of the term *zhongguo* 中國. The *zhongguo* in those texts was a concept which was extremely rich in meaning. It does not refer specifically to the Luoyang 洛陽 region, which was then considered the heart of the Chinese kingdom, but rather refers to the capital in a geographical sense as well as the state in a political sense. When *zhongguo* first appeared in writing, it did not refer to China and Chinese culture yet. It was neither a racial concept which referred specifically to the Chinese race, nor a cultural concept which referred to Chinese culture. When *zhongguo* first appeared in writing during the early Zhou dynasty, it was a written record of the concept of *zhongguo* which was already in wide circulation in society at that time. In fact, the concept of *zhongguo* probably originated even before the early Western Zhou dynasty. Noting the origins of concepts such as *zhong* 中 and *dizhong* 地中 (the center of the land), some archaeologists have concluded that *zhongguo* first appeared during the Taosi 陶寺 period, the Miaodigou 廟底溝 period, or the Erlitou 二里頭 period. Studying these archaeological findings in conjunction with recounts regarding *zhongguo* in historical texts, it is probably historically accurate to date the earliest appearance of the concept of *zhongguo* to the founding of the Xia dynasty.

Keywords

Xia – Shang – Western Zhou – China and the concept of *zhongguo*

Just what does *zhongguo* 中國 refer to? When did *zhongguo* first appear, and what was its meaning? Notwithstanding the fact that several scholars have expounded on this topic,¹ owing to discrepancies in textual sources and varying interpretations, these questions have remained points of contention in scholarly debate. In view of this ongoing debate, we offer our views here in hopes of eliciting further discussion.

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- 1 Scholarly works discussing the concept of *zhongguo* in ancient China include: Chen Dengyuan 陳登原, *Guoming shugu* 國名疏故 (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1936); Yu Xingwu 于省吾, “Shi zhongguo” 釋中國, in *Zhonghua xueshu lunwenji* 中華學術論文集, ed. Zhonghua shuju bianjibu 中華書局編輯部 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 1981); Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 and Wang Shumin 王樹民, “Xia’ he ‘zhongguo’ – zuguo gudai de chenghao” “夏” 和 “中國” – 祖國古代的稱號, in *Zhongguo lishi dili luncong* 中國歷史地理論叢, ed. Shi Nianhai 史念海 (Xi’an: Shaanxi renmin chubanshe 1981), 1; Wang Ermin 王爾敏, “Zhongguo mingcheng suyuan jiqi jindai quanshi” 中國名稱溯源及其近代詮釋, *Chinese Cultural Renaissance Monthly* 中華文化復興月刊 (Taipei), 5/8 (1973); Yu Rongchun 于溶春, “Zhongguo’ yici de youlai, yanbian jiqi yu minzu de guanxi” “中國” 一詞的由來、演變及其與民族的關係, *Neimenggu shehui kexue* 內蒙古社會科學, no. 2 (1986); Tan Qixiang 譚其驤, “Lishi shang de zhongguo he zhongguo lidai jiangyu” 歷史上的中國和中國歷代疆域, *Zhongguo bianjiang shidi yanjiu* 中國邊疆史地研究, no. 1 (1991); Chen Liankai 陳連開, “Zhongguo, huayi, fanhan, zhonghua, zhonghua minzu” 中國·華夷·蕃漢·中華·中華民族, in *Qitong chujie: Chen Liankai xueshu lunwenji* 求同初階: 陳連開學術論文集 (Beijing: Zhongyang minzu daxue chubanshe, 2008); Zhang Huanzhou 張環宙, “Shilun ‘zhongguo’ hanyi de fazhan” 試論 “中國” 含義的發展, *Huzhou shizhuan xuebao* 湖州師專學報, no. 2 (1995); Luo Zhitian 羅志田, “Xianqin de wufuzhi yu gudai de tianxia zhongguoguan” 先秦的五服制與古代的天下中國觀, in *Xueren* 學人, ed. Chen Pingyuan 陳平原, Wang Shoutang 王守堂, and Wang Hui 汪暉 (Nanjing: Jiangsu wenyi chubanshe, 1996), 10; Hu Axiang 胡阿祥, *Weizai siming – “zhongguo” gujin chengwei yanjiu* 偉哉斯名 – “中國” 古今稱謂研究 (Wuhan: Hubei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2001); He Zhihu 何志虎, “Zhongguo’ chengwei de qi yuan” “中國” 稱謂的起源, *Renwen zazhi* 人文雜誌, no. 5 (2002); Hu Yaohua 胡耀華, “Dui ‘zhongguo’ gainian yanbian ji diyuan neihan de fenxi” 對 “中國” 概念演變及地緣內涵的分析, *Jiangxi shifan daxue xuebao* 江西師範大學學報, no. 5 (2004); Chen Yuping 陳玉屏, “Lue lun zhongguo gudai de ‘tianxia’, ‘guojia’ he ‘zhongguo guan’” 略論中國古代的 “天下”、 “國家” 和 “中國觀”, *Minzu yanjiu* 民族研究, no. 1 (2005); 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).

1 The Earliest Appearance of *Zhongguo* in Writing and Its Meaning

There is a general consensus in scholarly circles that the term *zhongguo* first appeared in writing in the inscription of “He Zun” 何尊 and the “Zicai” 梓材 in *Shangshu* 尚書, both of which date to the early Western Zhou dynasty (1045–256 BCE).

Unearthed at Jiacun 賈村 Plateau, Baoji 寶雞 City, Shaanxi Province, in 1965, “He Zun” was a bronze vessel dating to the early Western Zhou dynasty. There are 122 characters inscribed on the inner surface of its base (known as the inscription of “He Zun”) which record King Cheng’s 成王 lectures to his junior clansmen during the Western Zhou dynasty. Specifically, the inscription tells us about historical events such as the overthrowing of the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600–1046 BCE) by King Wu 武王 of Zhou and his subsequent construction of the city of Cheng Zhou 成周 (at modern day Luoyang 洛陽). According to it, after King Wu of Zhou overthrew the Shang dynasty, he announced to the heavens, “*Zhongguo* (central territory) is where I shall dwell; it is also from here that I shall rule the people.” According to Ma Chengyuan’s 馬承源 (1927–2004) interpretation, the term *zhongguo* in the inscription refers to “the heart of the known world, that is, Luo city at the confluence of the Yi 伊 and Luo 洛 rivers.”² Similarly, Li Xueqin 李學勤 (1933–2019) has proposed that *zhongguo* in this inscription refers to *tuzhong* 土中 (in the earth) in “Shaogao” 召誥 in *Shangshu*, “meaning the heart of the known world.” Since “the Zhou people saw the Chengzhou region as the heart of the known world,” they referred to the Chengzhou/Luoyang region as *zhongguo*.³ Sun Qingwei 孫慶偉 has offered an alternative explanation, arguing that the character *zhong* 中 in the term *zhongguo* in “He Zun” does not denote a specific geographical location, but refers to “the center” in a politico-cultural sense.⁴ Hu Axiang 胡阿祥 has also argued that “the earliest meaning of *zhongguo* was a castle or plot of land situated in a central location,” that “the inscription of ‘He Zun’ tells us in no uncertain terms that *zhongguo* first referred to Luoyang” and that “Chengzhou was synonymous with *zhongguo*.”⁵ Li Kejian 李克建 has wrote that “*zhongguo* first referred

2 Ma Chengyuan 馬承源, “He zun mingwen chu shi” 何尊銘文初釋, *Wenwu* 文物, no. 1 (1976).

3 Li Xueqin 李學勤, “He zun xinshi” 何尊新釋, *Zhongyuan wenwu* 中原文物, no. 1 (1981).

4 Sun Qingwei 孫慶偉, “Chuanshuo shidai yu zuizao zhongguo” 傳說時代與最早中國, *Yichan* 遺產, no. 1 (2019).

5 Hu Axiang 胡阿祥, “Zhongguo conghe erlai” 中國從何而來, *Weishi* 唯實, no. 5 (2016).

to the region with Luoyang at its heart.”⁶ Li Xinwei 李新偉 has also stated that “the earliest reference to *zhongguo*” refers to “the Central Plains with the confluence of the Yellow River 黃河 and the Luo River at its heart.”⁷ Conversely, He Zhenpeng 何振鵬 has argued that “*zhongguo* in the He bronze vessel refers to the eastern regions under Shang control.”⁸ Xu Jiangwei 徐江偉 went a step further by discussing the form of the character *zhong* in the inscribed text *Zhaizi zhongguo* 宅茲中國 (meaning “dwell in *zhongguo*”). Building on this discussion, he argued that the term *zhongguo* in bronze inscriptions referred to “the most revered tribal state of the highest standing,” and that *zhongguo* was “the state among states” with the ability to command numerous tribal states.⁹

Another text in which *zhongguo* made an early appearance was the “Zicai” in *Shangshu*, which quotes King Cheng of Zhou as claiming, “the heavens has bestowed upon the house of Zhou the mandate to govern the people of *zhongguo*.” When Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (574–648) of the Tang dynasty (618–907) penned his commentary of *Shangshu*, he explained that *zhongguo* in this instance meant *zhongguo* of *jiuzhou* 九州 (nine provinces), which in turn referred to the entire region under the direct and indirect rule of the Western Zhou dynasty. Later generations have interpreted this in various ways. Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 (1893–1980) and Wang Shumin 王樹民 (1911–2004) have argued that “the expressions *zhongguo min* 中國民 and its *jiangtu* 疆土 (territory) refer to the state of Zhou itself and her people.”¹⁰ They have also argued that the expressions *zhongguo min* and its *jiangtu* refer to the tangible concept of *quxia* 區夏 (the region inhabited by the Chinese race).¹¹ Chen Yuning 陳育寧 has also argued that “*zhongguo* in this sentence refers to ‘the state,’ which is certainly not confined to the capital or the area east of the Hangu Pass 函谷關; rather, it includes the entirety of the Western Zhou kingdom.”¹² Cao Yin 曹音 has argued that the phrase “*huangtian jifu zhongguo min*”

6 Li Kejian 李克建, “Tianxia’ yu ‘yitong’: renshi zhongguo gudai guojiaguan de jiben weidu” “天下”與“一統”: 認識中國古代國家觀的基本維度, *Guangxi minzu daxue xuebao* 廣西民族大學學報, no. 4 (2015).

7 Li Xinwei 李新偉, “Zuichu de zhongguo’ zhi kaoguxue rending” “最初的中國”之考古學認定, *Kaogu* 考古, no. 3 (2016).

8 He Zhenpeng 何振鵬, “He zun mingwen zhong de ‘zhongguo’” 何尊銘文中的“中國”, *Wenbo* 文博, no. 6 (2011).

9 Xu Jiangwei 徐江偉, “Qiguai de jinwen ‘zhong’ zi” 奇怪的金文“中”字, *Wenming qiyuan tansuo* 文明起源探索 (blog, WeChat account), September 21, 2020.

10 Gu Jiegang and Wang Shumin, “Xia’ he ‘zhongguo’ – zuguo gudai de chenghao,” 8.

11 Wang Shumin 王樹民, *Shu’an wenshi xulu* 曙庵文史續錄 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2004), 104.

12 Chen Yuning 陳育寧, *Zhonghua minzu ningjuli de lishi tansuo* 中華民族凝聚力的歷史探索 (Kunming: Yunnan renmin chubanshe, 1994), 90.

皇天既付中國民 in *Shangshu* means that “the heavens have bestowed the people and land of the Yin kingdom upon our deceased king,” suggesting that he interpreted *zhongguo* in this instance as “the people and land of the Yin kingdom.”¹³ Luo Bei 羅蓓 et al. have similarly argued that “in the eyes of the Zhou people, the earliest appearance of *zhongguo* referred to the lost lands of the Shang, while *zhongguoren* 中國人 referred to the Shang people.”¹⁴ Tian Guanglin 田廣林 and Zhai Chao 翟超 have argued that *zhongguomin* and its *jiangtu* “undoubtedly refers to the people previously subjected to Shang rule and the lost lands of the Shang,” and that *zhongguo* “referred to the Shang state.”¹⁵ In contrast, Zhang Guoshuo 張國碩 has argued that “*zhongguo* in this instance refers to a specific region, probably the heartlands of the Shang kingdom.”¹⁶ Chen Liankai 陳連開 has pointed out that *zhongguo*, according to the records of *Shangshu*, can be cross-referenced with *zhongguo* in “He Zun,” and that “*zhongguo* clearly refers to the region with Luoyang at its heart.”¹⁷ Ma Manli 馬曼麗 et al. have argued that “*zhongguo* in this instance refers to the territories surrounding the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River, with Luoyang at its heart.”¹⁸ Ge Jianxiong 葛劍雄 has further argued that “the *guo* 國 (capital city) where the son of heaven resides was situated in a central location, so it was naturally referred to as *zhongguo*” and that “following the overthrow of the Shang by King Wu of Zhou, he thought that the heavens bestowed him with the mandate to rule *zhongguo* because he occupied the Shang capital,” thus interpreting *zhongguo* as “the capital city.”¹⁹

In fact, *zhongguo* in “He Zun” and *Shangshu* was already rich in meaning. First, it could refer to the Luoyang region at the heart of the known world, that is, the Central Plains. As mentioned earlier, most scholars agree with the interpretation of *zhongguo* from the phrase *zhai zi zhongguo* in “He Zun” as

13 Cao Yin 曹音, *Shangshu, Zhou shu shiyi* 尚書·周書釋疑 (Beijing: Shenghuo dushu xinzhi sanlian shudian, 2015), 64.

14 Luo Bei 羅蓓 et al., eds., *Zhongguo chuantong wenhua tonglun* 中國傳統文化通論 (Chengdu: Xinan jiaotong daxue chubanshe, 2015), 6.

15 Tian Guanglin 田廣林 and Zhai Chao 翟超, “Cong duoyuan dao yiti de zhuanzhe: wudi sanwang shidai de zaoqi zhongguo rentong” 從多元到一體的轉折：五帝三王時代的早期“中國”認同, *Shaanxi shifan daxue xuebao* 陝西師範大學學報, no. 1 (2008).

16 Zhang Guoshuo 張國碩, “Yetan zuizao de zhongguo” 也談最早的中國, *Zhongyuan wenwu* 中原文物, no. 5, (2019).

17 Chen Liankai, “Zhongguo, huayi, fanhan, zhonghua, zhonghua minzu: yige neizai lianxi fazhan beirenshe de guocheng,” 498.

18 Ma Manli 馬曼麗, ed., *Zhongguo xibei bianjiang fazhanshi yanjiu* 中國西北邊疆發展史研究 (Harbin: Heilongjiang jiaoyu chubanshe, 2001), 8.

19 Ge Jianxiong 葛劍雄, *Tongyi yu fenlie – zhongguo lishi de qishi* 統一與分裂—中國歷史的啟示 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2013), 20.

“the region with Luoyang at its heart.” Specifically, they believe that *zhongguo* in “He Zun” denotes the center of the known world. Luoyang was at the center of the known world, and was thus referred to as *zhongguo*. At the same time, they also agree that *zhongguo* in *Shangshu* means the center of the known world. Such an understanding seems to have become the consensus in academic circles, with little if any controversy.

Second, *zhongguo* could refer to the capital at the heart of the country. Some scholars have posited that “He Zun” recorded historical events relating to the construction of Chengzhou (Luoyang) during the early years of the Western Zhou dynasty. It thus follows that *zhai zi zhongguo* really means *zhai yu chengzhou* 宅於成周, or rather, the construction of houses in Chengzhou (Luoyang). While Chengzhou was not the capital of the Western Zhou dynasty, it was its secondary capital and could thus be referred to as one of the kingdom’s capitals. Hence, *Chengzhou zhongguo* in this instance also means “the capital of *zhongguo*.” In fact, the expression *zhai yu Chengzhou* in “He Zun” refers to the intention of King Cheng of Zhou to “dwell in Chengzhou,” while *zhai zi zhongguo* refers to the proclamation of King Wu of Zhou to the heavens. Thus, to equate these two expressions with each other would be a gross simplification. The capital of the Zhou kingdom during King Wu’s reign was not Chengzhou but rather Fenghao 豐鎬 (that is, Haojing 鎬京, present-day Xi’an 西安 in Shaanxi province). The construction of Chengzhou city mentioned in “He Zun” occurred during the reign of King Cheng. “He Zun” might have been the transcription of a lecture issued by King Cheng to a junior aristocrat He at Chengzhou, but it does not mention that King Wu also made his proclamation to the heavens at Chengzhou. The “Zhou Benji” 周本紀 in *Shiji* 史記 records that following the overthrow of the Shang dynasty by King Wu of Zhou, he held a grand ceremony to worship the heavens at the state altar in the former Shang capital of Zhaoge 朝歌. This seems to imply that King Wu of Zhou did not issue his proclamation to heaven at Chengzhou, but rather at the former Shang capital of Zhaoge. There seems to be no indication of King Wu’s intention to move the capital to Chengzhou from the expression *zhai zi zhongguo* in his proclamation to the heavens. If this hypothesis can indeed be proven, then *zhongguo* in “He Zun” certainly does not refer to Chengzhou, but rather the former Shang capital of Zhaoge or the Western Zhou capital of Haojing. It thus follows that the term *zhongguo* refers to the capital. Usage of the term *zhongguo* to refer to the capital is common in historical sources of the Western Zhou dynasty. The Mao’s 毛 commentary of the poem “Minlao” 民勞 found in the “Daya” 大雅 in *Shijing* 詩經 mentions “love the common people of *zhongguo*, so that the kingdom is at peace,” and also “love the common people of

the capital, so the kingdom is at peace.”²⁰ In this poem, *zhongguo* and *jingshi* 京師 (capital city) were mentioned in parallel with each other, suggesting that they were identical in meaning. Hence, Mao Heng 毛亨 of the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) explained that “*zhongguo* refers to the capital city, while *sifang* 四方 refers to the Chinese civilization.”²¹ When Kong Yingda of the Tang dynasty penned his annotations of *Chunqiu* 春秋 and *Zuozhuan* 左傳, he also wrote that “*zhongguo* refers to the capital city and *sifang* refers to the Chinese civilization,”²² clearly stating that *zhongguo* refers to the capital city.

Third, *zhongguo* could refer to the Shang dynasty, the Shang people, or the territories under Shang rule, or the Western Zhou people or the territories under Western Zhou rule, and thus refer to the state. The expression *huangtian jifu zhongguo min* in *Shangshu* means that the heavens bestowed the land and people of the Shang kingdom upon the King of Zhou and gave him the mandate to rule over them.²³ The use of *zhongguo min* to refer to both the Shang people in general and Shang loyalists is evident in this case. It is also conceivable that *zhongguo* in “He Zun” refers to the lands under Shang control. The term *zhongguo* in “He Zun” was used by King Wu of Zhou in his proclamation to the heavens following his conquest of the Shang. According to the “Zhou Benji,” after King Wu conquered the Shang, he once held a grand ceremony to worship the heavens and inaugurate the new dynasty, thus proclaiming the formal establishment of the Western Zhou dynasty in place of the Shang. Tian Guanglin et al. are of the opinion that this record and the record in “He Zun” mentioning King Wu’s conquest of the Shang, his worshipping of the heavens, and his prayers to the heavens “I shall dwell in *zhongguo*” all refer to the same event. Comparing both accounts, *zhongguo* is mentioned in parallel with the Shang, so it seems likely that the term refers to the Shang dynasty.²⁴ In other words, when *zhongguo* first appeared in writing, it also referred to the Shang state.

The term *zhongguo* was also used to refer to the state in other historical sources from the Western Zhou dynasty. According to the Mao school’s commentary of the “Xiaoya” 小雅 in *Shijing*, the Kunyi 昆夷 tribe from the West

20 “Minlao” 民勞, in *Maoshi zhushu* 毛詩注疏, in *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏, ed. Ruan Yuan 阮元 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980) 17.548.

21 Ibid., 548.

22 *Chunqiu Zuochuan zhengyi* 春秋左傳正義, in *Shisanjing zhushu*, 49.2095.

23 Chen Liankai, “Zhongguo, huayi, fanhan, zhonghua, zhonghua minzu: yige neizai lianxi fazhan beirensi de guocheng,” 498.

24 Tian Guanglin and Zhai Chao, “Cong duoyuan dao yiti de zhuanzhe: wudi sanwang shidai de zaoqi zhongguo rentong.”

and Xianyun 玁狁 tribe from the north frequently invaded *zhongguo* during the reign of King Wen 文王 of the Western Zhou kingdom. Under orders from the son of heaven, King Wen led expeditions “to defend *zhongguo*.”²⁵ During the reign of King Wen, the Zhou kingdom was still a vassal state of the Shang. The term “son of heaven” in the expression mentioning King Wen’s receiving of the “orders of the son of heaven” to lead an expedition against the Kunyi and Xianyun likely refers to the Shang king (or the Yin king) and not King Wen of Zhou. King Wen followed the Shang king’s orders to lead an expedition against the Kunyi and Xianyun mainly to defend the Shang state. Therefore, *zhongguo* in the term “to defend *zhongguo*” mainly refers to the Shang state.

Of course, King Wen of Zhou followed the Shang king’s orders to lead an expedition against the Kunyi and Xianyun not only to defend the Shang state, but also to defend Xiqi 西岐, that is, the Western Zhou state, which was a vassal of the Shang. Hence, *zhongguo* in this instance not only refers to the Shang state, but also to the Western Zhou state. Based on the expression *huangtian jifu zhongguo min* in *Shangshu*, we know that since the heavens bestowed upon the deceased king of Zhou the mandate to rule over the Shang people (*zhongguo min*) and the territories under Shang control (*jiangtu*), the Shang loyalists (*zhongguo min*) and the Shang territories thus became an integral part of the people and territories of the Western Zhou kingdom. It follows that the Western Zhou state had become the ruler of *zhongguo*, and that *zhongguo* naturally refers to the Western Zhou people and the lands ruled by the Western Zhou state. This point was also reflected in the relevant historical sources from the Western Zhou period. According to the Mao school’s commentary of the “Xiaoya” in *Shijing*, all the hallmarks of culture including poetry and song were abandoned, leading to successive invasions by the barbarians, causing *zhongguo* to be weakened.²⁶ During the reign of King You 幽王 (r. 782–771 BCE) of Western Zhou, the ethnic minorities from the west and the east (*Xirong* 西戎 and *Dongyi* 東夷) invaded *zhongguo* successively.²⁷ At that time, the ethnic minorities along the entire periphery of the kingdom rebelled against *zhongguo*, leading to continuous warfare in the border regions.²⁸ Undoubtedly, *zhongguo* in all of the instances above refer to the Western Zhou state. When Sun Yirang 孫詒讓 (1848–1908) of the Qing dynasty (1616–1911) wrote explanatory notes for *Mozi* 墨子, he claimed that “*Zhongguo* during the early Zhou

25 “Caiwei” 采薇, in *Maoshi zhushu*, in *Shisanjing zhushu*, 9.412–13.

26 “Liuyue” 六月, in *ibid.*, 10.424.

27 “Shaozhihua” 苕之華, in *ibid.*, 15.500.

28 “He cao bu huang” 何草不黃, in *ibid.*, 15.501.

referred to the Shang and Xia kingdoms, while *zhongguo* during the late Zhou referred to the Shang and Zhou kingdoms.”²⁹ By interpreting *zhongguo* as the Shang and Xia kingdoms during the early Zhou and interpreting it as the Shang and Zhou kingdoms during the late Zhou, Sun effectively meant that *zhongguo* referred to the state.

Thus, it can be seen that when *zhongguo* first appeared in writing in “He Zun” and *Shangshu*, it not only referred to the Luoyang region at the heart of the known world, but in fact had multiple meanings, and mainly referred to the capital city in the geographical sense and the state in the political sense. It seems that when *zhongguo* first appeared in writing, it did not yet refer to Chinese civilization and culture. It was neither an ethnic concept which referred to the Chinese race, nor a cultural concept which referred to Chinese culture. *Zhongguo* only referred to the Chinese race and culture from the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE) and the Warring States period (475–221 BCE) onwards.

2 The Emergence of the *Zhongguo* Concept Predates Its Appearance in Writing

Although scholars disagree on the meaning of *zhongguo* in “He Zun” and *Shangshu*, there is consensus on the fact that they are the two earliest appearances of *zhongguo* in writing. Yu Xingwu 于省吾 (1896–1984) concluded, on the basis of meticulous research, that “the characters *huo* 或 and *guo* 國 did not exist in Shang oracle bone script.”³⁰ Pointing out that the expression *zhongguo* did not exist before the Western Zhou period, and that “He Zun” and *Shangshu* were both written during the reign of King Cheng of the Western Zhou dynasty, suggesting that King Wu and his son King Cheng both used the expression *zhongguo*, Yu further argued that *zhongguo* became a standard expression no later than the early Western Zhou period. Yu Xingwu’s argument that *zhongguo* first appeared in writing during the early Western Zhou period has been accepted by scholars and has become the consensus even among the general public.

The fact that *zhongguo* first appeared in writing during the early Western Zhou period does not mean that the concept of *zhongguo* also emerged only during the early Western Zhou period. This is because written records typically

29 Sun Yirang 孫詒讓, *Mozi jiangou* 墨子閒詁 (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1935), 14.309.

30 Yu Xingwu, “Shi zhongguo,” 6.

appear after a certain concept has been transmitted by word of mouth in society over a period of time.

Based on the above hypothesis, several scholars have proposed that the term *zhongguo* originated from the Shang dynasty. For instance, Hu Houxuan 胡厚宣 (1911–1995) argued that the Shang dynasty was also referred to as the *zhongshang* 中商, “and it was from here that the term *zhongguo* originated.”³¹ Tian Qianjun 田倩君 has also argued that *Dayishang* 大邑商, the alternative name of the Shang, also referred to *zhongguo*; hence, “the term *zhongguo* certainly originated from the Shang.”³² Similarly, Tian Guanglin and Zhai Chao have opined that “the term *zhongguo* was already in popular use in Zhou society,” and that “given its popular usage by the Zhou period, it must have been preceded by a long period of circulation and passing down across the ages; hence, the upper limit of its period of circulation can naturally be traced to before the early Zhou period, and seems to have been the Shang period, which preceded the Western Zhou.”³³

It is indeed true that the *zhongguo* was already in circulation in society long before it first appeared in writing during the Western Zhou period, and that the term might have originated even before the Shang period, or that the concept of *zhongguo* originated during the Xia dynasty (ca. 2070–1600 BCE), which preceded the Shang. According to *Mengzi* 孟子, after the mythical emperor Yao 堯 died, Shun 舜 mourned his death for three years, after which he hid in seclusion “south of the Southern River” to dispel speculation regarding his intention to fight with Yao’s son Danzhu 丹朱 for the throne. It was only after the masses supported his ascension to the throne that he assumed the title of “the son of heaven” after arriving at *zhongguo*. Citing Pei Yin 裴駰 of the Song of the Southern dynasties (420–579), who in turn cited Liu Xi 劉熙 of the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220), Sun Shi 孫奭 (962–1033) of the Song dynasty (960–1279) wrote in his annotation of *Mengzi*, “because the capital city where the kings and emperors reside was referred to as *zhong*, the capital city came to be known as *zhongguo*.”³⁴ Although *zhongguo* in this instance was derived from an account of the past by Mencius during the Warring States period, it seems to have been based on fact rather than

31 Hu Houxuan 胡厚宣, “Lun wufang guannian ji zhongguo chengwei zhi qi yuan” 論五方觀念及中國稱謂之起源, in *Jiaguxue shangshi luncong chujī* 甲骨學商史論叢初集 (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 1989), 4.

32 Tian Qianjun 田倩君, “Zhongguo’ yu ‘huaxia’ chengwei zhi xunyuan” “中國”與“華夏”稱謂之尋原, *Dalu zazhi* 大陸雜誌, 31.1 (1966).

33 Tian Guanglin and Zhai Chao, “Cong duoyuan dao yiti de zhuanzhe: wudi sanwang shidai de zaoqi zhongguo rentong.”

34 *Mengzi zhushu* 孟子注疏, in *Shisanjing zhushu*, 9b.2737.

Mencius's fabrication or imagination. If this is indeed true, then the concept of *zhongguo* should have come into existence by the reigns of Yu 虞 and Shun during the Xia dynasty and was used to refer to the capital city at the heart of the kingdom. According to *Mengzi*, during Yao's reign, the land was "ravaged by floods" and the harvest was poor, leading to famine among the people of *zhongguo*. Yu the Great 大禹 was then entrusted by Yao to tame the waters, "so that (the people of) *zhongguo* may have food to eat."³⁵ *Zhongguo* in this instance probably includes the land "ravaged by floods" or the territories ruled by the Xia state. If this is indeed true, then the term *zhongguo* used by Mencius in this instance ought to refer to the Xia state. Furthermore, when Kong Yingda of the Tang dynasty wrote his annotation of the passage "Tan Gong shang" 檀弓上 in *Liji* 禮記, he claimed that Yu the Great expanded the boundaries of *zhongguo* via his flood control project, and therefore named a musical piece "Da Xia."³⁶ The term *zhongguo* in the instances above all refer to the Xia state. Although this interpretation of *zhongguo* was proposed by Kong Yingda who lived during the Tang dynasty, he was recounting the context in which the musical piece "Da Xia" got its name, including the taming of the floods by Yu the Great. Hence, his account should reflect some historical events and mythology from the Xia dynasty and constitute a generally accurate portrayal of the early Xia period. If this is indeed true, then it proves that the concept of *zhongguo* already existed during the Xia dynasty. This also suggests that the Xia people had begun to use to term *zhongguo* to refer to the capital city at the heart of the kingdom, as well as the Xia state.

The fact that the term *zhongguo* is absent in oracle bone script, and that the character *zhong* 中 appeared in multiple instances, suggests that the concept of *zhong* was already in wide circulation in society before the term *zhongguo* appeared. According to Yu Xingwu, the character *zhong* in oracle bone script was derived from "a flag with streamers."³⁷ In contrast, He Nu 何鷺 argues that the character *zhong* was derived from the character *gui* 圭 (jade), and posited that the fact that *gui chi* 圭尺 (jade rulers) were unearthed in the Taosi archaeological excavation sites suggests that the concept of *dizhong* 地中 (the center of the land) already existed by then and should rightly be considered "the earliest appearance of *zhongguo*."³⁸ Regardless of scholars' differing

35 Ibid., 5b.2705.

36 *Liji zhengyi* 禮記正義, in *Shisanjing zhushu*, 7.1281.

37 Yu Xingwu, "Shi zhongguo," 6.

38 He Nu 何鷺, "Taosi gui chi 'zhong' yu 'zhongguo' gainian youlai xintan" 陶寺圭尺 "中" 與 "中國" 概念由來新探, *Sandai kaogu* 三代考古, ed. Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo Xia Shang Zhou kaogu yanjiushi 中國社會科學院考古研究所夏商周考古研究室 (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 2011), 4: 85–119.

interpretations of the form of the character *zhong*, this proves that the concept of *zhong* already existed during the Xia dynasty, or even as early as the pre-Xia period. This is also corroborated by the relevant textual records. For instance, according to *Lunyu* 論語, Yao once counselled Shun to win the trust of the people by adhering to the principle of *yunzhi qizhong* 允執其中 (to be fair and impartial). Shun, in turn, counseled his successor Yu with essentially the same message *yunzhi juezhong* 允執厥中, that is, to be fair in his governance. *Shiji* also records that Di Ku 帝嚳 ruled over his subjects in a benevolent manner akin to the irrigation of the land, which was characterized by the application of principles such as equality and fairness throughout the land.³⁹ This suggests that by the reigns of Yao, Shun, and Yu, or even the earlier Di Ku, not only had the concept of *zhong* already appeared, but multiple meanings such as *zhongzheng* 中正 (fairness and justice), *gongyun* 公允 (fairness), *pingdeng* 平等 (equality), *zhongyong* 中庸 (adherence to the mean), *dazhongzhidao* 大中之道 (the path of the great mean) had been associated with the term.

These meanings of *zhong*, however, are probably not the earliest meanings of the character. The concept of *zhong* seems to have referred to such concepts as the middle, the center, the middle of the known world, and the middle of the earth. According to *Zhouli* 周禮, the duties of the administrator of land (*da situ* 大司徒) included “measuring the depth of the soil using jade tools and determining the middle of the known world (*dizhong*) by observing shadows.”⁴⁰ The term *dizhong* in this case has various meanings including *tuzhong* 土中, *zhongtu* 中土 (the middle of the earth), *tiandi zhi zhong* 天地之中 (between heaven and earth) or *tianxia zhi zhong* 天下之中 (the middle of the known world), so the expression *qiu dizhong* 求地中 should mean determining the middle of the known world. Although the expression *qiu dizhong* in *Zhou Li* was used in reference to events which occurred during the Western Zhou dynasty and it cannot be proved that the concept of *qiu dizhong* existed by the Xia dynasty, records mentioning Shun’s *qiu zhong* and *dezhong* have been found in a passage titled “Bao Xun” 保訓 in the Qinghua bamboo slips in recent years. Scholars have proposed differing interpretations of the character *zhong* found in these bamboo slips. Some have interpreted it as *tuzhong*, *dizhong*, *zhongdao* 中道 (the middle path) or *gongping zhengyi* 公平正義 (fair and just), while others have interpreted it as *xin* 心 (the heart), arguing that *qiu zhong* 求中 refers to concepts such as self-reflection.⁴¹ In fact, *zhong* in this instance

39 *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 1.14.

40 *Zhouli zhushu* 周禮注疏, in *Shisanjing zhushu*, 10.704.

41 Cf. Feng Shengjun 馮勝君, “Ye shuo Qinghuajian ‘baoxun’ pian de ‘zhong’” 也說清華簡《保訓》篇的“中”, in *Chutu wenxian yanjiu* 出土文獻研究, ed. Zhongguo wenhua yichan yanjiuyuan 中國文化遺產研究院 (Shanghai: Zhongxi shuju, 2017) 16: 26–27.

should carry multiple meanings. If we analyze Shun's *qiuzhong* in conjunction with *qiu dizhong* mentioned in *Zhouli*, it seems that Shun's *qiuzhong* also encompassed *qiu dizhong*. If this is indeed true, then we can conclude with certainty that the concepts of *dizhong*, *tuzhong* and *tianxia zhizhong* already existed by the time of Yao and Shun. If we consider that the original meaning of *zhong* existed before its derived meaning came into use, and that the historical accounts above contain records about Di Ku's *zhizhong*, it would not be unreasonable to suggest that the concepts of *dizhong*, *tuzhong*, and *tianxia zhizhong* 天下之中 denoted by the character *zhong* existed even before Di Ku's reign.

Following the emergence of the concepts of *dizhong*, *tuzhong*, and *tianxia zhizhong* denoted by the character *zhong*, as well as the establishment of the state in *dizhong*, *tuzhong*, as well as *tianxia zhizhong*, the concept of *zhongguo* came into being. To the ancients, the term *guo* could refer to either the state or the capital city. In fact, both meanings of *guo* – whether the capital city or the state – were closely linked to each other, because concepts such as “capital city”, “central authority”, and “city in the middle of the kingdom” could only appear after the establishment of the state. According to *Shangshu*, when King Cheng of Zhou visited Luo Yi 洛邑 and toured *tuzhong* (that is, Luo Yi or present day Luoyang in Henan province), Zhou Gong 周公 recommended that he build Cheng Zhou city at *tuzhong* to bring peace and order to the region.⁴² *Yi Zhou shu* 逸周書 also stated that Zhou Gong “built a large city named Cheng Zhou at *tuzhong*.”⁴³ All the accounts above refer to Cheng Zhou and Luo Yi (present day Luoyang) as *tuzhong* and refer to Zhou Gong's building of Cheng Zhou and Luo Yi as *zuo dayi yu tuzhong* 作大邑於土中 and *zuo dayi Cheng Zhou yu tuzhong* 作大邑成周於土中. If we study this written record in conjunction with the expressions *zaiyu Cheng Zhou* and *zhaizi zhongguo* in “He Zun,” *tuzhong* in this instance can be taken to mean *zhongguo*. This suggests that the emergence of the concept of *zhong* constituted the foundation for the emergence of the concept of *zhongguo*. As mentioned earlier, the concept of *zhong* appeared even before Di Ku's reign, but the state had not yet been established in *dizhong* and *tuzhong* at that time; therefore, the concept of *zhongguo* still did not exist. The concept of *zhongguo* only formally took shape after the establishment of the Xia state.

Some archaeologists have argued that, based on archaeological findings, “the earliest *zhongguo*” already emerged during the Xia dynasty or earlier, but they have yet to reach a consensus. Others have pointed out that the lack of

42 *Shangshu zhushu* 尚書注疏, in *Shisanjing zhushu*, 15, 212.

43 Zhu Youzeng 朱右曾, *Yi Zhou shu jixun jiaoshi* 逸周書集訓校釋 (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1937), 5-77.

consensus among archaeologists regarding when “the earliest *zhongguo*” or “the first *zhongguo*” appeared can be explained by their differing interpretations of *zhongguo*. Therefore, they propose understanding “the earliest *zhongguo*” or “the first *zhongguo*” according to their interpretation of *zhongguo*. Zhang Guoshuo has proposed five interpretations of *zhongguo*, namely, *zhongguo* in the geographical sense, *zhongguo* in the sense of a capital city, *zhongguo* in the sense of a tribal civilization, *zhongguo* in the sense of a state, and *zhongguo* in the context of archaeology and culture. On this basis, he has advocated determining “the earliest *zhongguo*” according to the different interpretations of *zhongguo*, and argued that if we understand “the earliest *zhongguo*” in that context (he seems to mean *zhongguo* in a cultural sense), then it should refer to the state in the Taosi civilization.⁴⁴ Han Jianye 韓建業 has argued that “the earliest *zhongguo*” in a cultural sense ought to refer to the civilization which emerged during the Miaodigou period around 4000 BCE.⁴⁵ Sun Qingwei has argued that “the earliest *zhongguo*” on the cultural level ought to refer to the civilization which took shape around the time when Huangdi 黃帝 (The Yellow Emperor) and his tribes appeared.⁴⁶

The fact that scholars have advocated establishing a standard for *zhongguo*, that is, discussing “the earliest *zhongguo*” according to a certain meaning of *zhongguo*, and that most of them are in favor of discussing “the earliest *zhongguo*” based on a cultural interpretation of *zhongguo*, is certainly most meaningful. However, we should pause for a moment: not only did the earliest appearance of *zhongguo* in writing not carry any cultural meaning, even according to the views of some of the aforementioned scholars, there is also no consensus regarding the use of a certain meaning of *zhongguo* (most are in favor of using *zhongguo* on the cultural level) to discuss “the earliest *zhongguo*.” Admittedly, the term *zhongguo* carries numerous meanings in ancient China. We should not establish a certain meaning of *zhongguo* as the standard for discussing “the earliest *zhongguo*,” but should discuss “the earliest *zhongguo*” by adopting a broader or more inclusive standard which includes any one meaning of *zhongguo*. In other words, the emergence of any given meaning of *zhongguo* should be regarded as “the earliest *zhongguo*.” Interpreting “the

44 Zhang Guoshuo, “Yetan zuizao de zhongguo.”

45 Han Jianye 韓建業, “Zuizao zhongguo: duoyuan yiti zaoqi zhongguo de xingcheng” 最早中國：多元一體早期中國的形成, *Zhongyuan wenwu* 中原文物, no. 5 (2019); Han Jianye 韓建業, *Zaoqi zhongguo: zhongguo wenhuaquan de xingcheng he fazhan* 早期中國：中國文化圈的形成和發展 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2015); Han Jianye 韓建業, “Miaodigou shidai yu ‘zaoqi zhongguo’” 廟底溝時代與“早期中國”, *Kaogu* 考古, no. 3 (2012).

46 Sun Qingwei, “Chuanshuo shidai yu zuizao zhongguo”; Sun Qingwei 孫慶偉, “Zuizao de zhongguo’ xinjie” “最早的中國”新解, *Zhongyuan wenwu* 中原文物, no. 5 (2019).

earliest *zhongguo*” through this lens, we believe that it is perfectly acceptable to regard the Erlitou civilization, the Taosi civilization, the Liangzhu 良渚 civilization, the Hongshan 紅山 civilization, the Miaodigou civilization, and the Huangdi period as cultural vestiges of Chinese history, since all of the regions in question belong to the *zhongguo* of later ages and are undoubtedly part of China. However, how can scholars prove the emergence of the concept of *zhongguo*, which is made up of the two individual characters *zhong* and *guo*? Since there was no writing at that time, and hence no written records or textual recounts to serve as evidence, combined with the fact that the earliest appearance of *zhongguo* in writing did not yet refer to Chinese civilization and culture, these opinions have yet to be supported with archaeological findings. However, our dating of the earliest emergence of the concept of *zhongguo* to the establishment of the Xia dynasty, based on recounting of *zhongguo* in texts narrating Shun’s arrival at *zhongguo* to assume the throne, seems to be perfectly logical. Weng Dujian 翁獨健 once pointed out, the concept of *zhongguo* probably first emerged during the Xia dynasty. The character *xia* 夏 means *daguo* 大國 (large state) and *zhongtu* (central territory). During the Xia and Shang, *zhongguo* refers to the capital cities of both dynasties, meaning “the center of numerous states,” in addition to “large state.” By the Zhou dynasty, besides meaning “the center of numerous states” and “the center of the earth,” the term had also come to refer to the Xia race or the Chinese race.⁴⁷ Although Weng Dujian did not expound on this point, his opinion that the concept of *zhongguo* emerged during the Xia dynasty seems to be historically accurate.

In conclusion, studying archaeological data and textual accounts on the Xia dynasty being *zhongguo*, we can certainly conclude that the concept of *zhongguo*, based on the concept of *zhong*, emerged by the Xia dynasty at the latest. Following the development of the *zhongguo* concept during the Shang dynasty, the term *zhongguo* formally made its appearance in writings dating to the early Western Zhou dynasty. The earliest appearance of the *zhongguo* concept could be taken to mean the center of the known world or the center of the state, that is, encompassing meanings such as “capital city” and “the central city”. Because the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties all established their respective states in the center of the known world, the term *zhongguo* also came to mean the states of Xia, Shang, and Zhou.⁴⁸ By the later years of the Western Zhou dynasty, the

47 Weng Dujian 翁獨健, ed., *Zhongguo minzu guanxishi gangyao* 中國民族關係史綱要 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2000), 5–6.

48 British scholar Anthony Giddens classified states into traditional states, absolutist states (which emerged in 16–17th century Europe), and modern nation states according to their state of historical development. See Anthony Giddens, *The Nation-State and Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). I propose to classify states into three categories: ancient states, modern states, and contemporary states. The various ethnic-based

term *zhongguo* came to refer to the heart of the known world or the capital city situated in the middle of the state; hence, the use of *zhongguo* to refer to the states of Xia, Shang, and Zhou entered the lexicon of the people at the time. Although the concept of *zhongguo* already had multiple meanings by the Xia, Shang, and Western Zhou dynasties, it did not yet include a cultural dimension. This proves that “the earliest *zhongguo*” was neither a racial concept used to refer to the Chinese race, nor a cultural concept used to refer to Chinese culture; rather, it was a concept which was used to refer to the capital city at the center of the state as well as the state at the center of the known world. As for the use of *zhongguo* to refer to the Chinese civilization and culture, that would have to wait till the Spring and Autumn and Warring States period.

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regimes established in ancient China and represented by their dynastic titles already “classified their citizens by region,” accomplished “the establishment of public authority,” and possessed the form of the state. Hence, although they were different from modern nation states, they can be referred to as ancient states. Ancient states in China mostly belonged to the dynastic state model. Hence, this article refers to the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties as states.

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