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TIANXIA AND THE INVENTION
OF EMPIRE IN EAST ASIA

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Intellectual Background

The idea of tianxia (天下) has never been rigorously defined, but among modern scholars the primary dispute is whether it refers to a culturally specific realm without set political boundaries, or rather primarily to China. Thus, based largely on his study of Qing China, Joseph Levenson argued that tianxia primarily indicated “a regime of value,” which he defined in opposition to a political unit, *guo* (國), that is, a state. Examining earlier periods, Morris Rossabi posited roughly the same distinctions, and for approximately the same period Peter Bol argued that tianxia should be defined as society in opposition to *guo* as state.¹ On the other hand, the authors of modern Chinese dictionaries such as *Cihai* (辭海) and *Hanyu da cidian* (漢語大詞典) assert that tianxia was a political unit essentially synonymous with *Zhongguo* (the middle states 中國), with only a secondary sense of “the larger world” or “civilized world.” This is not a quibble, because for these and related authors the definition of the term is linked to the problem of China’s modern entrance into the world of nation-states, and

the relation of the Chinese nation to the earlier political forms that existed in the area the country now occupies. Light can be shed on this question not only by examining the functioning of the term in the late imperial period but also by studying the origins of the concept and the nature of the political entity to which it was applied.

The term “tianxia” as a major category of Chinese thought appears in political discourse relatively late in antiquity, not figuring prominently until the emergence of the *Zuo zhuan* (左傳) and, to a lesser extent, the *Lun yu* (論語).² Although both texts evolved over time and neither can be precisely dated, this would suggest that the concept was not prominent prior to the fourth century BCE, that is, the early Warring States period. The term has not been found in the surviving corpus of Zhou bronzes and scarcely appears in the *Shi jing* (詩經) and the reliably early chapters of the *Shang shu* (尚書). Even these few early occurrences do not seem to be an established compound, but simply an abbreviated form of the fuller *tian zhi xia* (天之下). The phrase in both forms seems to have referred to the territory ruled directly by the Zhou king (in his capacity as *tianzi* 天子), and even to have referred to a smaller territory when the power of the king declined.

In the *Zuo zhuan*, the term begins to achieve some prominence, appearing four times in the first half of the text and no less than eighteen times in the second half. For most of the text the usage supports Levenson’s later generalization, featuring frequently in phrases indicating that a certain type of behavior would be either praised or condemned by “all under heaven,” which in the context clearly indicates the part of the world that shares the values of the Zhou elite. In some cases, mostly later in the text, the term has a political meaning, referring to a realm that might be occupied and held. This usage comes largely from speakers from the southern state of Chu in discussions about the possibility of Chu’s occupying the old Zhou realm. It also serves as what could be described as a term of “politicized culture,” in which tianxia as the Zhou realm is specifically contrasted with the territory of the Rong (戎) or Di (狄) peoples. Both these political and cultural senses also figure in the *Lun yu*, but the term appears more frequently than in the *Zuo zhuan* (dramatically so in relation to the relative brevity of the *Lun yu*) and most often in the sense of a realm that could be possessed and ruled. This realm, as in the earlier texts, was essentially the core Zhou states, and most references to it being possessed or ruled attribute this ability to the ancient sages. In contrast, the present day is marked by the absence of a single ruler over all under heaven.

This shift toward a political sense continued into the later fourth century BCE. In the core chapters of the *Mozi* (墨子), which probably date from this

period, the term “tianxia” appears more than four hundred times, even though the *Mozi* is only two and a half times the length of the *Lun yu* and much shorter than the *Zuo zhuan*. In the *Mozi*, “all under heaven” is treated primarily as a political unit, functioning routinely as the object of verbs such as “possess” (*you* 有), “rule” (*zhi* 治), or “be a king over” (*wang* 王). However, in contrast to the *Lun yu*, the *Mozi* not only cites the ancient sages but also indicates that any true ruler, including those of the present day, should unify and rule all under heaven. As in the earlier texts, this political unit should share a common set of cultural ideals. Thus the chapter “Unifying Upward” (*shang tong* 尚同) elaborates the argument that tianxia should be united through the establishment of a single criterion of duty or propriety (*yi* 義). Similarly, the text’s repeated references to the “men of service and gentlemen of tianxia” (*tianxia zhi shi junzi* 天下之士君子) imply that tianxia possesses a single cultural elite who should share common values. The *Mozi* also sometimes identifies tianxia as an economic unit whose resources must be protected or properly exploited by the ruler.

Later Warring States philosophical texts such as the *Mencius* (孟子), the *Xunzi* (荀子), and the *Han Feizi* (韓非子) follow the *Mozi* in identifying tianxia as a territorial unit defined by common cultural ideals that would ideally have a single ruler. While the cultural aspect of tianxia as a unit of value figures throughout this period, the sense of it as a political realm continues to predominate. Moreover, as theorized by the modern scholars cited above, tianxia is routinely defined in contrast to *guo*, with the latter invariably being a political subdivision of the former.³ The early difference between tianxia and *guo* was thus primarily one of scale rather than of kind. In this way it is clear that by the late Warring States period, as Yuri Pines has argued, tianxia was no longer simply a civilized world but also a potentially unified political realm, an imperium that transcended all existing state boundaries. It was first and foremost a place of political rule and only secondarily a regime of value or a normative society, as posited by Levenson and Bol for later periods.⁴

This shift of emphasis from culture to politics reflects the changing nature of the political order at the end of the Spring and Autumn period and during the Warring States. This period was marked by the decline and disappearance of the old Zhou nobility, whose shared ritual practices as reflected in archaeological remains were the clearest expression of the ideal of a world united by a common culture. (The same idea was also reflected in stories of poetic citation in diplomatic missions during the Spring and Autumn period that united a politically divided world through the performance of a common literary culture.)⁵ As this old order was replaced by extended, ruler-centered states formed

through universal military service and bureaucratic administration, the idea emerged that political rule extending across an ever larger and larger space, rather than any common elite cultural practice, was the basis for achieving a stable and enduring order. This ideal of peace through politics made sense only within a vision of a world that could be ultimately united under a single ruler. The diminution of appeals to culture was reinforced by the growing importance of states such as Chu and Qin that increasingly denied, seemingly in contradiction to their actual history, their strong cultural ties to the old Zhou order.⁶ However, a residual appeal to shared culture as a background to the ongoing political competition, and to a vision of a possible future world unity, was perpetuated through increasing economic links, mutual borrowing of political institutions, and the flow of diplomats, political aspirants, and scholars across state borders.

A final change in the sense of *tianxia* during the Warring States period, one that is central to the subsequent historical discussion in this chapter, is its geographic extension. The ideal of a united world as articulated in the *Mozi*'s chapters "Caring for Each and All" (*jian ai* 兼愛) and "Unifying Upward" was universal, transcending the boundaries of the old Zhou realm. This is probably clearest in the text's discussion of the sage Yu 禹. When the text praises the sage for "bringing order to *tianxia*" by ending the great flood, it describes how his great work included the aliens on the fringes of Zhou civilization who benefited equally with the Xia people of the middle states. This discussion clearly sees *Zhongguo* as only one part of the broader, universal realm defined as *tianxia*.⁷

This extension of *tianxia* to include peoples beyond the cultural limits of the Zhou realm may in part reflect the *Mozi*'s rejection of the traditional emphasis on ritual and on the cultural superiority of the Xia people. At various places in the text, the authors of the *Mozi* equate the claims to ritual superiority of the middle states with other people's belief that cannibalism or the murder of first-born sons is proper conduct.⁸ This shift toward a nascent cultural relativism that made possible the widening of sympathies and fellow feeling may well have partly reflected the increasing contact of subjects of the old Zhou realm with more distant peoples.⁹ In particular, it may have been related to the increasingly important role of the southeastern states of Wu and Yue as political actors, military innovators, and masters of certain technologies in the late Spring and Autumn and early Warring States periods.

Whatever the grounds for the *Mozi*'s extension of *tianxia* to include more distant and exotic peoples, this idea came to dominate philosophical discussions of the question in the later Warring States. One of the most striking ex-

amples is the *Gongyang Tradition* (*Gongyang zhuan* 公羊傳), which pioneered a clear dichotomy between the Chinese (*huaxia* 華夏) and the barbarians (*yidi* 夷狄) but nevertheless describes a meeting in 576 BCE between the envoys of the alien state of Wu from the southeast and representatives of a league from several of the middle states in this way: “Why does [the *Spring and Autumn Annals*] emphasize a meeting with Wu? It considers Wu as external. What does ‘external’ mean? The *Spring and Autumn Annals* considers its own state [Lu 魯] as internal and all the Xia as external, considers all the Xia as internal and the Yi and Di [夷狄] as external. But the Son of Heaven wants to unite tianxia, so how can he speak of things in terms of internal and external? This simply means that he begins with what is close.”¹⁰

Here the non-Xia peoples are treated as relatively exterior and inferior, but they are still part of the tianxia that is ideally to be united under a true Son of Heaven. Thus tianxia has come to include both what would be treated as the ancestral Chinese and the alien peoples who lay outside the middle kingdoms and the realm of Zhou culture. This or closely related ideas of a greatly extended state in which the majesty or virtue of the sage ruler extends to distant, alien peoples figure throughout the philosophical texts of the late Warring States period.¹¹ The term “tianxia” and related ideas come to function as the intellectual anticipation of the vast multiethnic empire that would emerge out of the unification of the old Zhou realm and its neighboring peoples.

Nor were these ideas of an empire limited to philosophical texts, for the stone inscriptions of the First Emperor incorporated the all-inclusive rhetoric of these texts in proclaiming that his might reached to the very edges of the earth, specifically locating his mountain inscriptions at the “extremities” of the land and stating that his beneficence reached “wherever the sun and moon shine, and wherever boats and carriages carry their loads,” and later extended this to include “wherever human traces reach.”¹² While Qin policies, such as building or connecting a “long wall” to the north, did not match these claims of universal blessing, the occupation of the Ordos in the north and the push into the south did indicate a commitment to extending the geographic range of the state and drawing in distant peoples as part of the desire to surpass earlier polities.¹³

The Early Han Empire as a Multiethnic Tianxia

Although the political philosophers of the late Warring States period developed a model of a polity defined by its vast extent and inclusion of alien peoples, more recent Chinese writers have produced a very different vision of the early

imperial project. The grand narrative of China's modern historiography depicts the Han state, established in 202 BCE in East Asia, as a well-delineated block of territory ruled by a people called Chinese. These Chinese people fought along their northern border with another people from the steppe called the Xiongnu and conquered peoples in the Tarim Basin. The narrative also makes the unexamined assumption that little change has occurred since that time, so that the Han Empire can be regarded as the prototype of modern China. It attributes at least two modern concepts to the East Asia of the second century BCE: one people governs one state, and states are mutually exclusive in both political and ethnocultural terms. Consequently, this narrative assumes that both the core people and the core region of the Han state can be treated as a coherent unit that remained largely unaffected by its interaction with outsiders, and that this unit is fundamentally identical to the later Chinese state. The late imperial adoption of "Han" as a rubric for the newly invented ethnic group that supposedly defined a Chinese nation-state facilitated this conflation of the two realms.

Our research challenges this narrative and the ideology on which it is based, rejecting the received national narrative on two grounds. First, by conflating without question the organizing principles of ancient empires with modern nation-states, we lose the capacity to fully explore the nature of the Han state and imperial power. Second, the modern narrative depends upon ignoring substantial amounts of material preserved in the two Han chronicles, *Shi ji* (史記) and *Han shu* (漢書).

In this chapter, we aim to demonstrate that the Han Empire, and those that followed it, was something quite different from a modern nation-state, and that the Han polity as an imperial form can be usefully analyzed in terms of the category *tianxia*. We analyze alliance strategies and resettlement policies that promoted imperial authority and secured the existence of the Han state for four centuries. We begin with the first century of the Han, during which the state was transformed from a limited regional polity with multiple power centers to a cosmopolitan empire of multiple regions governed by one supreme ruler, something approximating the notion of *tianxia*. The Han court was able to strengthen its own position only by linking to the broader state-to-state networks in eastern Eurasia and incorporating diverse peoples into its state structure. While the Han did this first to block the power-building strategies of its challengers, above all the subordinate kings, and then to achieve superiority over the Xiongnu ruler in the steppes and Central Asia, in doing so it fashioned a vision of imperial authority that was multicultural and transregional. This definition of imperial authority shaped the thinking of all later state builders in

Chinese history and gave a specific political sense to the vague and moralizing notion of *tianxia* that had figured in political philosophy.

This chapter makes four major points. For about six decades the Han emperor operated in a triangular political network with the Xiongnu *chanyu* (單于, a peer emperor on the steppe) and with client kings in the Yellow River region. While these lesser feudal kings allied with either the Han emperor or the Xiongnu *chanyu* and occasionally switched sides, the two supreme rulers also negotiated alliances with each other against lesser kings in their respective spheres of power. The integration of steppe populations into the state was essential for the Han court to obtain new human resources to realize military expansion into unfamiliar regions in eastern Eurasia. By having peoples of varied backgrounds participate in the highest governing elite group and the state structure, and using such people to suppress their own ethnic peers, the Han defined the empire as a multicultural and cross-regional state that potentially incorporated all known peoples, and in which shared ethnicity was of no significance. Finally, after examining in detail the crucial involvement of steppe peoples in the early definition of the Han state, the chapter also quickly traces the pivotal impact of the reliance on steppe cavalry in the Eastern Han, the transformation of all the states that immediately followed the Han due to the dominance of steppe peoples in the military sphere, and ultimately the indispensable role of steppe peoples within the political structure of subsequent empires that emerged in what is now China.

A Limited Power in the Yellow River and Yangtze River Regions (ca. 200–140 BCE)

From around 200 to 140 BCE, the Han was a limited state that struggled to secure its existence in the Yellow River, and to a lesser extent the Yangtze River, regions. The Han emperor faced two major challengers: the Xiongnu *chanyu* on the steppe and the subordinate kings in the east. Two phenomena were crucial in the dynamics of collaboration and competition among the three parties: ethnic and regional differences did not determine alliance decisions of the subordinate kings, and, for the Han emperor, forging gift-based alliances with the Xiongnu *chanyu* was an essential mechanism to strengthen himself in his contest with the subordinate kings.

The political landscape of eastern Eurasia had witnessed a dramatic change toward the end of the third century BCE. On the steppe, the Xiongnu ruler subjugated competing steppe powers and established a polity governed by him and lesser Xiongnu kings. As argued by Nicola Di Cosmo, this unification of

the steppes was probably a response to the disruption produced by the Qin Empire's conquest of the Ordos steppe and the attempt to secure that conquest through building a great wall.¹⁴ Shortly thereafter, in the Yellow River and Yangtze River regions, a military leader named Liu Bang (r. 202–195 BCE) and his coalition triumphed in the civil war that overthrew the Qin and established a new state, the Han. This nascent state interacted only with immediate neighboring powers such as the Xiongnu on the steppe. The Han was politically unconnected to interstate networks of other regions such as the Korean peninsula in the northeast or the Tarim Basin in the west.

After ascending the throne in 202 BCE, the first Han emperor continued to rely on his military coalition to assist him in managing the new state he had founded. He directly ruled only the western part of the Yellow River region, while entrusting most of the eastern region—the floodplain of the Yellow River—as well as the Yangtze River region to client kings. Although Liu Bang assumed the title of emperor, this highest governing elite circle of the Han state was essentially a group of peer rulers who had together emerged as military allies.

While reluctantly sharing power with client kings in exchange for their service, the first Han emperor started to elevate imperial authority by eliminating former clients and transferring feudal thrones to members of his own family. This process involved considerable brutality. For instance, after a client king named Peng Yue was killed in 196 BCE, his body was ground into minced meat that was then presented to all the client kings as a warning.¹⁵ The emperor's violent approach to reducing rivals' power and asserting his supreme status rapidly dissolved his bonds with the client kings and, not surprisingly, provoked considerable resistance.

One of the clearest places to observe this was the Yellow River region near the southern edge of the steppe. Witnessing the ongoing persecution of their peers, some frustrated client kings switched their allegiance to the Xiongnu in search of alternative shelter or military support. From Liu Bang's ascent to the throne in 202 BCE to his death in 195 BCE, within only seven years, three kings (*wang* 王) and one lord (*hou* 侯) near the southern edge of the steppe either joined the Xiongnu or sought military assistance from Xiongnu forces to resist imperial intimidation.¹⁶

As indicated by the *Shi ji* and the *Han shu*, the first military confrontation between the Han and the Xiongnu was ignited by one client king who transferred his allegiance to the Xiongnu. The Han subordinate kings near the steppe had fought with steppe forces for some time, but the first Han emperor demonstrated little interest in any such direct confrontation with the Xiongnu

until a client king in the Dai area joined the Xiongnu to escape imperial intimidation. The emperor led a punitive expedition against this client king and his new patron in 200 BCE. But the Han suffered a disastrous defeat and were forced to secure peace by sending a princess and annual gifts to the Xiongnu *chanyu*.¹⁷

The Han emperor's defeat sent a clear political message that this steppe polity was strong enough to be an alternative patron that could provide shelter from Han persecution. Threatened client kings in the Yellow River region did not have to submit to imperial intimidation, but could instead resist by choosing this new alliance option. The message was well received. For example, when in political danger, a lifelong friend of the emperor who was a client king in the Yan area also decided to take his entire family and thousands of followers to join the Xiongnu.¹⁸ Even after feudal thrones all came to be held by male relatives of the emperor, these uncles and nephews remained willing to invite Xiongnu forces into the Yellow River region to challenge imperial claims to supreme authority.¹⁹ These cases demonstrate that political collaboration and competition trumped cultural or regional allegiance. Once the emperor ceased to be a safe patron, subordinate kings in the Yellow River region simply renounced their allegiance to the Han and sought alternative options with the steppe empire to their north.

Han worries about the Xiongnu were thus a symptom of a larger problem—the clash between the subordinate kings' insistence on a power-sharing model and the emperor's attempts to move toward a more centralized state with a stratified political hierarchy. Although occasional conflicts with Xiongnu forces along the southern edge of the steppe were disturbing, more problematic for the Han emperor was the alienated client kings' renunciation of allegiance and recourse to Xiongnu protection.

In this context, the gift-based interaction between the Han emperor and the Xiongnu *chanyu* became more than a conciliation agreement. Its more important function was to provide a mechanism for both the Han emperor and the Xiongnu *chanyu* to claim a status superior to all the other kings as supreme rulers of their respective regions. This involved two methods. First, by referring to themselves as “two masters” (兩主) in communications, the Han emperor and the Xiongnu *chanyu* recognized each other as the highest regional representatives.²⁰ By the same token, this appellation transformed their gift-based connection into the highest level of interstate interaction, clearly distinguished from all other interactions between the steppe and the Yellow River region.²¹

Second, by excluding lesser kings from all exchanges with the *chanyu*, the emperor monopolized this highest level of interstate interaction. The sending

of a princess and annual gifts was not mediated by any subordinate kings, nor did the latter participate in any manner in this presentation that defined the relations of the two empires. Instead the gifts passed directly from the Han court to that of the Xiongnu in a process that honored both participants at the expense of their erstwhile political peers. Also, the receipt of a princess-wife tied the Xiongnu *chanyu* to the Han emperor as kin. Such marriage alliances could discourage Han subordinate kings from considering the Xiongnu *chanyu* a reliable ally. This exclusive interaction between the emperor and the *chanyu* thus undercut and rendered illegitimate any attempt by the Han subordinate kings to establish independent alliances with the Xiongnu *chanyu*.²² Any such unauthorized attempt could be deemed treason and should also have been rejected by the *chanyu*, whose own status was appreciably elevated through his unique ties to the Han emperor.²³

In addition, this gift-based mechanism initiated a formalized communication channel for the previously unconnected Han and Xiongnu rulers to negotiate their respective spheres of power in the Yellow River region and the steppe. For example, the third emperor, Emperor Wen (r. 180–157 BCE), invoked the rhetoric of two masters to request an explicit division along the southern edge of the steppe between the two supreme rulers. He declared to the Xiongnu *chanyu*, “To the north of the long walls are the states of [those who] draw the bow, and [they] receive commands from the *chanyu*; to the south of the long walls are the households of [those who wear] cap and girdle, and I in parallel fashion control them.”²⁴

The model of the world proposed in this statement boldly ignored the ongoing competition between the emperor and the subordinate kings, let alone the existence of other states to the south of the Yangtze River region. In order to show his commitment to realizing this ideal, the emperor then issued an edict to Han officials that insisted on returning fugitives and captives who, based on this model, should be under Xiongnu control.²⁵ While this partition of the world would have represented a diminution of conventional Chinese claims in the eyes of later Chinese political thinkers, at the time it marked a significant inflation of Han sovereignty.

The series of alliances thus established between the Han emperors and the Xiongnu supreme rulers seem to have successfully restricted subordinate kings’ alliance options. The war in 154 BCE between the Han emperor and the joint forces of subordinate kings, which marked the final collapse of the kings as a significant challenge to the Han court, is the most significant example. After ascending the throne in 157 BCE, the fourth Han emperor, Emperor Jing

(r. 157–141 BCE), duly dispatched gifts to the Xiongnu *chanyu* while taking more aggressive approaches than his father in suppressing subordinate kings.²⁶ His strict observance of established relations with the Xiongnu paid off when the increasingly desperate subordinate kings launched a joint military expedition in 154 BCE to challenge the imperial assertion of supreme authority. Although the subordinate kings allied among themselves, they failed to induce Xiongnu forces to intrude into the Yellow River region in support. The Xiongnu stayed on the steppe watching this warfare until it ended. Their forces were said to have made some moves on the steppe but halted due to rapid imperial suppression of the so-called revolt.²⁷ The ultimate inaction of the Xiongnu ruler could be understood as a reluctance, and perhaps outright refusal, to break the gift-based agreements with the Han court that had done so much to strengthen his own supremacy. This hesitation saved the Han imperial capital from the danger of simultaneous attack by the subordinate kings from the east and the Xiongnu forces from the north, and thereby facilitated the rapid and successful suppression of the military challenge.

Moving Away from the Two Masters Model (ca. 150–100 BCE)

As we have seen, from 200 to 154 BCE, generations of Han emperors had spent five decades blocking subordinate kings' attempts to seek support and protection from the Xiongnu. But lesser kings on the steppe had not until this point shown any interest in the Han emperor as a possible alternative patron.

The successful suppression of feudal resistance in 154 BCE marked a watershed, after which we find the first evidence of Xiongnu leaders shifting their allegiance to the Han. Late in the reign of Emperor Jing, eight Xiongnu leaders formally submitted to the Han court. This provoked a debate about granting these Xiongnu dignitaries the title of lord, which would have entailed incorporating them into the governing elite circle of the Han state. The prime minister objected to the idea of rewarding those who had “betrayed their master” (背其主). But Emperor Jing interpreted their switch of allegiance as a compliment to Han authority. He granted the title “Lord” to seven such defectors in 147 BCE and one more in 145 BCE.²⁸

Two contrasting attitudes appeared here in the debate over how to define the role of the Han state in the political landscape of eastern Eurasia. By denouncing disloyal behavior, the prime minister essentially identified the Han as a limited regional state that should refrain from contesting peer rulers' control over lesser powers within their sphere of influence. On the other hand, Emperor

Jing, perhaps now understanding that there was no longer any real possibility of weakened subordinate kings allying themselves with the Xiongnu, embraced the idea of reorienting these kings' allegiance by taking them into the governing elite circle of the Han. That is to say, rather than adhering to the two masters model that focused on divided spheres of power, Emperor Jing evinced an ambition to replace the Xiongnu *chanyu* as the master of the steppe kings. However, just as in the preceding period, the newly strengthened emperor continued to define his power as much through the relations that he established with the steppe peoples as through his claims to command his own people.

Early in the reign of the fifth emperor, Emperor Wu (r. 141–87 BCE), court officials also expressed reluctance to disturb the status quo, instead insisting on clinging to the position of a limited regional state. As in the earlier cases, they recognized that drawing steppe peoples into the Han political sphere clearly exalted the position of the ruler and strengthened his authority in relation to his own people. The officials' reluctance became clear when Emperor Wu conducted two rounds of court debates in the hope of abandoning the gift-based interaction with the *chanyu* as a prelude to launching a military expedition against the Xiongnu. In the first debate, the imperial secretary supported the continuation of peaceful relations by arguing that the sphere of the Xiongnu since the earliest times had never been viewed as land for conquest and should be left the way it was. Court officials agreed, and on this occasion the emperor respected the majority opinion.²⁹

At issue in this debate was supporting the established pattern of gift-based interstate interaction and rejecting a new expansionist policy. This connection implied that the officials understood the fundamental function of gift giving to be the negotiation of delimited power spheres with neighboring polities and the creation of a bond that obligated the parties to observe mutual agreements. Viewed from this perspective, sporadic conflicts along the southern edge of the steppe were a nonissue. The point was not whether conflicts occurred, but whether the Han court possessed the means to prevent random disputes from escalating into the breakdown of negotiated power spheres. As generations of Xiongnu *chanyu* had never shown any interest in conquering the Yellow River region, the gift-based interaction between the two supreme rulers could be considered effective from the point of view of the officials, and thus worth continuing.

But only one year later the same question was raised again. The detailed record in the *Han shu* makes clear that the real struggle in the court debates was between expansionism and anti-expansionism, with the former being identi-

fied with the emperor's assertion of his own power. In this round of debate, Emperor Wu no longer hid his intentions but started the discussion with a fixed premise: gift giving had never fully stopped conflicts, and thus war was to be preferred. A militant official proposed a plan to ambush the *chanyu*'s forces and thereby subjugate the Xiongnu with minimal loss of men and material. The emperor concluded the debate with the decision to carry out the scheme.³⁰

The initial ambush failed, but the fragile balance between the Han and the Xiongnu continued until the emperor dispatched troops in 129 BCE to attack steppe peoples in trading posts along the southern edge of the steppe. This led to intensive state-level conflicts that stretched from the Ordos steppe to the Yellow Sea for more than ten years. Both sides enjoyed transient successes at the price of great losses in resources: soldiers, ordinary subjects, and livestock.³¹ To some extent, relentless Han military expeditions did help loosen the bonds between the Xiongnu *chanyu* and lesser steppe kings, some of whom changed sides during the war. From 131 to 113 BCE, Emperor Wu granted the title "Lord" to seventeen Xiongnu leaders who surrendered to the Han, and celebrated the achievement of gaining such deserters by calling them "adherents to righteousness" (歸義), which implied foreign admiration of Han authority. They were then deployed to fight battles for the Han.³²

By integrating surrendered steppe populations into the Han state structure and exploiting their service, Emperor Wu entirely abandoned the attempts of his grandfather, Emperor Wen, to negotiate with the Xiongnu *chanyu* an unambiguous division of the known world into two spheres through territorial markers and lifestyle attributes. Instead the Han increasingly came to act as a multiethnic polity in which peoples of different backgrounds were united under the authority of a single ruler who transcended all regional and cultural distinctions. One clear example of this was when the emperor stationed the surrendered king of Kunye, a powerful steppe leader, and thousands of his followers within the bend of the Yellow River, where at the same time Han immigrants were forcibly resettled from the eastern Yellow River region. The deployment of both populations to the same area created a buffer zone for the establishment of Han bureaucratic operations in the corridor west of the Yellow River, increasing the possibility of connecting the Yellow River region to the Tarim Basin. By abandoning attempts to fix clearly delimited spheres of power, the outward-looking Han state became an aggressive empire that mixed social groups of varied cultural and regional backgrounds for the purpose of expanding the imperial presence into the Ordos steppe and then beyond into the Western Region (modern Xinjiang).³³

A Han-Centered Interregional Network in Eastern Eurasia
(ca. 100–80 BCE)

We have seen that from around 140 BCE, the Han started to incorporate Xiongnu leaders into its governing elite circle and steppe populations into its state structure. This transfer of the loyalty of steppe people from the *chanyu* to the emperor was crucial in transforming the Han state from a limited regional polity to a transregional power. First, the incorporation of such people into the Han state transformed it into a multiethnic, multicultural polity in which radically different people came together under the overarching supremacy of a single, unchallenged autocrat whose power imitated that of heaven in extending over all peoples.

Second, and on a more practical plane, these people from the steppe brought with them skills and knowledge that not only allowed the Han to fight battles in the formerly unfamiliar environment of the grasslands but also introduced the Han to previously unknown interstate networks that had developed between the steppe in the north and the Tarim Basin in the west. To the Han state during its first six decades, the Tarim Basin had remained an unknown land, whereas the Xiongnu had extended their dominant position on the steppe into the area. To assist the emperor in competing against the Xiongnu *chanyu*, some Xiongnu leaders who had entered the Han court suggested a new method that could supplement and strengthen military confrontation—cementing alliances with state rulers in the Tarim Basin who had submitted to Xiongnu power but resented this alien authority.³⁴

The knowledge and expertise brought to the Han court and its armies through the incorporation of surrendered people from the steppes made it possible for the first time for the Han to contact and seek out alliances with polities in the Tarim Basin. As the king of Kunye and his followers shielded the northwestern side of the Ordos steppe for the Han, after 120 BCE Han emissaries were able to travel to city-states in the Tarim Basin without being obstructed by Xiongnu forces. In addition, the Han extended its bureaucratic operations into the corridor west of the Yellow River to facilitate the extension of imperial power into this previously unknown political web. Infrastructural support provided by Han garrisons and steppe allies guaranteed that large numbers of Han emissaries could move back and forth along the road to Central Asia without suffering major losses. It is said that from five to ten diplomatic teams were dispatched each year, indicating the intensity of Han activities within the newly discovered region. Large teams included hundreds of emissaries, small ones a hundred or so.³⁵

But in the Tarim Basin the Han confronted multiple independent rulers who were either integrated into a Xiongnu-centered interstate network or strong enough not to join it. To maximize its capacity to exert more influence on the Tarim Basin than that of the Xiongnu in the shortest time possible, the Han deployed diverse approaches among the multiple steppe powers and city-states. While cementing a marriage alliance with a strong steppe power named the Wusun, the Han also used military threats to coerce reluctant city-states into cooperation, which was marked by the sending of royal hostages to the Han court.³⁶

Through attacking selected targets, for instance, the Han successfully coerced polities in the Tarim Basin into a Han-centered interstate network. In particular, the four-year expedition against Dayuan beginning in 104 BCE intimidated steppe powers and city-states into assisting the Han, in a response to the Han's demonstration that they could exert military influence westward, deep into the Tarim Basin, for a lengthy period. The change in attitude toward the Han presence was manifested in polities along the expeditionary routes that were forced first to provision Han troops and second to send royal children to the Han as hostages. A few city-states that refused to provision the troops either were destroyed or had their kings killed.³⁷ In this way the Tarim Basin and much of the steppe west of the Xiongnu state were drawn into the multiethnic Han order that had first emerged with the submission and resettlement of defectors from the control of the *chanyu*. This new Han-centered political network that integrated peer polities and lesser powers across multiple regions secured the status of the Han emperor as an unquestionable imperial authority in eastern Eurasia, whose power transcended all limits of geography and ethnicity and thus clearly extended beyond the authority asserted by the preceding Qin state.

The Han Empire as a Cosmopolitan Tianxia (80 BCE–100 CE)

At the same time that the Han state was externally establishing a network of states formally tied through submission to an emperor whose authority transcended the limits of a regionally limited Han culture, the internal structure of the state was steadily modified through the resettlement and incorporation of steppe peoples who were not drawn into the bureaucratic administration. This marked a third phase in the policies that elevated the emperor and turned a limited, territorial state into a cosmopolitan tianxia defined through the deliberate incorporation of multiple peoples with diverse cultures. In this case the emperor was elevated not merely through the delivery of hostages and tribute

from kings of Central Asian states who recognized him as a supreme overlord but also through the service of steppe warriors who became part of the Han state through formal submission to the emperor but remained outside the administrative system that had previously defined the state.

As noted above, Emperor Wu's decision to wage war on the Xiongnu was accompanied by the policy of accepting the submission of lesser Xiongnu kings who chose to transfer their loyalty to the Han. These men and their followers were resettled inside the Han sphere as dependent states (*shu guo* 屬國) that remained under the authority of their own rulers and whose soldiers served as cavalry in Han armies. This policy was carried forward on a larger scale in the last decades of the Western Han, when the Xiongnu Empire had temporarily split into northern and southern coalitions, with the latter recognizing Han suzerainty and being resettled inside the bend of the Yellow River and farther south. The ruler of this surrendered southern coalition roughly followed the pattern established for the kings of the Central Asian states. On several occasions he visited the Han court, where he received lavish gifts and was granted the unique privilege of referring to himself by his full name rather than as "your servant [*chen* 臣] + personal name" and sent one son to act as a hostage and to be educated in Han elite culture.

Most of the southern Xiongnu who had surrendered moved back to the north after their link with the Han allowed them to defeat their northern rivals. However, in 49 CE the restored Xiongnu state again split apart in a succession struggle. The Han court resumed the policy of furthering this split by allying with one side and encouraging them to resettle inside the Han state, for whom they provided service as cavalymen against their former fellows. This policy of resettling Xiongnu in the northwest was carried out on a much larger scale than in the Western Han, and it was supplemented by the practice of paying bounties for enemy heads to Xianbei and Wuhuan peoples. These had previously been part of the Xiongnu coalition but were now resettled in the north and the northeast of the Han state, where they continued to live under their own rulers as dependent states.

The policy of resettling steppe peoples inside the Han state was extended into a general reform of Han military forces. With the abolition of universal military service in 32 CE, the Eastern Han army was steadily restructured as a smaller military force consisting of professional soldiers and of convicts who were stationed in the vicinity of the capital, in small garrisons at the frontier, and in three major frontier military commands. Each of these commands was assigned the task of keeping an eye on the resettled barbarians, and two of them were named for the peoples whom they were intended to supervise. The com-

mands were also intended to provide troops who would accompany the steppe cavalymen mobilized to serve in the Han expeditionary forces that continued to war against the Xiongnu.³⁸

Thus while the internally resettled steppe peoples continued to be guided by their own rulers, these in turn were loosely directed by military officers, but they remained quite separate from the standard administrative hierarchy. In this system the Han emperor became the sole point at which the two key constituents of the empire—the peasantry who paid the taxes and the steppe peoples who provided the army's key strike forces—converged. Through his role as sole suzerain over the surrendered steppe peoples, and following Ban Chao's re-conquest of the city-states of the Western Regions, the emperor was elevated to a position that completely transcended his status as lord of the Han population. In this way the increasingly multiethnic and multicultural aspects of the empire became the mechanism for simultaneously exalting the position of the ruler and extending the state across the steppes and the oasis cities. These developments assimilated the emperor ever more closely with the all-encompassing heaven envisioned by the philosophers.

The scale and importance of the use of non-Han soldiers in the Eastern Han has been demonstrated by Hsing I-tien. In an article on the Eastern Han's steppe soldiers, he lists fifty-one cases of the use of non-Han troops between 48 and 177 CE, making an average of once every two and a half years. In twenty-seven cases, more than half the sample, there is no mention of any other soldiers accompanying the steppe peoples, and in six of these the commander of the expedition was a steppe ruler. These steppe forces made up most of the expeditionary armies in 73, 89, and the early 90s that finally destroyed the Xiongnu coalition that for three centuries had been the greatest external threat to the Han. This evidence of reliance on non-Han cavalry is supported by the fact that the state-controlled grasslands and stables that had been used for the rearing of military horses since the reign of Emperor Jing were largely abandoned.³⁹

This triumph of the Han through the incorporation of steppe peoples into an ever more cosmopolitan state was celebrated in a memorial written by Song Yi in 88 CE, one year before the Han's most decisive military victory against the Xiongnu:

Since the rise of the Han there have been repeated offensive expeditions, but that which they gained never made up for what was lost. Emperor Guangwu [the Eastern Han founder], having personally experienced the trials of warfare, deeply penetrated the order of heaven and earth.

Following the steppe peoples coming to surrender, he nourished them under a loose rein. The people at the frontier were able to live and their military service was halted; up to today it has been more than forty years. Now the Xianbei are obedient and capture the heads of Xiongnu numbered in the tens of thousands. The Middle Kingdom enjoys this great achievement, and the peasants know nothing of its toil. In this achievement the Han has reached its apogee. The reason is that the steppe peoples attack one another, with no loss to the Han armies.⁴⁰

This is an early formulation of what would become axiomatic as “using barbarians to control barbarians.”⁴¹ However, first, as Song Yi noted in his memorial, that technique depended on the initial practice of welcoming steppe peoples into the Han realm while not incorporating them under conventional bureaucratic administration. This policy of employing separate hierarchies of control to draw diverse peoples into a single political order that existed only in the figure of the emperor, in whom the two hierarchies converged, reappeared in diverse forms throughout the history of imperial China.⁴² Thus this multi-ethnic, dual state that combined registered peasants who were bureaucratically administered with steppe soldiers who served the state under distinct forms of control became an enduring characteristic of the imperial order.

Second, the steppe soldiers not only fought other steppe peoples but also in some cases were employed by the Han ruler to suppress internal rebellions, much as foreign mercenaries were used by monarchs against their own people in early modern Europe.⁴³ Both these facts show that in the first century CE, steppe peoples had become a major constituent element of the Han political order without being placed under bureaucratic control. The first Chinese empire had been able to defeat its external foes and extend its power through remaking itself as a cosmopolitan *tianxia*, and all the subsequent states that ruled the northern half or the entirety of the old Han realm followed this pattern.

Cosmopolitan Polities after the Han

While the Eastern Han pattern of combining steppe peoples and peasants as two distinct elements in a single polity continued into later periods, the means by which they were brought together continued to evolve. First, at the end of the Han a new pattern emerged in which resettled steppe peoples no longer operated in their old communities but rather served as long-term soldiers in standing military commands. Although such men were no longer members of their traditional groups, they remained outside the conventional administra-

tive order, participating in the state only through their enduring personal ties to their commanding officers. In such armies they were combined with former Han subjects who had gradually assimilated the martial customs of the steppe peoples, and the entire northwestern region increasingly became as much barbarian as Chinese. An army of this nature played the central role in the fall of the Han.⁴⁴

Second, in the immediate wake of the collapse of the Eastern Han, only those who were able to marshal significant military forces could act at the imperial level, and internal steppe peoples were central to all such forces. This was particularly true of Cao, who relied on Wuhuan cavalry in his successful campaigns to reunite the drainage basin of the Yellow River and to push down into the middle Yangtze region. These and related forces remained central to the armies of the Cao-Wei state, as well as the Jin state that supplanted it. Most of the armies that fought in the Rebellions of the Eight Kings (*ba wang zhi luan*) that brought an end to the brief reunification under the Jin employed steppe cavalry as their chief striking forces.⁴⁵ Thus throughout the third and early fourth centuries CE the ability to command steppe soldiers remained essential to any claims to imperial power, just as it had been under the Eastern Han.

In the second decade of the fourth century CE, the Sino-nomadic fusion took on a crucial new aspect, as for the first time the steppe leaders abandoned their role as junior partners in the service of ambitious Chinese leaders and instead used their military forces to establish themselves as rulers over the peasant population. The first man to adopt this course was Liu Yuan, a highly Sinitized steppe leader who claimed kin links with the old Han imperial family and ruled over most of the southern Xiongnu, who had been resettled into the Yellow River region in the Eastern Han. These steppe peoples had largely become sedentary stock breeders, but their economic activities allowed them to continue to cultivate their skills as horsemen. Forming a coalition with the Xianbei, Di, and other steppe peoples, he declared himself “King of Han.” His armies fought to the gates of Luoyang, and although he died before the Jin capital was taken, cavalry armies led by his younger brother Liu Cong and by Shi Le (another Xiongnu) sacked Luoyang in 311 CE and Chang’an in 317 CE. These victories led to the Jin court’s flight to the lower Yangzi, and for the next century (the era of the so-called Sixteen Kingdoms) the entire drainage basin of the Yellow River was divided among multiple short-lived states formed by steppe rulers. When this region was finally reunited in the early fifth century CE, it was by the cavalry forces of the Tuoba rulers who established the Northern Wei state.⁴⁶

In his study of the history of the relations of nomadic empires with China, Thomas Barfield has argued that the capacity of the Xianbei states, first under the Murong and subsequently under the Tuoba, to establish relatively stable polities and ultimately to reunify the Yellow River region was due to their ability to combine a Chinese administration of the peasantry with a nomadic soldiery. He treats this achievement as unprecedented and contrasts it with the earlier Xiongnu state that relied entirely on the forcible extraction of Chinese wealth. These achievements in turn, passing through the military reforms of the Northern Zhou in the old Guanzhong region, provided the ultimate foundation for the reunification of the former Han territories under the Sui that became enduring under the Tang.⁴⁷ This combination of the bureaucratic administration of a Chinese peasantry with the tribal control of steppe armies was indeed crucial to the Sui-Tang reunification, but it had in fact been anticipated by the Eastern Han in their triumph over the Xiongnu. The only difference was that in the case of the Wei, the steppe peoples provided not only the military forces but also the rulers. This evolution within the Sino-nomadic dual state from a predominantly steppe soldiery to steppe rulers was fundamental to the subsequent history of imperial polities in the area that has become China.

Conclusion

To summarize, from 200 BCE to around 100 CE, the Han evolved from a confined regional polity with multiple political centers into a cosmopolitan empire governed by a single supreme ruler who commanded the recognition and the services of the Han peasantry, the Indo-European oasis kingdoms of what is now Xinjiang, and large numbers of steppe peoples who lived in their traditional communities within the Han sphere. In the first stage of this transition the emperor asserted his superiority over his former peers through establishing direct relations of gift giving and kinship with the Xiongnu ruler. This relationship was articulated as the division of the world between two masters in a process that allowed each to strengthen his hitherto contested position within his own sphere. Once the possibility of feudal defection or rebellion had ended, the Han emperors reversed their established policy, which was now advocated only by those who sought to limit imperial power. The emperors instead now welcomed the submission of those who had previously belonged to the other master, and then launched a series of expeditions that encouraged further defections. The expertise and skills of these newly surrendered steppe peoples were in turn employed first to open communication with the more

western steppe powers and with the city-states of the Tarim Basin, and in subsequent decades to extend Han power into those regions through a series of military campaigns. By the end of this process of suppressing challengers and promoting imperial authority, a whole range of peoples of varied cultures and regions were integrated into the radically expanded Han state structure, and a Han-centered interregional network was constructed that connected polities across the steppes and extended to the western edge of the Tarim Basin. This process of incorporation changed forever the nature of Han rule by making it explicitly transethnic and transregional, and this new form of state defined a vision of transcendent imperial authority that shaped the practices of all later state builders.

Han imperial power thus rose precisely by becoming multicultural and transregional, by decisively breaking with the established Qin political model, and by establishing a state that in many ways corresponded to the earlier philosophical vision of a single *tianxia* wherein all people, no matter how distant or alien, were brought together under the authority of a single ruler. The reciprocal interactions during this period between the inner workings of the Han state and its relations with foreign peoples and polities served to promote the Han emperor to the status of heavenlike authority across eastern Eurasia.

This account contrasts sharply with the received narrative of the Han, which deliberately ignores key internal differentiations and decisive external influences and declares the state to be based on the timeless existence of a homogeneous Chinese people that exists as an eternal, ahistorical category of explanation. To the contrary, the Han chronicles show that all parties that could promote the power and status of the ruling house were engaged either as allies or as part of the state structure. Differences in culture or regional origins were not a core concern in organizing the state, and nothing indicates that the peoples who participated in the state structure were thought to share a common history or culture. Indeed, imperial policies worked in the opposite direction. Even during the first century of Han history, both imperial rhetoric and action already demonstrated a pride in integrating peoples of varied cultural and regional backgrounds into the service of the emperor. In the process of becoming a multiethnic, transregional polity, the Han state changed forever the nature of imperial rule in East Asia and defined a cosmopolitan vision and reality of political authority that underpinned all later state builders in the region. The ultimate emergence of alien conquest dynasties following the collapse of the Han, and repeatedly throughout the later history of empires in East Asia, was in many ways simply the logical culmination of this process.

Postscript

As a final point, in the above discussion we have treated the terms “tianxia” and “empire” as closely related, if not synonymous. To the extent that a Chinese category such as tianxia is to become part of a broader international discourse, it must be drawn into dialogue with related categories in other languages, of which “empire” is the prime example. This is particularly true in that many scholars have begun to discuss premodern or early modern empires as a political type defined by, among other characteristics, large size, cultural and ethnic diversity (espoused as a value), the pivotal role of local intermediaries, a supreme ruler as the meeting point of diverse communities, and so on.⁴⁸ Many of these features, as we have argued above, are precisely those that distinguish the Han and subsequent empires from earlier and later polities in the region. This is not to argue that the concept of tianxia should be folded into that of empire. To the contrary, it could prove a useful antidote to the sway of the Roman Empire as the exemplary case in the West of an empire.⁴⁹ Several features of the Roman state, etymologically reflected in the overwhelmingly military connotations of the terms “imperium and “imperator,” may well skew our attempts to develop a model for polities of this type. However, studies of the concept of tianxia must by all means not be allowed to become another case of Chinese exceptionalism, remaining an eternally alien and exotic Other that by definition can speak only to and of itself.

NOTES

1. Levenson, “T’ien-hsia and Kuo.” The same usage is espoused by Rossabi; see Rossabi, “Introduction.” For Bol’s argument, see Bol, “Government, Society and State,” 140.
2. The discussion here is indebted to Yuri Pines.
3. For example, see Yang Bojun, *Mengzi yi zhu*, 30, 328; Jiang Lihong, *Shang Jun shu zhuizhi*, 57, 85; Wang Xianqian, *Xunzi jijie*, 114, 134, 172, 185, 326, 351.
4. Pines, “Changing Views of *Tianxia*,” 106.
5. Lewis, *Writing and Authority*, 155–163.
6. On the decline of a recognized common culture in the Warring States and the increasing assertion of a distinct identity by Chu and Qin, see Pines, “Disputers of the Li,” 20–21; Pines, “The Question of Interpretation.” Also see Falkenhausen, “On the Typology of Chu Bronzes.”
7. Wu Yujiang, *Mozi jiaozhu*, 160. The *Mozi*’s views on the universal range of tianxia are also discussed in Chen Guying, *Zhuangzi jinzhu*, 863.
8. For the *Mozi*’s ridicule of Zhou rites, see Wu Yujiang, *Mozi jiaozhu*, 267–268, 735. On the text’s nascent cultural relativism, see also Pines, “Beasts or Humans.”

9. The possible links of political imperialism with widening sympathies and ideas of a universal humanity are explored in Hayot, *The Hypothetical Mandarin*, esp. chs. 1–3.
10. *Chun qiu Gongyang zhuan zhushu*, Lord Cheng year 15, ch. 18, 7b–8a. On the *Gongyang Tradition*’s emphasis on the dichotomy of Xia and Yi, see Toshikuni, *Shunjū Kuyōden no kenkyū*, ch. 6.
11. The “Zhong yong” 中庸 chapter of *Li ji* describes how the fame and reputation of the “greatest sage under Heaven” would “overflow the middle states to reach the Man and Mo tribes.” See *Li ji zhushu*, in *Shisan jing zhushu*, vol. 5, ch. 53, 13a–b. Chen Qiyong, *Lü shi chun qiu*, follows the *Mozi* in emphasizing the universal reach of the work of Yu; see 1514–1515. The *Mencius* on several occasions speaks of the eagerness of alien peoples to join the state of sages such as Tang. See Yang Bojun, *Mengzi yi zhu*, 45, 148. The *Xunzi* also reiterates that the lands of alien peoples should be incorporated into the unified empire of the sage. See Wang Xianqian, *Xunzi jijie*, 204–205, 300, 328–329.
12. Kern, *The Stele Inscriptions*, 12, 19, 23, 26, 27–28, 31, 32, 33, 35, 36, 39, 47. Explicit references to this universal state as *tianxia* appear on 13, 21, 37, 43.
13. The same vision is expressed in the supposed popularity among late Warring States rulers of Zou Yan’s new, greatly expanded vision of the world. On this desire to surpass the Zhou by finding or creating a greater realm, see Lewis, *The Construction of Space*, 249–258, esp. 258.
14. Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies*, 186–188.
15. Sima Qian, *Shi ji*, 91.2063.
16. For a detailed discussion, see Meiyu Hsieh, “Viewing the Han Empire from the Edge,” 26–34.
17. Sima Qian, *Shi ji*, 99.2718; 93.2633–2634.
18. Sima Qian, *Shi ji*, 93.2638–2639; 110.2895.
19. For an example, see Sima Qian, *Shi ji*, 106.2827.
20. For an analysis of the two masters model that took shape during the reign of Emperor Wen, see Hsieh, “Viewing the Han Empire from the Edge,” 54–68.
21. Sima Qian, *Shi ji*, 110.2896–2897, 2902.
22. One typical method for the imperial court to accuse a subordinate king of treason was to argue that this king was in contact with the Xiongnu. For an example, see Sima Qian, *Shi ji*, 118.3076–3077.
23. Sima Qian, *Shi ji*, 99.2719; 110.2895, 2898; Ban Gu, *Han shu*, 2.89; 5.144.
24. Sima Qian, *Shi ji*, 110.2902.
25. Sima Qian, *Shi ji*, 110.2903–2904.
26. Ban Gu, *Han shu*, 5.140–141.
27. Sima Qian, *Shi ji*, 50.1990; 106.2827; 110.2904.
28. Sima Qian, *Shi ji*, 11.445; 19.1018–1021; 57.2078; 93.2639.
29. Sima Qian, *Shi ji*, 108.2861.
30. Ban Gu, *Han shu*, 6.162; 52.2399–2403.
31. Ban Gu, *Han shu*, 6.155–164.
32. Sima Qian, *Shi ji*, 20.1027–1029, 1031–1032, 1039–1047.
33. Sima Qian, *Shi ji*, 30.1425; 110.2909; 111.2934, 2945; 123.3167, 3170.

34. For some examples about the assistance provided by steppe informants, see Sima Qian, *Shi ji*, 123.3157 and 3159.
35. Sima Qian, *Shi ji*, 123.3168–3170.
36. Hsieh, “Viewing the Han Empire from the Edge,” 116–123, 191–200, and ch. 4.
37. Sima Qian, *Shi ji*, 111.2915; 123.3175–3178.
38. Lewis, “The Han Abolition,” 57–60.
39. Hsing I-tien, “Dong Han de Hu bing,” 143–166; Fan Ye et al., *Hou Han shu*, monograph 25, “Bai guan er,” 3582.
40. Fan Ye, *Hou Han shu*, 41.1415–1416.
41. Hsing I-tien, “Han dai de yi Yi zhi Yi lun,” 9–53.
42. Thus under the Tang dynasty, the zones of fluctuating control over the registered Tang population and the steppe horsemen who served in the Tang armies were marked by the shifting geographic distribution of the “loose-rein prefectures” used to control the latter. In the same period, the dual nature of the state that included both conventional administration of the peasantry and military control of the steppe peoples was established by attributing the literary articulation of these two aspects to two different texts, the *Yu gong* and the *Han shu*. See Lewis, *China’s Cosmopolitan Empire*, 27–29.
43. See, for example, Fan Ye, *Hou Han shu*, 38.1285.
44. On the military aspect of the fall of the Han and the central role of steppe standing military commands, see Lewis, “Conclusion,” in *The Early Chinese Empires*; Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 85–93.
45. Lewis, *China between Empires*, 33–37, 54–56, 58–62; Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare*, ch. 2; Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 93–100.
46. Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare*, 48–73.
47. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 100–114; Lewis, *China between Empires*, 73–85; Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare*, chs. 5–6.
48. Notable examples are Burbank and Cooper, *Empires in World History*; and Barkey, *Empire of Difference*.
49. On the tendency in the West to use Rome as the ideal type against which all other cases are measured, see Duverger, *Le Concept d’empire*.

FROM EMPIRE TO STATE

Kang Youwei, Confucian Universalism, and Unity

Wang Hui / Translated by Ban Wang

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A friend asked me why I use “empire” instead of “tianxia” in my analysis of China’s imperial history, especially late Qing reforms and transformations. One reason is that tianxia tends to denote the uniqueness and continuity of Chinese culture in isolation from the world system. This essentialist use of tianxia falls victim to the false dichotomy of oriental empire and modern nation-state. Moreover, the concept of empire implies a dynastic genealogy of institutional forms, the formation of moral authority with religious significance, and a strategy for political legitimacy. All these elements could be described as political culture in modern parlance. Imbued with a vision broader than the concept of nation-state, “empire” may be a more productive term in highlighting the historical formation of political legitimacy. Based on culture and ritual, this political legitimacy hinges on the governing body’s ability to incorporate different ethnic groups and populations from different regions, and different religions, into a flexible and pluralistic structure. In this chapter, by considering Kang Youwei’s scholarship on Confucianism, I show that empire as a mode of political legitimacy and cultural politics resonates with the ideal of tianxia in