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“The Central Kingdom” and “the realm under heaven” coming to mean the same: The process of the formation of territory in ancient China

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Abstract “The Central Kingdom” is pregnant of political implications as well as of geographical and cultural significance. It was believed that whoever controlled *Zhongguo* (the Central Kingdom or China) would be the legitimate ruler over *Tianxia* (the realm under heaven or all under heaven). It was the contention for “the Central Kingdom” among the varieties of dynasties, notably those established by the Han-Chinese and the various ethnic groups in the northern borderland, that lead to the alternation of disintegration and unification of the territory. It was not until the Qing Dynasty that the unified “Central Kingdom” composed of a variety of ethnic groups turned into the ideal “realm under heaven” with “the Central Kingdom” at its core, which naturally put an end to the formation of territory in ancient China.

Keywords the Central Kingdom, the realm under heaven, the territory of ancient China, the process of formation

摘要 “中国”一词并非单纯的地域或文化观念，也有丰富的政治含义，其中围绕“中国”形成的“中国”为“天下”中心、且据之可以成为正统王朝的观念，对古代中国疆域的形成产生了重大影响。正是众多民族尤其是汉和北疆民族建立的王朝或政权不断争夺“中国”，导致了现实中疆域分布格局不断出现分裂和统一的反复交替。至清代，理想中的以“中国”为核心的大一统的“天下”，和现实中的统一多民族国家实现了重合，古代中国的疆域也由此完成了凝聚的过程。

关键词 中国，天下，古代中国疆域，形成轨迹

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The formation process of ancient China's territory has been on the agenda of scholarly inquiry since the early 20th century, which generated *Zhongguo bianjiang yangeshi* (A history of the evolution of China's frontier) by Ge Suicheng, *Zhongguo jiangyu tuozhanshi* (A history of the extension of China's territory) by Xia Wei, and *Zhongguo jiangyu yange lue* (A brief history of the evolution of China's territory) by Tong Shuye from the 1920s to the 1940s.¹ At present, the study of the territory in China mainly focuses on the formation process. A Systematic review can be found in Ma Dazheng et al.'s *Ershi shiji de Zhongguo bianjiang yanjiu: yimen fazhan zhong de bianyuan xueke de yanjin guocheng* (A review of the study of the territory in China in the twentieth century: The development of a interdisciplinary subject) and Liu Hongxuan's *Zhongguo jiangyu shi* (A history of territory in China).² Although the previous study only analyses the formation by phases, it has paved the way for further theoretical research.

From the perspective of nation-state, foreign scholars hold that "the territory in the north of the Great Wall did not belong to the Central Kingdom" and that "The Central Kingdom belonged to the Han-Chinese" on the grounds that no dynasty made "the Central Kingdom" its title in the entirety of Chinese history. They believe that ancient China was the dynasties established by the Han-Chinese. As a matter of fact, despite the absence of a dynasty entitled "the Central Kingdom," the territory in ancient China was nonetheless formed and the Chinese nation emerged, the reason of which is also the key to the formation of the territory in ancient China. The Chinese history was featured by the alternation of disintegration and unification until the Qing Dynasty when a multi-ethnic country in great union was finally established. Held responsible for this prominent feature are many factors, among which the ideal of "Tianxia" (the realm under heaven; all under heaven) with *Zhongguo* (the Central Kingdom; China) at its core is worth mentioning. It was upheld by the variety of ethnic groups including the defunct ones. Although it was initially held by the Han-Chinese inhabiting *Zhongyuan* (the Central Plain), this very ideal, which gradually became popular among the many ethnic groups in the frontier regions, especially those in the north, lead to the contention and consequently closer relationship among the various groups. It accounts for the alternation of disintegration and unification in terms of territory, an alternation which characterized the Chinese history until the Qing Dynasty when the unified "Central Kingdom" composed of a variety of ethnic groups turned into the ideal "realm under heaven" with "the Central Kingdom" at its core, and when the formation of territory in ancient China was finally achieved.

¹ Ge Suicheng, 1938; Xia Wei, 1941; Tong Shuye, 1946.

² Ma Dazheng, et al., 1997; Liu Hongxuan, 1995.

From the perspective of how various ethnic groups in Chinese history identified with “the Central Kingdom,” this article seeks to explore the laws of territory formation in ancient China at the macro view.

1

In spite of the absence of a reigning dynasty entitled “the Central Kingdom” in the ancient China, the phrase “the Central Kingdom” has a long history. Scholars have already embarked on the study of the meaning and the evolution of this very phrase. The first academic symposium on ethnic relations in Chinese history held in 1981 and sponsored by the Society of Ethnic History of China and the Institute of Ethnology of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences gave an early impetus to this research. Since then, many scholars tried to explore the phrase, its meaning and evolution, but failed to reach a consensus. Generally speaking, their findings fall into two categories: one holds that the phrase of “Central Kingdom” is a geographical and cultural concept and the other maintains that it is a geographical concept which also refers to “a central state.”

First, “the Central Kingdom” is believed to be a geographical and cultural concept without indicating the state political power. Weng Dujian holds that “The phrase ‘the Central Kingdom’ could be traced back to the *Shijing* (The book of songs). In antiquity, it was simply a geographical or cultural concept, or a commendatory term.”³ Zhang Xuanru thinks that “‘the Central Kingdom’ only referred to a place in ancient times and it was not until modern times did it refer to a country. Open to criticism is the previous scholarship, which regarded it as the title of a country, or considered the Central Plain as the territory of the Central Kingdom in accordance with the account of *Jiuzhou* (the nine states) in the *Yugong* (Ancient Chinese geography) chapter in *Shangshu* (The book of documents).”⁴ Chen Liankai elaborates on the term “the Central Kingdom” which made its debut in the Western Zhou Dynasty, differentiating between the variety of meanings it has: (1) It means “*Jingshi* (the capital), the city where *tianzi* (the son of heaven) lived, in contrast to where *Zhuhou* (the feudal lords) lived. (2) It refers to the Central Plain, including the regions in the lower reaches of the Yellow River, with Fenghao and Luoyi at its core. Before the Zhou Dynasty annihilated the Shang Dynasty, *Quxia* (the region of the Xia people) refers to the regions inhabited by the subjects of the Zhou Dynasty, the center of which was Fenghao. After the Shang Dynasty was defeated, Luoyang, which was “in the center of the realm under heaven,” was named “the Central Kingdom” or the “the Central Plain” and regarded as the center of the Xia Dynasty. Now the

³ Weng Dujian, 1981.

⁴ Zhang Xuanru.

center of the Shang Dynasty was *Dongxia* (The east of Xia). In a word, “the Central Kingdom” was used in contrast to other remote regions. (3) It signifies the nationality which consisted of the Xia people, the Shang people and the Zhou people, and which was entitled the Xia nationality as a whole. It also included the culture of the Xia people.⁵

Second, “the Central Kingdom” is thought to be a geographical concept which also means “a central state.” Mi Yizhi holds that “In the ancient times, ‘the Central Kingdom’ referred to a place and it underwent changes and development. In the pre-Qin period, it meant the state that was situated in the centre of the various states, and the inhabitants of the latter were respectively called *Dongyi* (The barbarian peoples of the east), *Nanman* (The barbarian peoples of the south), *Xirong* (The barbarian peoples of the west) and *Beidi* (The barbarian peoples of the north). At that time, ‘the Central Kingdom’ did not refer to a country; furthermore, the area it referred to was not even the domain of a country. In a similar vein, the words *Sihai* (The four seas) and *Tianxia* found application.”⁶ Du Rongkun maintains that “The phrase ‘the Central Kingdom’ made its debut in the *Book of Songs* and the *Book of Documents*. According to historical accounts and recent discoveries, it meant *Jingshi* (The capital), and *Wangji* (The imperial capital) etc. in the beginning. As time went by, it signified more and became the appellation of a place.... Having established a state in the Central Plain, the ancient Huaxia people called the very state ‘a central kingdom,’ meaning ‘a central state,’ as opposed to the surrounding states....After the Qin Dynasty had been ushered in, the Huaxia people became merged with the so-called peoples in the surrounding areas, and a centralized multi-ethnic state was established, where the Huaxia people (also called the Han-Chinese after the Han Dynasty) were the majority. Now ‘the Central Kingdom’ was the area that was directly under imperial rule.... In antiquity, ‘the Central Kingdom’ was used to differentiate the regions, cultures, and political status, rather than refer to the whole of the territory or be a concept of jurisdiction or be the formal appellation of a state regime.”⁷ Based on Du’s argument, Chen Yuping believes that “‘the Central Kingdom’ derives from the philosophy of ‘making oneself at the center,’ rather than from the location.”⁸

All arguments mentioned above sound convincing in certain aspect, but they are still open to question. Believing that “the Central Kingdom” is a geographical or cultural concept, the former category of opinion misses the political implications that the word bears. Although paying attention to the meaning of

⁵ Fei Xiaotong, 218.

⁶ Mi Yizhi.

⁷ Du Rongkun.

⁸ Chen Yuping.

“the central kingdom,” the latter is thin, and contradictory in terms of argumentation. While agreeing that it is geographical or cultural, the author of this article holds that this phrase also bears political implications ever since it came into being and that it not only symbolizes royalty, but it also personifies the centralized power which is important in ancient people’s view on “the realm under heaven.” The reasons are as follows:

First, when “the Central Kingdom” was used to mean the capital, it signified royalty as well as a place. The previous scholarship has always paid attention to the meaning of “the Central Kingdom” as the capital. A prominent example is found in “Daya” (Major odes) of the *Book of Songs*: “Pacifying the areas in four directions to benefit the Central Kingdom, and appeasing the kingdoms in four directions to benefit the capital.” It is from the perspective of geography that “the Central Kingdom” is believed to be a geographical concept. As an administrative division, the capital is undoubtedly a geographical concept. It follows that “the Central Kingdom” is a geographical concept when it refers to the capital. However, the political implications of the capital are neglected. As a matter of fact, the capital is called so, simply because it was the place where the emperors dwelled. It is called so, simply because it was related to royalty. Consequently, the capital is not only a place; it is also the personification of royalty, which accounts for the fact that the capital could mean “the Central Kingdom” among the various states in the pre-Qin period. Thus the political implication of “the Central Kingdom” in ancient China is evident and should not be neglected merely because the phrase gradually became a geographical and cultural concept.

Second, although it is destitute of the meaning of a “country” in the modern sense, “the Central Kingdom” was widely used to refer to places which were under the imperial rule of the Zhou Dynasty, and to the various regimes in the Spring and Autumn period and in the Warring States period. A couple of scholars deny that “the Central Kingdom” could mean the state regime, since they try to analyze the time-honored history with the modern western understanding of the word “country,” failing to take into consideration the different context in which “the Central Kingdom” appeared and developed. The phrase of “the Central Kingdom” was found on Hezun (a wine vessel which was made by a certain He), excavated in Baoji, Shaanxi Province in 1963. The inscription on the vessel reads as follows: “Having already seized the metropolis of the Shang Dynasty (*Dayishang*), the King Wu of the Zhou Dynasty reported to the Heaven in his court: I will settle in this Central Kingdom and rule the people from this place.” This statement could be cross-referenced in the *Book of Documents*: “The Heaven has already handed the populace and land of the Central Kingdom over to the deceased king.” Scholars maintained that here “the Central Kingdom” referred to the region with Luoyang at its center. For instance, Chen Liankai held that “(The latter) means that King Wu of Zhou was entrusted with the land and

populace of 'the Central Kingdom' by the Heaven, which could cross-reference the above inscription. 'The Central Kingdom' obviously refers to the region with Luoyang at its center."⁹ However, this is not the sole explanation. It could be safely assumed that "the Central Kingdom" in "settle in this Central Kingdom" and "The Heaven has already handed ... of the Central Kingdom" refers to the area under the imperial rule of the Kings of Zhou, which was the same to "the Central Kingdom" in "Benefiting the Central Kingdom is to pacify the areas in four directions." As far as the territory of the Zhou Dynasty is concerned, it is recorded in *Zuozhuan* (Zuo's Commentary on the *Spring and Autumn Annals*), "The 9th year of the Lord Zhao": "When the King Wu of the Zhou Dynasty had annihilated the Shang Dynasty, Pugu 蒲姑 and Shangyan 商奄 became the eastern territories of our kingdom; Ba 巴, Pu 濮, Chu 楚, and Deng 邓 became the southern territories; Sushen 肃慎, Yan 燕, and Bo 亳 became the northern territories." Now, the above is believed to be the territories of the Zhou Dynasty. Nonetheless, it was the region where the decrees of the Kings of Zhou could be effectively implemented. The following years witnessed the change of the meaning of "the Central Kingdom," which was used to refer to the Huaxia people and their regimes in addition to the regions under the imperial rule of the Kings of Zhou. In the "Wangzhi" section of *Liji* (The book of rites), it is recorded: "The inhabitants in the five regions, namely, the Central Kingdom, the west, the east, the north and the south, have their own distinguished characteristics. The people in the east are called *Yi*, characterized with loose-hair and tattooed body, some of them did not enjoy the cooked food. Those in the south are called *Man*, characterized with cross-toes; some of them do not eat cooked food either. Those in the west are called *Rong*, characterized with loose-hair and leather clothes; some of them do not eat grain food. Those in the north are called *Di*, living in caves and wearing feathers, some of them do not eat grain food, either. The inhabitants in the five regions had their own settlements, favorite food, clothes, facilities and utensils." Undoubtedly, "the Central Kingdom" here refers to the region inhabited by the Huaxia people. Moreover, in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, it could also mean the Huaxia regimes established by the feudal lords. In ancient Chinese classics such as the *Annals of Spring and Autumn*, *The Commentary of Zuo*, and *The Discourses of the States*, "the Central Kingdom," "Huaxia" and "Zhuhua" were used to mean all the states of Qi, Lu, Jin, Chen, and Cai, excluding the states of Qin and Chu, both of which were finally included in "the Central Kingdom" in the Warring States period.

Third, "the Central Kingdom," under the imperial rule, was believed to be the centre of the realm under heaven by the ancient Chinese. Legitimacy of rule was mainly manifested by residence in this area. In the "Xiaoya" (Lesser odes)

⁹ Fei Xiaotong, 217.

section of the *Book of Songs*, it is recorded that “All the land under heaven belongs to the sovereign and all people within the territory are the subjects of the sovereign.” This expression clearly demonstrates that royalty was the key among the powers of the world, and was the important constituent of the ancient Chinese view on the “the realm under heaven,” particularly in the pre-Qin period. The change of the meaning of “the Central Kingdom” from the “capital” to Huaxia or even the Central Plain shows that people’s ideas changed with the change of the center of powers and with the change of the political framework of the court. In the “Zhouyu” (The discourse of Zhou) section of the *Discourses of States*, it is recorded: “In accordance with the statutes established by previous kings, the area within the capital is *Dianfu* 甸服; that immediately out of the capital is *Houfu* 侯服; what supported *Houfu* is *Binfu* 宾服; where inhabited by the barbarian peoples of south and east is *Yaofu* 要服; where inhabited by the barbarian peoples of west and north is *Huangfu* 荒服. The people living in *Dianfu* should offer sacrifice to the king daily; those in *Houfu* should offer sacrifice to the king monthly, too; those in *Binfu* should present tribute to the kings seasonally; those in *Yaofu* should present tribute to the kings annually; and those in *Huangfu* should pay tribute at least once to a new ruler to show their obedience.” The masses’ notion of royalty and political framework finds fine expression in the above account. Crucial was royalty. *Dianfu* could be called the imperial capital; consequently it could also be called “the Central Kingdom.”

The Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods saw the decline of the Zhou Dynasty and the rivalry between the feudal lords. On the one hand, it was hoped that the feudal lords of the Huaxia origin could fend off the barbarian invasions and achieve the unification of China. On the other hand, “the Central Kingdom,” which stood for royalty, found application in securing the feudal lords’ advantage in the wars. As a result, the lords of the Huaxia origin were honored as “Chinese feudal lords” in *Chunqiu gongyang zhuan* (Gongyang’s commentary on the *Spring and Autumn Annals*). The defense of the Jin State against the barbarian Chu State was thus honored as a heroic deed entitled “Lord Huan saving China.” However, human beings’ will could hardly exert influence on the course of history, as is well exemplified by the fact that the Chu and Qin states won in the wars. Consequently, in the Warring States period Chu and Qin became part of “the Central Kingdom.”

In 221 BCE, subduing the other six states, the Qin State achieved the unification of the Central Plain, leading to two obvious changes in the political framework: the establishment of royalty and the application of “the Central Kingdom” as the name of the Central Plain after the unification. (1) Having unified the Central Plain, Yingzheng was praised: “Having deployed the righteous troops and defeated the remaining enemies, His Majesty has achieved peace in the world, divided the world into commanderies and prefectures, and standardized the laws.

His achievement is unprecedented, outshining even that of *Wudi* (The five august kings who ruled at the dawn of Chinese history)."¹⁰ As a result, the term "Huangdi" (Emperor) was coined and "emperors" became the center of power. (2) The Central Plain was unified, which was directly ruled by the Qin Dynasty and which was "divided into thirty-six commanderies, in each of which the civilian governor, the military governor and the inspector were appointed." Later, more commanderies were included so that the total number increased to forty, then the warlordism was ended and the laws became the same in every part of the empire. The territory stretched "to the sea, i.e. Korea in the east, to Lintao and Qiangzhong in the west, and to Beixianghu in the south. In the north, rivers found application in fortification, and the Yinshan Mountain and Liaodong were annexed." "Everything was standardized, from the units of measure and length to characters and even the gauge of carts."¹¹ Now "the Central Kingdom" naturally referred to the Central Plain. The changes brought about by the unification exercised influences on the ancient Chinese view on the "the realm under heaven." One point that is noteworthy is that royalty and the Central Plain became closely related and later the relationship got cemented as the unified multi-ethnic dynasties continued to exist. One prominent example is found in "His Majesty takes the four seas as the boundary and rules over the nine states."¹² As early as in the pre-Qin period, present was the notion that "The possession of the heartland of the realm under heaven could facilitate the rule over the world."¹³ As unity was dominant during the Qin and Han dynasties, the meaning of "the Central Kingdom," extended from the capital or imperial capital to including commanderies and prefectures. Consolidated was the idea that only when one controlled "the Central Kingdom," could he be the ruler of the realm under Heaven. And so was the belief in the legitimate dynasty.

It could be assumed that in the beginning the phrase "the Central Kingdom" was not only a geographical or cultural term, but also one pregnant of political implications. Although in the antiquity, "the realm under heaven," rather than "the Central Kingdom," was used more frequently to refer to the country in the modern sense, "the Central Kingdom" was thought to be the centre of the "the realm under heaven." The belief that the rule over "the Central Kingdom" means the legitimate rule over even the barbarian peoples influenced many dynasties in the Chinese history. And although no dynasty was entitled "the Central Kingdom" in the past, the phrase "the Central Kingdom" was finally used as the title of a sovereign state. The contest for "the Central Kingdom" featured the

¹⁰ Sima Qian, Vol. 6, "Qinshihuang benji."

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ban Gu, Vol. 64, II, "Yan Hu zhuang."

¹³ Li Sheng.

Chinese history. It was not only the ultimate objective of the Han-Chinese, but also the engine promoting other peoples inhabiting the frontiers, particularly those northern borderlands, to move to the Central Plain. The ever-lasting vie among the ancient Chinese regimes including those in the borderland lead to the formation of the territory of China and that of the Chinese nationality.

2

The idea of founding the unified “realm under heaven” with “the Central Kingdom” at its center was formed by the Han-Chinese in the Central Plain. However, in the Chinese history a unified realm under heaven founded by the Han-Chinese was only realized in the Han Dynasty and the Tang Dynasty. More often than not, the history was characterized by vying for the control over “the Central Kingdom” among the variety of courts or regimes. Based on the Han Dynasty, the Tang Dynasty witnessed an expansion of territory, an improved administration and some changes in the idea of the unified “realm under heaven,” the last of which were of vital importance to the formation of ancient Chinese territory.

Firstly, the notion that “His Majesty takes the four seas as the boundary and rules over the nine states” developed into the notion that “The Son of Heaven rules over the four seas.” In the Tang Dynasty, the nine states was to some degree the equivalent of “the Central Kingdom,” although in the Han Dynasty, it was thought to be the commanderies and prefectures. This argument is clearly demonstrated in the opening remarks in the “Geographic gazetteer” of *Hanshu*. The gazetteer first relates the geographic position of the nine states established by Yu (The successor of Shun; the first king of the Xia Dynasty). Then it proceeds to say that “Now the Han Dynasty was prosperous. Following the laws and regulations of the Qin Dynasty, it upheld benevolence and advocated simpleness in order to appease the subjects. Having pushed back the ethnic groups in the north and south, Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty managed to expand the territory. Founding the Province of Jiaozhi in the south and that of Shuofang in the north, he has also annexed the provinces of Xu, Liang, and You. Combining the systems of the Xia and Shang, he renamed the You Province the Liang Province, and the Liang Province the Yi Province. Provincial governors were appointed in all the thirteen provinces.” In the Han Dynasty, *Xiyu duhufu* (The protectorate of the western regions) was established to administer the western regions, *Huqiang xiaowei* (The commander who protected Qiang) was appointed to protect the west of Qiang, and *Huwuhuan xiaowei* (The commander who protected Wuhuan) was stationed to protect frontier regions such as Wuhuan and Xianbei.

However, due to the belief of the Han-Chinese and their emphasis on “the four seas” and “nine states,” these regions were not mentioned in the “Geographic gazetteer” in *Hanshu*. In other words, the people of the Han Dynasty considered the “nine states,” which were commanderies and prefectures, as the regions under the imperial rule. By contrast, they regarded the western regions, the west of Qiang, Wuhuan, and Xianbei as areas the administration of which was out of the need to solve problems concerning Xiongnu or out of the desire for safety in the commanderies and prefectures. These forced administration of these areas greatly influenced the measures in the Tang Dynasty, as is well exemplified in the improved system of protectorate in order to effectively administer the vast frontiers.¹⁴

As the areas under the rule of the Han Dynasty expanded and the administration became more effective, people’s ideas changed. One noteworthy example is “The Son of Heaven rules over the four seas.” The phrase “to rule over the four seas” was frequently quoted in *Jiu Tangshu* (The old history of the Tang Dynasty) and *Xin Tangshu* (The new history of the Tang Dynasty). For instance, in “Yizong benji” (Basic annals of Emperor Yizong of the Tang Dynasty) in *Jiu Tangshu*, it is recorded that “I rule over the four seas and regard the subjects as my children.” In “Liyi er” (Etiquette: II) in the same volume, it is written that “The Son of Heaven rules over the four seas. He established a hall as a symbol of vitality, which implies that he rules over the world.” And in “Chen Zi’ang zhuan” (The biography of Chen Zi’ang) in *Xin Tangshu*, it reads as follows: When Emperor Gaozong of the Tang Dynasty deceased, Chen Zi’ang petitioned to the ruling Emperor, saying that the mountain mausoleum could be built in the East Capital, believing that “And the Son of Heaven rules over the four seas. The Emperor Shun was not buried in Cangwu and the Emperor Yu in Kuaiji, because they were fond of the barbarian peoples and despised the Chinese.

The different ideas in the Han and Tang dynasties concerning the framework of “the realm under heaven” find fine expression in the evolution from “ruling over the nine states” to “ruling over the four seas,” an evolution which was resultant from the recognition of the inhabitation of other peoples in “the Central Kingdom” on the part of the Han-Chinese roughly from 220 to 581. The evolution also demonstrates that the territory under the imperial rule was ever on the increase and that the interrelationship between “the Central Kingdom” and the borderland had developed.

Secondly, the rule of other ethnic groups over “the Central Kingdom” was recognized, especially by the Han-Chinese. Royalty, the gist of the ideal of the unified “realm under heaven” with “the Central Kingdom” at its center,

¹⁴ Li Dalong, 2003.

influenced the various ethnic groups as the rule of the Han Dynasty covered the vast borderland. In the 2nd year of Gengshi (24), Yu, the chieftain of Xiongnu, refused to declare himself a vassal, saying that “Xiongnu and Han were actually counterparts. When Xiongnu saw upheavals, the Emperor Xiaoxuan helped Huhanye to assume the throne. In return, the latter declared himself a vassal to the former to show respect. Now Han also witnessed disturbance, as Wang Mang usurped the throne. Troops from Xiongnu moved to attack Wang’s regime, draining its frontiers, so that turmoil ensued and the rule of Han was once again hailed. As a result, Wang’s regime was overthrown and the Han Dynasty was restored. I did most of the job, and you should respect me.”¹⁵ Yu’s request that Emperor Gengshi (Liu Xuan) should “respect” him was obviously influenced by the Han-Chinese ideal of “the realm under heaven,” an ideal which later guided other ethnic groups in the borderland in their action. Firstly, the so-called *Wuhu* (the five barbarian peoples), namely, the Jie people, the Di people, the Qiang people, the Xianbei people, and the Xiongnu people, established their regimes in the Central Plain, vying for the legitimate rule over “the Central Kingdom.”

In the 1st year of Yongxing (304), Liu Yuan of Xiongnu, who pretended to be the descendent of the imperial Liu family of the Han Dynasty, said that “The Han Dynasty had ruled for a long time, benefiting the masses greatly. I am the descendant of the Han family, and the Emperor and I were brothers. Now that my brother passed away, I am to succeed his throne. Is not it all right?” Then “declaring amnesty and changing the title of his reign into *Yuanxi*, he entitled the deceased Liu Chan the Emperor Xiaohuai and offered sacrifice the eight deceased emperors of the Han Dynasty. He also appointed his wife Huyan as the empress, the Right Righteous Prince as *Chengxiang* (the prime minister), Cui You as the *Yushi dafu* (the supreme censor), Liu Hong as *Taiwei* (the grand commandant), Fan Long as *Da Honglu* (the minister herald), Zhu Ji as *Taichang* (the minister of ceremonies), both Cui Yizhi from Shangdang and Chen Yuanda from Houbo as *Huangmenglang* (the imperial attendant).”¹⁶

However, Fu Jian of the Di origin, who founded the Former Qin state, told his ministers that “I am just trying to unify the world and have taken the barbarian peoples as my subjects. You had better free yourself from anxieties and too strict principles. Only by way of self-cultivation can one fend off disasters, and reflect his owning deeds. Why should he be awed by barbarian troubles?”¹⁷ Boasting that he had won the recognition of the various ethnic groups, he went on to demand that the Eastern Jin Dynasty of Huaxia origin should be a vassal: “I have been a successor to our great course for nearly twenty years. Now that the

¹⁵ Ban Gu, Vol. 94, II, “Xiongnu zhuang.”

¹⁶ Sima Guang, Vol. 85, the tenth month of 304.

¹⁷ Ibid., Vol. 103, the eleventh month of 373.

bandits have been eliminated, the world is peaceful except the southeast, where the inhabitants were disobedient. When the idea occurs to me that the world is not unified, I could hardly have my dinner. Now I wish to send our troops to crusade against this place.”¹⁸

Although the Han-Chinese historians did not recognize “*Wuhu shiliuguo*” (The sixteen kingdoms of the five barbarian peoples), they did recognize the Northern Wei Dynasty founded by the Xianbei people. The Xianbei people’s challenge to the “legitimacy of the Huaxia people” was direct and naked. Tuoba Gui, the chieftain of the Xianbei people, proclaimed that “My predecessors have always ruled in the north and controlled the states afar. Although they have assumed the throne, they have nonetheless failed to subdue the nine states. When I ascended the throne, the realm under heaven was not unified and there was the need for a ruler in the Central Plain. Despite our different customs, we should try to conciliate them with our integrity. And I myself led our troops to the Central Plain, eliminated traitors and won widespread recognition in the end. Now we should continue to use Wei as the title of the dynasty, as was used by our predecessors.”¹⁹ Tuoba Gui’s self-proclaimed status finds expression in the words and sentences such as “I (zhen),” “failed to subdue the nine states,” “the realm under heaven was not unified,” “there was the need for a ruler in the Central Plain,” and “Despite our different customs, we should try to conciliate them with our integrity,” etc. It shows that he claimed to be the legitimate Son of Heaven of the Huaxia origin and aimed at the unification of the Central Plain. In the 11th year of Taiping zhenjun (450), the Northern Wei troops moved southward to invade the Song Dynasty of Southern Dynasties. Although they did not succeed in defeating the latter, they expanded their territory to the north of the Huai River. What is more important, the Northern Wei Dynasty, as a legitimate Chinese dynasty, was recognized by the Han-Chinese historians. It was the first dynasty established by the ethnic groups in the borderland that was enlisted in the legitimate Chinese dynasties. And *Weishu* (The history of Wei), which recorded the history of the Northern Wei Dynasty was regarded as the official history.

The histories of the Western Jin Dynasty, the Eastern Jin Dynasty, the Southern Dynasties and the Northern Dynasties, demonstrated that the ethnic groups in the borderland moved to “the Central Kingdom” for legitimacy out of their own desire. It was because the Han-Chinese belief that gaining control over “the Central Kingdom” meant dominance in “the realm under heaven” was accepted by the groups, particularly those in the northern borderland. The Han-Chinese also accepted such a fact, as is evidenced by the Han-Chinese historians’ recognition of the legitimacy of the Northern Wei Dynasty. On the one hand, the

¹⁸ Fang Xuanling, Vol. 114 “Fujian zaiji xia.”

¹⁹ Wei Shou, Vol. 2 “Taizu ji.”

above two kinds of acceptance led to the change of the traditional Chinese view on “the realm under heaven,” and led the groups in the borderland to moving to the Central Plain. Their moving promoted the merging of the frontiers, and that of the northern borderland and the Central Plain. On the other hand, abandoned was the strict distinction between Han-Chinese and the barbarian peoples. In the Tang Dynasty, the belief that “The Huaxia people and the barbarian peoples are one family” became a crucial guidance in “the administration of the country.” “The realm under heaven” could be co-administered by the Huaxia people and other peoples.

Thirdly, the belief that “The Huaxia people and the barbarian peoples are one family” was cemented and then advocated as the guidance in “the administration of the country.” The belief could be traced back to the remote antiquity. In “Xiongnu zhuan” (The biography of Xiongnu) in *Hanshu*, it is recorded that in the early years of the reign of Emperor Yuandi of the Han Dynasty, Han Chang and Zhang Meng, were asked to escort the son of Huhanye, the chieftain of Xiongnu back home. “Han and Zhang found that the chieftain’s subjects were getting more and more populous while the ferocious animals were nearly eliminated; consequently, the chieftain and his subjects were able to defend themselves, not in the least sense horrified by the Zhizhi, the rebellious brother of Huhanye. When Han and Zhang heard that the ministers advised their chieftain to move back to the north, they were worried because it could be more difficult for them to control Xiongnu if the chieftain agreed to do so. They did not hesitate to conclude a contract with the chieftain, reading as follows: “From now on, Han and Xiongnu are one family and should not deceive or attack each other. If anyone should commit theft, the guilty shall be reported, the thief shall be punished and what is stolen shall be restored. If one party is faced up with invaders, the other party should send troops to help. If one party fail to abide by this contract, it shall suffer disasters. All our offspring shall join the contract.” Now, it could be safely assumed that in the Han Dynasty the belief that the Han-Chinese and the barbarians peoples are one family already made its appearance, although Han and Zhang themselves could hardly believe that it could become true. Nonetheless, this belief which originated in the Han Dynasty was frequently quoted by the emperors of the Tang Dynasty. In “Gaozu benji” (Basic annals of the Emperor Gaozu of the Tang Dynasty) in *Jiu Tangshu*, it is recorded that “In the 8th year of Zhenguan (634), “Emperor Gaozu went to review the troops in the west of the city. Having appreciated the generals and soldiers, he returned and treated high-ranking officials in the Weiyang Palace. He asked the Illig Khan from Tujue to dance and asked Feng Zhidai, the chieftain of Nanyue, to compose a poem. Then he smiled and said: “The northern and southern ethnic groups are one family. This is the first time in history.” In a similar vein, in *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government*, Vol. 197, it is

written that “Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty said: “The masses in other ethnic groups are also human beings, whose characters are the same to those in the Central Plain. The emperor worries that he cannot offer his favor to them and does not highlight their difference. If he shows benevolence properly, all of the ethnic groups could live like one family. However, if he is suspicious, then brothers could be turned into enemies....” Although racial discrimination was evident in the policies concerning the other ethnic groups, the belief that “the Huaxia people and the barbarian peoples are one family” was an important principle guiding the policies, as is shown in the appointment of a large number of officials of ethnic origin²⁰ and in the use of *Tiankehan* (The heavenly Khan) to address Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty.²¹ In the Han-Chinese historians’ opinion, the title of the heavenly Khan reflected the fact that the dynasty of the Han people dominated “the realm under heaven.” The “Geographic gazetteer”s in both *Xin Tangshu* and *Jiu Tangshu*, enlist many favored prefectures so that the areas under the direct imperial rule expanded and so did the territory of “the Central Kingdom.” And the Tang Dynasty was not a dynasty only composed of the Han-Chinese, inasmuch as the vast frontiers were under the imperial rule and officials of ethnic origin were appointed. “The realm under heaven” became one which was co-administered by Han-Chinese and non-Han-Chinese peoples.

Finally, “the Central Kingdom” became even more important in “the realm under heaven.” It should be pointed out that until the Tang Dynasty despite changes in the ancient people’s view on “the realm under heaven,” the belief that “the Central Kingdom” was the center of “the realm under heaven” was nonetheless cemented and this is reflected in the following aspects: (1) A dynasty that would achieve unification assumed the responsibility for ruling over the nine states. The unification achieved of the Qin and Han dynasties exerted great influences on the policies of the Tang Dynasty in that the system of protectorate initiated in the Han Dynasty was applied to all of the borderland in the Tang Dynasty and in that the emperors of the Tang Dynasty established that the unification of the commanderies and prefectures of the Han Dynasty was a prerequisite for the great unioin. In *Cefu yuangui* (The prime tortoise of the record bureau), it is written that “In March in the 19th year of Zhenguan (645), Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty went to visit Dingzhou. He told his courtiers that ‘Liaodong had been part of the ancient Central Kingdom. From the

²⁰ In *Xin Tangshu*, the biographies of nearly one hundred non-Han-Chinese chieftains or officials were written. Most of these officials, who were from different tribes, worked in the central government or in the hinter land in the Tang Dynasty. Some of them were even high-ranking officials. Equality is shown in the appointment of officials in this dynasty.

²¹ Liu Xu, Vol. 3, “Taizong benji xia.” It is recorded that “And so all the ethnic groups in northwest asked the Emperor to adopt the title the heavenly Khan. Then it was proclaimed that he could be also called so.”

Wei until the Zhou, it had not been considered by the emperors. The Sui expedited four times and ended up with failures and uncountable losses. Now their king has been murdered and the current ruler is overbearing of their geographical advantages. This event weighs much on my mind, and I could hardly fell asleep. I will try to revenge our subjects and the murdered king of Korea. The world is peaceful except this place. And our troops will be summoned to eliminate the enemies. However, I am worried about the descendants who would be extremely determined to take a crusading voyage and try to attack Liao, or to create turmoil. I would like to take it over before I get old, without leaving it to later generations. Therefore, I have eaten food without delicious vegetables since we departed from Luoyang, in consideration of sharing the bitterness with the commoners and getting it done once and for all.” When Emperor Taizong mentioned that “Liaodong had been part of the ancient Central Kingdom,” “The world is peaceful except this place” and how he would try to subdue Korea, he was actually talking about his responsibility for ruling over the nine states. (2) “The Central Kingdom” and “places inhabited by other ethnic groups” became an organic whole. In “Li Daliang zhuan” (The biography of Li Daliang) in *Xin Tangshu*, it is recorded that “Li Daliang petitioned to Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty, saying that ‘I heard that anyone who wishes to pacify those far away must pacify those near at hand. The Central Kingdom constitutes the root of the realm under heaven while the place inhabited by the other ethnic groups is the leaves. It is practically impossible to pursue peace when the root is damaged and the leaves are lush.’ The idea that “the realm under heaven” was composed of the Huaxia people and the other ethnic groups could be found in the pre-Qin period, although at that time the differences between them were highlighted and the effective administration of the borderland was ignored. As is evident in what Li Daliang said, in the Tang Dynasty, the borderland and the hinterland became inseparable, though the former was only sort of a vassal. (3) The dynasty which gained control over “the Central Kingdom” could be the center of “the realm under heaven.” Despite the disunion from the Wei Dynasty to the Northern Dynasty, “the Central Kingdom” was not downgraded in people’s mind; instead, it was upgraded. Li Yuan, Emperor Gaozu of the Tang Dynasty, once in vain proposed that Korea should stop being a vassal to the Tang Dynasty, for Pei Ju and Wen Yanbo, high-ranking officials, argued otherwise. They held that “Liaodong, was Qizi’s state during the Zhou Dynasty, and the Xuantu Prefecture of the Han Dynasty. It submitted to China before the Wei and Jin periods. The Central Kingdom is to the other ethnic peoples what the sun is to stars. There is no reason for the latter to feel depreciated.”²² What is noteworthy here are the comparison of “the Central Kingdom” to “the sun” and that of “the other ethnic

²² Liu Xu, Vol. 199, I, “Gaoli zhuan.”

peoples” to “stars.” Obviously, here “the Central Kingdom” refers to the Tang Dynasty, which was compared to “the sun” on the grounds that in this dynasty the unification of “the Central Kingdom” was achieved.

The Tang Dynasty saw the above changes, which exerted great influences on the formation of the territory in ancient China. What is more important, they were theoretically conducive to the vying for being the common ruler over the realm under heaven among the ethnic groups after the Tang Dynasty and to the unification in the Yuan Dynasty.

3

After the Tang Dynasty, the Chinese history once again witnessed disunion and unification. First, there was the five short-lived dynasties succeeding one another in the north and the co-existence of the ten states in the south as successor states of the Tang Dynasty. The five dynasties were the Later Liang Dynasty, the Later Tang Dynasty, the Later Jin Dynasty, the Later Han Dynasty and the Later Zhou Dynasty. The ten states constituted Wu, the Southern Tang, Wu-Yue, Min, Chu, Nanping, the Former Shu, the Later Shu, the Southern Han and the Northern Han. Then, there was the co-existence of the Song Dynasty, the Liao Dynasty, the Western Xia Dynasty and the Jin Dynasty. Last, there was the unification in the Yuan Dynasty. The history was featured by the vying for being the common ruler over the realm under heaven among the empires established by the ethnic groups in the borderland and those in the Central Plain. The competition ended with the victory of the ethnic groups. The change of the common ruler did not interrupt the continuation of the main body of the civilization. The formation of the territory in ancient China was ever in progress. Many factors account for such phenomenon. One important reason was that the empires, which achieved unification, claimed legitimacy.

As is mentioned above, the ideal of competing with the empires in the Central Plain and gaining control over “the realm under heaven” fostered by the Xiongnu people could be traced back to the Han Dynasty. It came true when the northern part of China was unified during the Northern Wei Dynasty. When the Tang Dynasty finally fell in 907, the ethnic tribes in the northern borderland initiated another round of competition for the control over “the realm under heaven.” The Khitan people had already risen in the Tang Dynasty, and became an important steppe people in the north. In 916, their chieftain Yelü Abaoji assumed the throne, so that the Liao Dynasty, mainly composed of the Khitan people, made its appearance in the Chinese history. During his reign, the Khitan people tried to move to the Central Plain in vain. In 917, they were so defeated by Li Cunxu in Youzhou that Yelü remarked in a sigh that “I am not predestined

to come here.”²³ Despite the defeat, the Khitan ambition of moving to the Central Plain and gaining control over “the realm under heaven” remained unchanged. During the reign of Yelü Deguang (927–947), the Khitan people got involved in the fighting in the Central Plain and won, obtaining tributes from the Later Jin Dynasty. Besides, sixteen subprefectures were ceded to the Khitan Liao, together with extravagant tribute every year.²⁴ From then on, the Khitan people began to fulfill their ambition of controlling “the realm under heaven.” When the Northern Song Dynasty came into being, a ceaseless war between Song and Liao commenced in order to determine to whom the “sixteen subprefectures” belonged. The “Chanyuan Treaty” in 1004 promised peace to both governments, but the emperor of Song had to pay huge tribute to the nomadic ruler and call the latter’s mother aunt. In spite of the discouraging defeat, the Han-Chinese of the Song Dynasty formed an ally with the Jurchen people to combat the Khitan people. In 1122, the troops of the Song Dynasty, and that of the Jin Dynasty established by the Jurchen people, attacked the Liao Dynasty. The weakness of the Song Dynasty demonstrated during the attack on Yanjing roused its ally to an invasion of Song itself in 1125, putting an end to the Northern Song Dynasty. The vast area to the north of Qinling Mountain and the Huai River, now came under the control of the Jin Dynasty, making it a unified multi-ethnic dynasty in the north of China.

It should be pointed out that despite their ethnic origins, rulers of the Liao and Jin dynasties did not regard the Song Dynasty as legitimate; instead, they consider it as “barbarian.” The rulers of the Song Dynasty, particularly of the Southern Song Dynasty were willing to “be downgraded and deprived of their respectful titles. Regarding the rulers of the other ethnic origins as legitimate ones, they considered themselves as vassals.”²⁵ They regarded the ruler of the Jin Dynasty as the common ruler over the realm under heaven.

If Liao and Jin’s roles for “the common ruler for the realm under the heaven” were not recognized completely because of the existence of the Song Dynasty of the Han people, the founding of the Yuan accomplished Northern peoples’ purpose for “the common ruler over the realm under the heaven.” Having reunited and conquered China, the emperors of the Yuan Dynasty claimed their legitimacy. Once, Genghis Khan, told his officials: “The ultimate pleasure for a man lies in conquering the masses in turmoil and defeating his enemies, and looting all the belongings of the latter. He is satisfied when he succeeded in forcing their wives to cry, mounting their fine horses and married their

²³ “Xue Juzheng, Vol. 137, “Qidan zhuan.”

²⁴ Sima Guang, Vol. 280.

²⁵ Li Xinchuan, Vol. 29.

stunningly beautiful wives or concubines.”²⁶ What Genghis Khan told his sons was recorded in *Yuanchao mishi* (The secret history of the Yuan Dynasty). He said: “The world is blessed with a vast area and abundant in rivers. You can conquer other countries with a view to an expansion of your domain.” Thus guided, he and his descendants established the strong Mongol Empire that extended from Europe to Asia. He tried to conquer the world, while his descendants claimed to be successors of Chinese origin. Kublai Khan, wrote to his Japanese counterpart in 1265, saying that “The emperor of the Mongol Empire now writes to the Emperor of Japan. Since ancient times, the kings of even small countries emphasized honesty and good neighborship. And my ancestors, with their predestination, have ruled over the realm under heaven and respected by numerous people in other places. When I assumed the throne, I found that the innocent Korean people have suffered from wars for a long time. As a result, I ordered that the war end, the troops go back and the old men and children be returned. The Korean Emperor and his subjects came to extend their gratitude early in the morning. They were vassals in name, but they seemed to be my children. I think you also know this. Korea is to the east of my empire. Japan is close to Korea and had begun her friendly intercourse with China. Now I myself have not sent a single mission for friendly relations. It worries me that my opinion should not reach you. And so I have sent my envoy to you with my letter to show my wish that we could resume our friendly intercourse and live in concord with each other. As is well known, the Sage could live in every part of the world. If we do not resume our intercourse, how can we be one family?”²⁷ Emperor Wuzong of the Yuan Dynasty followed suit and said that “Our ancestors have acted in tune with the times and expanded the territory, unifying the Central Kingdom.”²⁸ The historical accounts show that the emperors of the Yuan Dynasty upheld the belief that they were also “Chinese.” This may be the reason why the Yuan Dynasty was regarded as a legitimate one in China.

The rulers of the Liao, the Jin, and the Yuan dynasties, vied for being the common ruler over the realm under heaven, and facilitated the unification, contributing to the formation of the territory of ancient China.

(1) These three are regarded as legitimate dynasties, and “the Central Kingdom” has become multi-ethnic. In the Han and Tang dynasties, only the Northern Wei Dynasty, one among the many non-Han-Chinese dynasties on China’s soil, was considered to be “the Central Kingdom.” In the Song Dynasty, which co-existed with the dynasties of Liao, Jin, and Yuan, all of the four dynasties became the representative of “the Central Kingdom,” when the local

²⁶ Rashid al-Din Fadl Allah, Vol. 1, II, 226.

²⁷ Song Lian, Vol. 208, “Ribei zhuan.”

²⁸ Ibid., Vol. 22, “Wuzong yi.”

unification was achieved in the Liao and Jin dynasties and the unification achieved in the Yuan Dynasty. This was partly due to the fact that all these dynasties claimed to be legitimate Chinese dynasties. However, only when the claim was recognized by other dynasties or peoples can it be veritable. The records of their histories, namely, *Songshi* (The history of the Song Dynasty), *Liaoshi* (The history of the Liao Dynasty), *Jinshi* (The history of the Jin Dynasty), and *Yuanshi* (The history of the Yuan Dynasty) have been regarded as official histories, which proved that the claim has been recognized. What is also worth mentioning is Mahamud Kashgali's explanation of “Chinese” in his *Turkic Dictionary*. He divides “the Central Kingdom” into three parts: the upper Qin, which was the Song Dynasty, the middle Qin, which was Khitan Liao and the lower Qin. According to this explanation, Zhang Guangda holds that “Cross-referenced by other Muslim literature, Mahamud Kashgali's idea of China was typical of the understanding of the people in Central Asia.”²⁹ If this understanding is legitimate, it at least shows that the inhabitants in Central Asia thought that “Although ‘China’ (Qin) was divided, it covered areas governed by the Khitan people and areas under the rule of Kara Khan, in addition to the Central Plain governed by the Han-Chinese”. In other words, during this period, when “the Central Kingdom” expanded, it became multi-ethnic. This understanding exerted great influences on the merging of the Central Plain and the borderland.

(2) The rulers of the Liao, Jin and Yuan dynasties have become the common ruler over the realm under heaven. This fact not only made the Central Plain and the northern borderland more closely related, but also made other borderland, particularly the Tibet, part of ancient China. In the Han and Tang dynasties, influenced by the belief that “The Han-Chinese and the other ethnic groups are different,” the administration of the borderland was for the purpose of peace in the Central Plain or of praise for bountiful and widespread benevolence. Pacification characterized the administration, which was abandoned when difficulties arose.³⁰ Originated in the borderland and mainly composed of the ethnic minorities, the Liao, Jin, and Yuan dynasties tried to administer the Central Plain more actively. Abandonment of administration was rarely seen and the political center continued its southward movement. Having obtained the sixteen subprefectures, the territory of Liao “extended to the sea in the east, to the Jin Mountain and the desert in the west, to the Luqu River in the north and to Baigou Ravine in the south. It covered a vast area.”³¹ The Khitan rulers divided the

²⁹ Zhang Guangda.

³⁰ The Western Han Dynasty once gave up the rule over the Hainan Island, while the Eastern Han Dynasty sometimes abandoned the administration of the western regions. See Li Dalong, 1996; 2006.

³¹ Tuotuo, 1974, Vol. 37. “Dili zhi liu.”

officials into two groups and ruled the Khitan people with their own institutions and the Han-Chinese with their own ones.³² In addition, they carried out effective administration, and launched a war against the Song Dynasty in order to seize the sixteen subprefectures. The above measures nonetheless helped to make the vast areas of “the Central Kingdom” including the sixteen subprefectures an organic whole. Based on the Khitan-Liao territory, the Jin Dynasty, founded by the Jurchen people, expanded its domain. The east of its territory “reaches Jilimiwu where the Gaizhu barbarians live; the north extends about 1,500 kilometers beyond the Puyulu, bordering with Huoluhutuanmouke; the west extends beyond the Tianshan mountain...the south reached the middle Huai River, bordering with the Song.”³³ Now the vast areas to the north of the Huai River in the Central Plain were included in the territory of this dynasty. While the political center of the Liao Dynasty was in the steppe, which of the Jin Dynasty was Beijing. The southward movement of the political center demonstrates that the administration of the Central Plain was of vital importance in the Jin Dynasty, strengthening the relationship between the Central Plain and the northern borderland.

On such a basis, unification on a larger scale was achieved in the Yuan Dynasty. In the “Geographic Gazetteer” in *Yuanshi* (The history of the Yuan Dynasty), it is written that “When the commanderies and prefectures came into being, the prominent examples of those who ruled over the realm under heaven, are the Han Dynasty, the Sui Dynasty, the Tang Dynasty, and the Song Dynasty. However, as far the territory is concerned, that in the Yuan Dynasty was the largest. The territory expansion in the Han Dynasty was hindered by the ethnic groups in the north while the Sui Dynasty failed to have the ethnic groups in the east submit. The Tang Dynasty witnessed troubles in the west while the Song Dynasty saw troubles in the northwest. Originating in the northern desert, the Yuan Dynasty has managed to annex the western regions, crush the Western Xia regime, annihilate the Jurchen people, make Korea a vassal and put down rebellions in Nanzhao. Having moved to the south of the Changjiang River, the Yuan Dynasty finally achieved the unification of the world. Now its territory extended to the Yinshan Mountain in the north, to the desert in the west, to Liaodong in the east and to other kingdoms in the south. The land in the Han Dynasty was 4,660 kilometers from east to west, and 6,684 kilometers from north to south, while that in the Tang Dynasty were 4,755 kilometers and 8,459 kilometers respectively. The land in the Yuan Dynasty was larger than those in the Han and Tang dynasties.” In order to administer the vast land, more direct and unified administrative measures were adopted; the officials in the provinces

³² Ibid., Vol. 45, “Baiguan zhi yi.”

³³ Tuotuo, 1975, Vol. 24, “Dili zhi shang.”

were entrusted with the various affairs, the garrisoning of the frontiers and the relationship with the neighboring provinces.³⁴ The prefectures and other administrative divisions, including Dadu (The grand capital) were regarded as the hinter land. These measures pointed to a more favorable political environment in which the Central Plain and the borderland could merge. Active and effective were the rule of the Yuan emperors over Tibet, which was closely related to the Central Plain as early as in the Tang Dynasty and which finally became an indispensable part of ancient China.

(3) The evolution of multi-ethnicity and the merging of the various peoples consolidated what had already been achieved in the formation of the territory. When unification was achieved in the Yuan Dynasty, the population was divided into four kinds, each of whom was ruled differently. The four kinds were: the Mongols, the people in the western regions, the Han people and the people in the south. The previous scholarship leveled criticism at this policy, which was believed to personify racial discrimination. As a matter of fact, this policy never aimed at the differentiation of the various peoples; instead, it was chronologically based, since the different peoples submitted to the Yuan Dynasty at different time. Moreover, it actually recognized what had been achieved in the merging of the various peoples since the Five Dynasties period. The first kind of people included various tribes, all of which had become one part of the Mongol people. The second kind consisted of the ethnic groups in the western regions and even in the Central Asia, who finally formed the Hui people including some Han people in the Central Plain who finished their eastward movement. The third kind, were mainly composed of the people under the rule of Jin Dynasty, who inhabited to the north of the Huai River. They became a constituent of the Han people after much negotiation in the Liao and Jin dynasties. The fourth kind refers to the various peoples ruled by the Southern Song Dynasty. That is to say, although a touch of racial discrimination displays itself in the differentiation, the further merging of the various peoples was actually facilitated. Meanwhile, the policy of population migration was adopted. The ceaseless migration in the Yuan Dynasty was unprecedented in terms of the extent and scale. According to the section of “Bingzhi 2” (The record of military affairs, II) in *Yuanshi*, “the world was conquered by the Yuan Dynasty with military might and many troops were sent to guard the frontiers. To begin with, Emperor Taizu and Emperor Taizong of the Yuan Dynasty had subdued the western regions and then Tibet. However, there was no record of how they stationed their troops, nor could their rules be recovered. During the reign of Emperor Shizu, the world was unified and troops led by feudal lords were stationed in the frontiers and important passes. The Mongol troops and the troops from the various tribes were stationed in Heluo and

³⁴ Song Lian, Vol. 91, “Baiguan zhi 9.”

Shandong, which were the center of the world. The troops of the Han-Chinese origin and the newly recruited troops were stationed in the vast areas from the south of the Huai River and the Yangtze River to the South China Sea, where the various fiefs and counties were established.” That is to say, the Mongol troops and the troops from the various tribes were stationed in the north, whereas the Han-Chinese troops and others were stationed to the south of the Huai River. The latter were also supervised by a couple of members from the former. In order to guarantee the supply for the troops, the policy of opening up the wasteland was adopted. A brief account of this policy could be found in “Bingzhi 3” (The record of military affairs: III) in *Yuanshi*. “When the dynasty was at its dawn, the wasteland was opened up with our troops in order to overcome the solid fortification and fierce enemies. Now that the world is unified, the policy of opening up wasteland was again adopted in all the provinces so as to secure the supply for the troops. Sometimes the ancient practice was emulated and sometimes the actual situation of the land constituted the main concern. A lot of factors have to be taken into consideration. Perhaps, in Shaopo, Hongze, Gan, Su, Gua and Sha, the ancient practice was followed, while in Helin, Shaanxi and Sichuan, the wasteland was opened up for the first time. As for Yunnan, Hainan and Haibei, which were considered to be the centre of the various tribes’ inhabitations, troops were sent to exercise control over these places as well as opening up the land. As a result, all the troops were liable to open up wasteland and all the land were to subject to cultivation.” This means that due to garrison and the opening up of wasteland, more and more Mongols and the Han-Chinese were resettled on a scale that was unprecedented. For example, in the Yuan Dynasty, a large number of Mongols moved to Yunnan in order to garrison this place. Some scholars believe that the Mongols involved were more than 100, 000.³⁵ The migration of the various ethnic groups can be achieved in various ways, among which looting, garrison, appointment of officials; exile, planned migration and trade were the most important ones.

The merging and the resettlement of the various ethnic groups in the Yuan Dynasty were resultant from the unification in this dynasty. The merging led to the disappearance of some ethnic groups, and it also helped the formation of some new and strong groups, such as the Mongol people and the Han people, etc. It was also inductive to improving the relationship between the Central Plain and the borderland.

4

The Ming Dynasty and the Qing Dynasty were the final stage when the territory

³⁵ Weng Dujian, 1990, 567–568.

of ancient China was formed. In 1368, the establishment of the Ming Dynasty marked the beginning of this final stage. In the first section of “Dili zhi” (Geographic gazetteer: I) of *Mingshi* (The history of the Ming Dynasty), it is recorded that “The land extends from Korea in the east to Tibet in the west, and from Daqi in the north to Annan in the south. That is to say, it is 5,875 kilometers from east to west and 5,452 kilometers from north to south. As Emperor Chengzu of Ming Dynasty abandoned Daning and moved to Dongsheng, Emperor Xuanzong moved Kaiping to Dushi, and Emperor Shizong once again abandoned Hami and Hetao, the land now extends from Liaohai in the east to Jiayu in the west, and from Yun and Shuo in the north to Qiong and Ya in the south. It covers a vast area and is indeed grand.” In 1644, the reunification of China was achieved when the Qing Dynasty established by the emerging Manchu people in the northeast borderland went across the pass. In the first section of the geographic gazetteer of the *Qingshi gao* (The draft of Qing history), it is recorded that “Having emerged in the east, the Qing Dynasty is entitled to a brief history. Emperor Taizu and Emperor Taizong of the Qing Dynasty tried to wield their powers, subjugating the east of the Central Kingdom, Hada, Huifa, Wula, Yehe and Ningguta, etc. As a result, the vast areas in the old Fanzhasake became part of the territory of the Qing Dynasty. When Emperor Shizu came and defeated the enemies, he established the capital in Beijing, exercising control over the realm under heaven as the sole monarch. Emperor Shengzu and Emperor Shizong tried to expand the territory, wielding control over areas in Qinghai, etc. When he assumed the throne, Emperor Gaozong crushed the regimes in Junggar and other places. Since then, Karafuto in the east, Xinjiang and Congling in the west, the Outer Khingan Range in the north and Qingzhou in the south, became part of the Qing Dynasty. What a magnificent scene! It is unprecedented since the Han and Tang dynasties.”

As far as the areas under control, the mode and the idea of the ruling were concerned, the Ming Dynasty, established mainly by the Han people, could hardly be regarded as a “unified” dynasty. The so-called “indeed grand” was simply showy inasmuch as the “unification” in this dynasty was that of the Han people, which was equivalent to “unification” of “the Central Plain” in the traditional sense. “The realm under heaven” was still divided. The ruling mode concerning the frontiers (military offices) was chiefly characterized by pacification; and in the idea of ruling, “the difference between the barbarian peoples and the Han-Chinese people” was emphasized. The formation of territory culminated in the Qing Dynasty, established mainly by the Manchu people aided by the Mongol people. It is not exaggeration to say that “it is unprecedented since the Han and Tang dynasties.” Based on the unification of the previous dynasties, the unification achieved in the Qing Dynasty was on a larger scale. This dynasty also witnessed the development of the mode and the idea of the

ruling. When “the Central Kingdom,” as an identity, was used in international affairs, “the Central Kingdom” and “the realm under heaven” meant the same. From then on, “the Central Kingdom” became a country in the modern sense and the territory of ancient China was finally formed.

First of all, under criticism in the Qing Dynasty was the idea that upheld that “the barbarian peoples and the Han-Chinese people are different,” which was emphasized in the Ming Dynasty. Besides, what established was the belief that the states founded by the barbarian tribes could be entitled to legitimacy.

After the Tang Dynasty, no unified dynasty was established by the Han-Chinese people. However, the founders of the Ming Dynasty overthrew the Yuan Dynasty, claiming to “drive away the ethnic groups back to the north and recover the Central Plain.”³⁶ The ideas that “the barbarian peoples and the Han-Chinese people are different” initiated in the pre-Qin period, were picked up in the Ming Dynasty and then developed. Succeeding the Ming Dynasty and achieving the unification, the Qing Dynasty targeted criticism at these ideas, despite the fact that its legitimacy would not be recognized just like those of other dynasties founded by the tribes in the borderland. While the reign of the Emperor Shunzhi of the Qing Dynasty saw the criticism of these traditional Chinese ideas, which of the Emperor Yongzheng witnessed a systematic criticism. During the reign of the latter, Han-Chinese scholars, such as Zeng Jing and Lü Liuliang, popularized the ideas that upheld racial discrimination against the Manchu, based on the views in the pre-Qin period. Emperor Yongzheng criticized these ideas in a systematic way. According to *Dayi juemi lu* (Record of an awoken scholar), Emperor Yongzheng was the first to manifestly express that “It is not taboo in our dynasty to address the Manchu as barbarian people.” Meanwhile, he maintained that the appellation of “barbarian people” only had something to do with geography, instead of showing the difference between “Han-Chinese” and “non-Han-Chinese.” “It is related to the place where one originated, something of a birth place.” “How the Han-Chinese and other peoples could be considered different.” In addition, he held that “Rebels tried to draw a difference within our territory by way of defamation, saying that the emperor of Manchu came to rule over the Central Kingdom. They did not know that Manchuria to our dynasty is just as the native place to the Central Kingdom. Emperor Shun was from the tribe in the east while King Wen of Zhou came from the tribe in the west. Did their birth places lead to disintegrity of the two men?” “Ever since the beginning of the unification of the Central Kingdom, the places which could not be subjugated were condemned as barbarian. For example, Hunan, Hubei and Shanxi, etc., were regarded as barbarian in antiquity. But it is practically impossible to consider them as barbarian nowadays. When the Han,

³⁶ The tenth month of 1367, *Ming taizu shilu*, Vol. 26.

Tang and Song dynasties were in their prime, the tribes in the north and west were not conquered and there were their territories and ours. However, as we have come to and ruled over the Central Plain, we have exercised control over a larger area, including the places inhabited by the Mongol tribes. The Chinese should feel it is a great pleasure rather than trying to differentiate between the Han-Chinese and other peoples!” The emperor’s criticism of the ideas of the Han-Chinese scholars aimed at arguing for the legitimacy of the Qing Dynasty and had some far-reaching significance.

In the Song, Liao and Jin dynasties, the debate on the legitimacy of “the Central Kingdom” had already begun, and been found in the various affairs, without any systematic and clarified theories. One example is the conflicts around the “exchanging rituals.”³⁷ The Han-Chinese scholars regarded the Liao Dynasty, the Jin Dynasty and the Yuan Dynasty as legitimate simply because they had to accept the fact. That is the reason why the debate on legitimacy was once again picked up in the early Qing Dynasty. The argument of Emperor Yongzheng not only made the legitimacy of the Qing Dynasty widely recognized, but also showed that the Qing Dynasty recognized “the Central Kingdom.” It demonstrated that the unification in the Qing Dynasty was not the result of barbarian invasion, but it was resultant from the inheritance and development of the unification of the previous dynasties on the part of the Qing Dynasty. Consequently, “the Central Kingdom” in the traditional sense developed into the multi-ethnic “China.” And there was the theoretical base on which a unified multi-ethnic China appeared in the Qing Dynasty.

Secondly, the idea of ruling in the Qing Dynasty was quite different from that in the previous dynasties. It led to the innovation of the mode of ruling, and the abandonment of the ideas and policies that hindered the merging of the hinter land and the borderland. It also functioned as the more sound theoretical basis and more reliable safeguard of the formation of the territory of ancient China.

The above debate also influenced the idea of ruling in the Qing Dynasty, leading to a package of changes and innovations in the mode of ruling concerning the borderland as were found in many aspects. Abandoned once and for all was the traditional belief in pacification. It was replaced by the idea that “People in the world are in one family, the officials and masses are all my subjects.”³⁸ Besides, the policy of replacing the ethnic rulers in the borderland with government officials embodied more definite ways of administering the borderland. In the Yuan Dynasty, the policy of “ethnic rulers ruling in the borderland” was adopted to guarantee a safe and peaceful frontier. It prevented the regimes in the borderland from developing, but it was featured by

³⁷ Zhao Yongchun, 220–235.

³⁸ The eighth month of 1648, *Qingshizu shilu*, Vol. 40.

pacification. Ruling on their own, the ethnic rulers became the hindrance to the application of the regulations of the central government. As a result, in the Ming Dynasty, key in the reform of policies concerning the borderland was the replacement of the ethnic rulers with government officials, which was widely adopted in the Qing Dynasty. It follows plainly that the ruling became more concrete, facilitating the change of the mode of ruling so that the mode in the hinter land was adopted in the borderland, guaranteeing the merging of the borderland and the hinter land. Also abandoned was the idea that the Great Wall should be renovated for defense. Instead, the active ruling over the peoples in the borderland was initiated. Emperor Kangxi once “told his high officials that in the Qin Dynasty the Great Wall was built with a lot of efforts. Now in our dynasty, we have obliged the Outer Mongolians, who act as defense against those in the north and are really more secure than the Great Wall.”³⁹ It was really an innovation that the idea concerning the Great Wall died into oblivion. Ever since then, the Great Wall, which came into being in the pre-Qin period, and which was the man-made barrier between the agricultural Central Plain and the steppe northern borderland, was free from its responsibility for defense. The areas surrounding it got merged more quickly in terms of politics and geography. Undoubtedly, the changed ideas eradicated the practice of “ruling over rather than administering” the borderland on the part of the dynasties established mainly by the Han-Chinese, and greatly facilitated the merging of the borderland and the hinter land.⁴⁰ On the one hand, it should be pointed out that the innovation in the idea and mode of ruling over the borderland in the Qing Dynasty was resultant from the ever closer relationship between the borderland and the hinter land and from the need of merging. On the other hand, the change of the idea and mode was conducive to the merging of the borderland and the hinter land, as was exemplified by the establishment of provinces in the borderland in the late Qing Dynasty.

Finally, when in the name of the sovereignty of “the Central Kingdom,” the Qing Dynasty draws the borderlines with neighboring countries, “the realm under heaven” in the traditional sense bears the same meaning to “the Central Kingdom,” signifying the final stage of the formation of territory in ancient China.

In ancient China, “the realm under heaven” was usually used to refer to the territory of a dynasty, because of the inadequate geographical knowledge and the influence of the idea that “All the land under heaven belongs to the king and all people within the territory are the subjects of the king.” This is the reason why

³⁹ The fourth month of 1691, *Qingtaizong shilu*.

⁴⁰ The change of ideas and policies concerning the borderland in the Qing Dynasty. See Li Shiyu.

expressions such as “a general amnesty under heaven” were not infrequently used in historical accounts. Although “the Central Kingdom” could be used to refer to a dynasty, it referred, more often than not, to the ruling center (i.e. the Central Plain). In the Qing Dynasty, although “the Central Kingdom” included the eighteen provinces directly under the imperial rule, and “the realm under heaven” to the areas where the laws and regulations were effective, “the Central Kingdom” nevertheless assumed the meaning of the territory of the Qing Dynasty. Consequently, “the realm under heaven” and “the Central Kingdom” tend to mean the same, which could be exemplified in the Treaty of Nerchinsk. In the 28th year of Kangxi’s reign (1689), in order to check the eastward expansion of Russia and solve the ensuing conflicts, the Qing China signed the Treaty of Nerchinsk with Russia. The text of the treaty was inscribed on the mere stone between the two countries, which contains a sentence that “All the rivers flowing into the Heilongjiang in the south of the Large Xing’an mountain belong to the Central Kingdom (Zhongguo).”⁴¹ Obviously, in this treaty, “the Qing Dynasty” was equivalent to “the Central Kingdom” and “the Central Kingdom” had a sense of modern sovereign state. This is also true in the Manchu, Russian, and Latin versions of the treaty.⁴² That is to say, in the reign of the Emperor Kangxi of the Qing Dynasty at the latest, “the Central Kingdom” became the appellation of a unified multi-ethnic country and the variety of Chinese peoples got involved in the international affairs in the name of a sovereign state, “the Central Kingdom.” The use of “the Central Kingdom” as the name of a sovereign state was attributable to the efforts of various peoples and signalized the final stage of China’s territory formation. The outbreak of the “Opium War” in 1840 marked the end of this formation process.⁴³

5

Many factors contributed to the formation of ancient China’s territory. Although the evolution of the meaning of “the Central Kingdom” reflects only one aspect, it does give us some in-depth suggestions:

Firstly, the change of the meaning of “the Central Kingdom” from “capital” to a sovereign state, which bears the same meaning to “the realm under heaven,” is a long historical course in consistent with the formation of territory in ancient China.

⁴¹ The twentieth month of 1689, *Qingshengzu shilu*, Vol. 143.

⁴² Wang Tieya, 1–2.

⁴³ The academia still has diverse cognitions on the ultimate formation of the territory in ancient China. Considering the territory in ancient China was all along in a natural state without the intervention of alien forces before the Opium War, the author set the Opium War in 1840 for the ultimate formation of the territory in ancient China.

Secondly, the concept of “the Central Kingdom,” fostered by the Han-Chinese people in the Central Plain, was spread to the borderland due to the contact between the regimes established by the Han people and those by the peoples in the borderland. It was adopted by the latter, particularly those in the northern borderland. The competition for legitimate rule over the “Central Kingdom” became a political choice for the various dynasties, including the regimes in the borderland, which contributed to the unification of “the Central Kingdom” of multi-ethnic groups.

Thirdly, the Han-Chinese people have played an important role in making “the Central Kingdom” the title of sovereignty. Not just the phrase “the Central Kingdom” was created by them, but the belief that “the Central Kingdom” (the Central Plain) was the center of “the realm under heaven” was also initiated by them. However, the reason why “the Central Kingdom” and “the realm under heaven” got the same meaning was mainly because of the recognition of “the Central Kingdom” by the peoples in the borderland. Therefore, “the Central Kingdom” in ancient times and at present as well does not exclusively belong to the Han-Chinese, but to all the peoples in China.

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