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History, Space, and Ethnicity: The Chinese Worldview*

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IN writing this article, I attempt to answer two interrelated questions: (1) What was the Chinese perception of the world, or world history, before China came into close contact with the rest of the world in the nineteenth century? And (2) how did this perception affect the work of historians from the Han dynasty (206 B.C.–A.D. 220) onward? Their interrelation is shown in that the former was not only reflected in the latter, but also, from time to time, molded by it. For it was the knowledge of history that entertained and sustained the Chinese conception of the world and China's relation to it. From the most remote times, historical writing was already an indispensable basis of Chinese culture, promoting and propagating it with appropriate examples from the past. Confucius (551–479 B.C.), for example, once remarked, "If I wish to set forth my theoretical judgments, nothing is as good as illustrating them through the depth and clarity of actual events."¹

Examining the evolution of the Chinese worldview in historiography, therefore, enables us to achieve a better understanding of traditional Chinese culture in general and Chinese historical thinking in particular. For instance, the Chinese conception of the world was

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¹ Quoted in Sima Qian's "Taishigong zixu" (Self-Preface of the Grand Historian), in *Shiji* (Historical Records) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959).

based on belief in the nature-people correlation, a uniquely emphasized concept in ancient Chinese culture. The term “all under heaven,” or *tianxia*, therefore, was used by the people to refer to the world.² What is under heaven was also often organized, or graded, according to levels of moral and cultural development, an emphasis often advocated by the Chinese in judging the effectiveness of a government. Thus viewed, “all under heaven” suggests a unity in the Chinese world, derived from the moral conformity in Chinese society. The Chinese based themselves on this moral conformity when they set out to construct a relationship with their neighbors.

Previous studies on this subject, as far as I know, are quite scanty for various reasons.³ First, as I shall describe below, traditional Chinese historians seem to have shown little interest in neighboring countries, let alone the world. Second, given the changes that occurred in China’s long history, it is extremely hard to define what “China” was referred to in a given period. In order to demarcate China, or the Sinitic world, from the rest of the world, we must assume that the inhabitants living in today’s China are a fixed entity, which is not true. During its history China had been overrun by several foreign peoples who were subsequently assimilated into Chinese culture and who, from time to time, became successors to and promoters of Chinese civilization.

China is thus historically constructed, and the terms “Chinese” or “Han,” while initially an ethnic definition, can refer to a flux of peoples who lived, at one time or another, in the land around the Yellow and Yangzi Rivers. What is known to be “China proper” originally referred to the region of the middle part of the Yellow River in north China. However, due to many archaeological discoveries in the South in recent decades, scholars are now inclined to believe in multiethnic

² In the *dilizhi* (treatise of geography) of Ban Gu’s *Hanshu*, for example, Ban uses the term *tianxia* to refer to all the known world unified by the Yellow Emperor, a legendary ancestor of the Han Chinese, hence blurring the difference between modern concepts of “state” and “world.” *Hanshu* (Han history), (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), ch. 28, p. 1523. Modern scholars attribute this inclusiveness of “state” and “world” in the mind of ancient Chinese to the fact that there were no neighbors of ancient China that “could boast a native culture comparable in size, splendour, or permanence” (J. D. Frodsham, *The First Chinese Embassy to the West: The Journals of Kuo Sung-tao, Liu Hsi-hung, and Chang Te-yi* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974], pp. xv–xvi).

³ It seems that Fitzgerald’s *Chinese View of Their Place in the World* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969) is the only focused study on the subject. But even so, it is not concentrated on traditional China; more than half of the pages (forty-five out of eighty-two) are on China’s relations with the modern world.

origins of ancient Chinese civilization.⁴ The historical fluidity of the terms “China” and “Chinese” suggests an apparent discrepancy between historical reality and the modern imaginary. China’s relation with the world represented a historical past that was defined by and confined to its own terms and times.⁵

ZHONGGUO AND TIANXIA: CHINA AND THE WORLD

Since the term “Chinese” was fluid, as was the term “the central kingdom,” or *zhongguo*, its relation with “all under Heaven” did not form an absolute dichotomy. In fact, they were mutually dependent. *Zhongguo* indicated the center of the world, hence the “central state” or “middle kingdom,” while *tianxia* referred to the extended Chinese world, despite its ecumenical claim. What was included in this Chinese world was often a flux of peoples, organized through a grade system similar to that of Chinese society. The Chinese perception of the world thus reflected the hierarchical nature of Chinese society and culture.⁶ This hierarchy was centered on Han Chinese culture, or Confucianism, mainly from the early third century B.C. to the early twentieth century. The position of a non-Han people in the hierarchy was determined by the extent to which they resembled mainstream Han culture. A similar standard was applied to arranging the non-Hans socially in this hierarchy. The Han Chinese often judged a non-Han people by their social behavior. If the non-Hans showed a willingness to adopt the Han lifestyle, they were referred to by the Han Chinese as “cooked” (*shu*), in contrast to the “raw” (*sheng*) who resisted the Han influence.⁷

⁴ See Ping-ti Ho, *The Cradle of the East: An Inquiry into the Indigenous Origins of Techniques and Ideas of Neolithic and Early Historic China, 5000–1000 B.C.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976); Fu Sinian, “Zhongguo lishi fenqi zhi yanjiu” (A Study of the Division of Chinese History), in *Fu Sinian quanji* (Complete Works of Fu Sinian), 7 vols. (Taipei: Lianjing chubanshe, 1980), 4:176–82. On Gu Jiegang’s view of the development of Chinese culture, see Hon Tze-ki, “Ethnic and Cultural Pluralism: Gu Jiegang’s Vision of a New China in His Studies of Ancient History,” *Modern China* 22 (1996): 315–40.

⁵ In his masterful study of the dynastic history in the Tang dynasty, Denis Twitchett has warned us about this discrepancy between what concerns us as “products of our own culture and our own time” and what belonged to the times in which the historians lived. See his *Writing of Official History under the T’ang* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. viii.

⁶ *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China’s Foreign Relations*, ed. John Fairbank (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 2.

⁷ Compare Frank Dikotter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992), pp. 8–10. Lien-sheng Yang paraphrased the *sheng* and *shu*

Since the demarcation between the Han and the non-Han was based largely on cultural and social terms, the exact boundary was not always clear. Rather, as history shows, the term "Chinese" often had a broad and loose connotation in order for the Han Chinese to accommodate the reigns of non-Han rulers, especially after the decline of the Han dynasty in the third century, and to include non-Han ethnic groups who entered China proper and became sinicized. When modern scholars make a claim for the continuity of Chinese culture, therefore, what they refer to is a hybrid cultural tradition that was based on the teachings of Confucianism but included elements from other non-Han cultures. In the twentieth century, for example, Fu Sinian, Gu Jiegang, Ho Ping-ti, and other historians all noticed the multiethnic origin of Chinese civilization and the Han and non-Han interaction in their interpretations of Chinese history and culture.⁸ These interactions constituted the dynamics in shaping the Chinese worldview, which was characterized by a variety of attempts made by both sides to cope with social, political, and economic changes in the world.

The interactions, of course, did not always take place in peaceful ways, such as through trade and commerce. For the Han Chinese, the exchange often arose from their having suffered an invasion. While confident in the superiority of their culture, Han Chinese resorted to various means to achieve a satisfactory outcome. As summarized by John Fairbank, these options "included cessation of contact; indoctrinating the foreigner in the Chinese view by cultural-ideological means; buying him off by honors or material inducements or both; using one barbarian against another through diplomatic maneuvers; and in the final extremity accepting barbarian rulers at the apex of the Chinese world."⁹ Of course, there was no guarantee that any of these methods would work in a given situation. But this spectrum of options for the Han Chinese in designing their relation with non-Hans further reveals the fluidity and indeterminacy in the Chinese worldview.

At times when all these methods failed to work, or when the Han Chinese failed to fend off non-Han invasion, the effort to preserve China's cultural superiority was continued in the form of sinicization.

into "uncivilized" and "civilized." See his "Historical Notes on the Chinese World Order," in *The Chinese World Order*, ed. Fairbank, p. 21. In Mayfair Yang's recent study of social relationship in modern China, we learn that *sheng* and *shu* also refer to a degree of familiarity among people (*Gifts, Favors, and Banquets: The Art of Social Relationships in China* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994], pp. 193–94).

⁸ See note 4, above.

⁹ Fairbank, "A Preliminary Framework," in *The Chinese World Order*, ed. Fairbank, pp. 11–12.

In other words, as argued by both traditional and modern scholars who believed in the theory of sinicization, while the Han Chinese lost their battles, their culture and lifestyle could captivate their conquerors. As the Chinese worldview was based on a sense of cultural superiority, the military success of a non-Han ruler often failed to shake this basic belief, so long as he chose to adopt Han Chinese culture—namely, the Confucian ideology, the bureaucratic system, the civil service examination (after the Tang dynasty, 618–907), the sedentary lifestyle, and agricultural economy. However, as pointed out recently by Evelyn Rawski and shared, to some degree, by her opponent Ping-ti Ho, the sinicization thesis can be simplistic in attempting to describe the often rich and complex relationship between the Han and the non-Han in China's long history. While Rawski attempts to draw attention to the efforts made by the non-Hans to preserve their own cultures, Ho defends the validity of the thesis. But Ho also devotes a large portion of his article to discussing the phases and facets of the Han and non-Han relations in various historical periods and notices that sometimes "sinicization" was achieved through practices of "barbarianization."¹⁰

This recent debate on the sinicization thesis attests that the Chinese worldview in the past was not simply a product of Han Chinese culture, but a continuum of efforts made by both the Han and non-Han Chinese to respond to change over time.¹¹ On the one hand, the Chinese empire boasted that it was the cultural center of the world; its claim of universalism was based on a moral and cultural order rather than on an ever-victorious military.¹² Confucianism radiated its ethical values and cultural precepts outward from the center of the empire, which was often the capital of the reigning dynasty. On the other hand, while the ideal recipients of this cultural radiation would be China's neighbors, there was no guarantee that they would necessarily conform to the teachings of Confucianism. Consequently, as summarized by Fairbank, three zones were formed, according to these neighbors' cultural affinities to and geographical distances from China. The first was known as the "Sinic Zone" and consisted of Korea, Vietnam,

¹⁰ Evelyn Rawski, "Reenvisioning the Qing: The Significance of the Qing Period in Chinese History," *Journal of Asian Studies* 55 (1996): 829–50; Ping-ti Ho, "In Defense of Sinicization: A Rebuttal of Evelyn Rawski's 'Reenvisioning the Qing,'" *Journal of Asian Studies* 57 (1998): 123–55.

¹¹ In Schwartz's words, the Chinese perception of world order was "maintained both by contingent external factors and by the strength of its inner cosmological foundations" ("The Chinese Perception of World Order, Past and Present," in *The Chinese World Order*, ed. Fairbank, p. 284).

¹² *Ibid.*; and Frodsham, *The First Chinese Embassy to the West*, p. xvi.

and, at brief times, Japan. The second was the "Inner Asian Zone," to which most non-Han ethnic groups of nomadic tribes belonged. And the third was the "Outer Zone," which included regions in Southeast and South Asia, as well as Europe in later ages.¹³

The difference among the states in these three zones could be seen in nomenclature: most states in the Sinic Zone were given a name, such as Chaoxian (Korea) or Riben (Japan), whose derogatory meaning was either nonexistent or eventually lost. States in the Inner Asian and Outer Zones were simply referred to by names such as *yi*, *fan*, and *man*, all terms used to designate "barbarians" in the Chinese language. The continuous use of these contemptuous terms by the Chinese to refer to their neighbors inevitably suggests their ethnocentrism. But it also shows the limited success of Confucian culture with regard to its power of assimilation. Although the Han Chinese made many efforts to spread their culture among their neighbors, they also encountered various challenges and failures. In the span of two millennia, only a few peoples who entered China proper and established dynasties were regarded by the Han people as successful examples of cultural assimilation. In other words, in the Chinese perception of the world, there was always a center-periphery consideration that helped situate the *zhongguo* in the known world, the *tianxia*.

This center-periphery thinking was essential to the formation of the Chinese worldview. An early attempt by the Chinese to conceive the world is shown in the *Yugong* (Yu's Tribute), traditionally attributed to Da Yu, a legendary hero whose deeds were comparable to Noah's in the Judeo-Christian tradition.¹⁴ The *Yugong* perceived the world in "five zones" (*wufu*), centering on the Yellow River region, or China proper, which was divided into "nine states" (*jiuzhou*). Based on these ideas, the first diagram of the world was drawn by the Chinese.¹⁵ The criteria for dividing the five zones were based on the distance of each zone from the center, which, in turn, affected the level of civilization of its inhabitants. Indeed, the farthest zone was named the "desert zone" (*huangfu*), suggesting a remote and hence uncivilized culture. But the "desert zone" was not the end of the world. In the *Yugong*, the

¹³ Fairbank, "A Preliminary Framework," in *The Chinese World Order*, ed. Fairbank, p. 2.

¹⁴ Although the *Yugong* was attributed to Da Yu, as in Sima Qian's *Shiji* (Historical Records), whose life was dated as early as the twenty-first century B.C., modern scholars believe that it was most likely written in the tenth or ninth centuries B.C. and, through the editing of Confucius and others, became formalized into its present appearance in the fifth century B.C.

¹⁵ Richard Smith, *Chinese Maps: Images of "All under Heaven"* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 24.

term “four ends” (*sizhi*) was used to indicate the four utmost ends of the world, located respectively in the east, west, north, and south. At these “four ends” one could find nothing but vast oceans or great deserts.

While the *Yugong* showed a limited knowledge of the world, it largely shaped the Chinese worldview. For example, the terms *zhongguo* and *tianxia* were both already used, although the latter was more like a cosmographical term referring to the universe. The universe was made up of heaven, earth, and everything in between; heaven was not only larger but covered the earth, as suggested by the term “all under heaven.” Thus, the cosmographical theory known as the “covering heaven theory” (*gaitian shuo*) was developed. According to the theory, heaven was like a bowler hat covering the earth, and the earth was like a dinner plate placed upside down under the heaven. The “covering heaven theory,” of course, had an obvious deficiency: it implied that the universe was flat. During the Han dynasty some scholars replaced it with a new one, known as the “organic heaven theory” (*huntian shuo*), in which the universe was likened to an egg: earth was its yolk, hanging in the middle and surrounded by the white, which was heaven. Despite their difference, both theories consider the universe in a holistic manner.

This holism, however, did not mean that every component in the universe played an equal role. Rather, the universe was characterized by heaven’s domination and earth’s subordination. This cosmography, therefore, presented a preconceived political order in the universe. Moreover, it was employed by the Chinese to support the center/periphery relationship between themselves and their neighbors. China’s superiority, for example, derived from its proximity to heaven. Considering their country as the celestial empire (*tianguo*) and their emperor as the son of heaven (*tianzi*), the Chinese believed that it was only natural for them to become the center of the world and carry out the mission of civilizing the rest, just as heaven was superior to the subordinated earth. Thus the self-image of China, or the “central kingdom,” had a base in the cosmography of heaven and earth.

In the early imperial period, when Chinese historians produced some model texts in historiography, they basically followed the center/periphery approach to configuring the world. Ban Gu (A.D. 32–92), a historian of the Han dynasty, is famous for his composition of the *Hanshu* (Han History), a text that paralleled the influence of Sima Qian’s (145–86 B.C.) *Shiji* (Historical Records) in Chinese historiography. In comparison with Sima Qian, one of Ban’s novel contributions was a chapter on geography, called *Dilizhi* (Treatise of Geography), in which he gave a general description of the territorial

topography of the known world. Ban Gu used both terms, *tianxia* and *zhongguo*; the latter, read according to the connotation, referred to the capital of Ban's perceived world empire. According to Ban, after Yu successfully controlled the great flood, the world was divided into five zones (*wufu*), in which nine states (*jiuzhou*) were established. The distance of each from the capital affected the level of civilization of the inhabitants. Those who lived closer to the *zhongguo* enjoyed a higher level of civilization than those who lived far away.

The level of civilization of the peoples in different areas was determined in the Han dynasty by cultural and geographical proximity to China, as well as by ethnic differences. As Richard Smith has noted, while most Chinese believed that "people outside the pale of Chinese civilization could be culturally transformed," there were others who thought that the ethnic difference was destiny.¹⁶ As a result, Han rulers held different expectations for the behaviors of the peoples and took a hierarchical approach in their perception of the world. They hoped that their neighbors would adopt Han culture, but they did not expect everyone to become as civilized as they were. As a result, the ethnic distinction between the *hua* (brightness) and the *yi* (barbarian) remained intact during the early imperial period. This distinction suggests that even though the Han people made a claim of universalism about their culture, they were also aware that this universalism not only worked in a center-periphery context but also reflected ethnic differences.

PERCEIVING THE WORLD IN HISTORIOGRAPHY

Due to the limits of space and knowledge, I shall base what follows mainly on readings of what are commonly known as the "standard histories" (*zhengshi*) in Chinese historiography. As "standard histories," these texts were supposed to have reflected an official position. In Twitchett's words, "official historiography was as much a political as a scholarly activity."¹⁷ By using these texts, it should be possible to obtain the official version of the Chinese worldview. However, if we look closely at the composition of each text, we will find that the degree of "officialness" often varied tremendously. Before the Tang dynasty established the historiographical office in the vicinity of its

¹⁶ Smith, *Chinese Maps*, pp. 8–9; Ban Gu, *Hanshu*, ch. 28, pp. 1523, 1537.

¹⁷ Twitchett, *The Writing of Official History under the T'ang*, p. 17.

royal palace, for example, “official” history meant nothing but the author’s position in officialdom, sometimes because of family inheritance, as in the case of Sima Qian.¹⁸ There were also cases in which a history had been written outside the court but was later adopted to become “official historiography,” like Ban Gu’s *Hanshu* and, to some extent, Ouyang Xiu’s (1007–72) *Xin wudaishi* (New History of the Five Dynasties).

Sima Qian’s *Shiji* may be a good example for a discussion of a quasi-official approach in an official history. Despite the fact that the *Shiji* was later placed on a pedestal as the first “standard history,” Sima’s ideas of history were not entirely homologous with Confucian ideology, which was newly adopted by the Han emperor at the time when Sima was writing. His professed goal in writing this magnum opus went beyond illustrating upright morals with concrete examples, as taught by Confucius. Rather, he had an ambition of elucidating the fundamental relationship between “heaven” and “men,” working out a lawful generalization of human history, and delivering an account of his own.

Sima Qian’s ambition prompted him to search for a comprehensive understanding of what was between “heaven” and “men,” or the *tianxia*. Before embarking on the writing, he traveled extensively and reached the northern, eastern, and southern borders of the Han dynasty. He included in the *Shiji* sections that dealt with the Han dynasty’s neighbors: the Huns (Xiongnu) in the north, the Koreans in the east, and the peoples (including some non-Han ethnic groups) in today’s south China.¹⁹ Evidently, this was the known world to Sima Qian, a learned man in China in the second century B.C. Its small size was in proportion to the size of China at the time. In Sima Qian’s China, non-Han ethnic groups on the northern border areas and the people living in the coastal region of the southeast were both excluded.²⁰ The latter, although they later became an important component of the Han Chinese, were referred to by him simply as the *man*, or the *nanman*, meaning “barbarians” and “southern barbarians,” respectively.

¹⁸ Twitchett carefully describes the location of the historiographical office (*shi guan*) in the Tang royal palace and its closeness to the power center (*The Writing of Official History under the T’ang*, pp. 13–20).

¹⁹ In the *Shiji*, Sima Qian uses the name *nanyue* to refer to the peoples in the south. According to *Cihai*, the *nanyue* refers to a state that existed in the region that belongs to today’s Guangxi and Guangdong Provinces and was conquered by the Han in the early second century (*Cihai* [Sea of Words] [Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 1979], p. 135).

²⁰ This region includes parts of Zhejiang, Fujian, and Hunan Provinces.

Sima's account offers a point of departure for our observation of the dynamics in China's relation with the world. In forming this relation, Han China seems to have pursued two different goals. It was very active and aggressive in handling its southern neighbors; by the time Sima completed his writing, some southern barbarians had already been conquered, and their territories were made into a *jun* (county) by the Han. By contrast, the Han Chinese faced a much more difficult challenge in dealing with the nomads from the north.²¹ In the *Shiji*, Sima provided a detailed and extensive account, describing the failures and successes of the Han in defending their northern border. For most of the time Han China was in a defensive position, trying to appease the Huns by giving women and gifts rather than engaging in military confrontation. Even if a Han ruler picked up his courage to launch a campaign, he often ended it with a defeat. The valiant Liu Bang (256–195 B.C.), for example, who was known in history for founding the great Han dynasty, once waged a campaign against the Huns, only to find himself soon after being ambushed and entrenched in a besieged town named Pingcheng. Unable to find a way out, he had to bribe a favorite concubine of the Hun chief. It was through her help that Liu finally escaped the predicament. Liu's defeat proved to be a traumatic experience to his successors. After Liu Bang's death, the Huns invaded Han China again. When Liu Bang's wife, the regent at the time, made known her intention to fight back, her generals reminded her of Liu Bang's experience in Pingcheng and persuaded her to seek a truce by offering women to the Hun chieftain instead.²²

Han China's inability to handle invasions in the north proved to be a lasting legacy. Although later dynasties added new territories by annexing land in south and southwestern China, few succeeded in northern expansions. In fact, China's northern borders remained basically unchanged throughout the history of imperial China, except in the Yuan (1271–1368) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, when the rulers themselves were non-Hans with roots in the north. This legacy left its traces in the Han Chinese perception of the world: although the Han Chinese upheld the idea of ethnocentrism, as shown in their definition of the superior-inferior relation between China and its neighbors, they also invented ways to implement their ethnocentrism eclectically. To give full credit to this eclecticism, some scholars like

²¹ Fitzgerald has attributed this difference to the ways in which the northerner and southerner lived on their land: the northerners were pastoralists, while the southerners were rice cultivators, like the Han in China proper (*The Chinese View of Their Place in the World*, pp. 3–4).

²² *Shiji*, ch. 110, pp. 2894–95.

Jing-shen Tao have gone so far as to argue that beginning in ancient times, there was always an underlying tradition in Han China of “conducting relations with neighboring countries on a basis of equality whenever that was advisable or necessary.”²³ Tao points out correctly that there was no universal way for Han rulers to treat their counterparts in other states. In the case of Han-Hun relations, Han dynasty policies could really be classified into two types, as Ban Gu summarized in his *Hanshu*. One was known as the “bribery” or “peace” policy, the other was the “military policy.” Although Ban believed the military policy was more effective and would provide a long-term peace for the Chinese, Han history showed otherwise.²⁴ In his account, one finds many incidents when Han rulers opted for the bribery policy to deal with crises in the north. The bribery policy usually meant, as Ying-shih Yu has noted, assuring the non-Han leader “a fixed amount of annual imperial ‘gifts’” and a Han “princess” in exchange for his pledge not to raid the Chinese border areas.²⁵

But even if the Han rulers adopted a policy other than military conquest, they still did not treat their neighbors as equals. The adoption of a bribery policy, or any policy other than military conquest, did not sap Han China’s ethnocentrism, but offered an alternative to reinforce its China-centered worldview. To the Confucians who received patronage from Han rulers in Ban Gu’s time, the belligerent behavior of the non-Hans was evidence of the backwardness of their culture. Han China’s military weakness thus was not a major problem as long as China’s goods could still attract unruly barbarians to send in their tribute. Although the action of giving tribute often meant a give-take gesture and was hardly an equal exchange, Han China was complacent in the knowledge that it was regarded as the cultural center of the world. As the center, Han China should try to persuade its neighbors through its cultural ascendancy by spreading its moral teachings and pervading virtue. In the *Analects*, Confucius is recorded to have said that “if remote people are not submissive, all the influences of civil culture and virtue are to be cultivated to attract them to be so.”²⁶ This culture-cen-

²³ Jing-shen Tao, *Two Sons of Heaven: Studies in Sung-Liao Relations* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1988), p. 8. Tao’s point of view was shared by a few scholars when they edited an anthology on Han China’s foreign relations in the tenth through fourteenth centuries. They point out that China’s world order based on the tribute system was not always effective, nor was it always insisted on by the Chinese. See Morris Rossabi, ed., *China among Equals: The Middle Kingdom and Its Neighbors, 10th–14th Centuries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

²⁴ *Hanshu*, ch. 94, 3830–34.

²⁵ Ying-shih Yu, *Trade and Expansion in Han China: A Study in the Structure of Sino-Barbarian Economic Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 10.

²⁶ *Analects*, trans. James Legge (New York: Dover, 1971), p. 309.

tered approach, or culturalism, was aimed to compensate Han China for whatever setbacks and losses it might have on the battlefield.

To implement this culturalism required the Han Chinese to be flexible and tolerant in dealing with their neighbors in the tribute system. As early as Sima Qian's time, Han rulers already knew how to follow a principle known as the *jimi* (loose rein) to deal with some of their most difficult neighbors. Although cultural cultivation usually meant adopting Confucian rituals on ceremonial occasions, with this "loose rein" policy, Han rulers could excuse some disobedient non-Hans if they failed to participate in the ceremony or failed to follow the proper protocol. For some Confucian scholars, to cultivate moral principles and promote culture among non-Hans was more important than to subdue them with a military victory.²⁷ Cultural cultivation thus outweighed territorial gains.²⁸

Implementing this loose rein policy became an endeavor to establish the hierarchical world order of the Han, which distinguished their neighbors according to the level of their acceptance of Han cultural values, or *laihua* (come to receive acculturation). Whenever a non-Han ruler showed his willingness to communicate with China in accordance with the Chinese rites, Han rulers were always advised to respond to his request with an appropriate level of propriety.²⁹ Through this policy, Han China affirmed its cultural superiority over others and turned its disadvantageous position into a procedure for confirming the China-centered world.

A few scholars have noticed that this culturalism, *wenjiao* (education through culture), sanctioned by Confucian teachings and adopted by the Han Chinese, tended to deemphasize violence and even to regard war as an aberration.³⁰ In his book on Chinese strategic culture, Alastair Johnston identifies the three basic components of culturalism:

²⁷ During the reign of Han emperor Wu, there were quite a few successful military expeditions launched against the Huns, which extended Han China's northwestern territory. To fund these expensive military actions, Han officials introduced state monopolies on salt and iron. But Confucian scholars stood up against these monopolies, arguing that the best policy toward the barbarians was not military victory, but cultural cultivation.

²⁸ *Discourses on Salt and Iron: A Debate on State Control of Commerce and Industry in Ancient China*, trans. Esson M. Gale (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1931), pp. 5–6.

²⁹ Lien-sheng Yang describes the origins and practices of the *jimi* policy in Chinese history in "Historical Notes on the Chinese World Order," in *The Chinese World Order*, ed. Fairbank, pp. 31–33.

³⁰ John Fairbank, "Varieties of the Chinese Military Experience," in *Chinese Ways in Warfare*, ed. Frank Kiernan and John Fairbank (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 25; Thomas Cleary, ed. and trans., *Mastering the Art of War: Zhuge Liang and Liu Ji* (Boston, Mass.: Shambhala, 1989), p. 20; Mark Edward Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), p. 103.

“war is inauspicious and to be avoided; the enemy is not necessarily demonized—it can be enculturated and pacified, though not exterminated or annihilated; violence is a last resort.”³¹ Challenging this notion of minimal violence as the prevailing tradition in Chinese culture, Johnston contends that there is another model, the *parabellum*, or realpolitik paradigm, that worked on the operational level. This paradigm acknowledged that conflict was a constant feature of human affairs and endorsed violence against the enemy whenever possible. In elucidating this paradigm through his study of Ming history, Johnston succeeds in revealing the realpolitik approach the Han people adopted over time in dealing with their neighbors. His emphasis, of course, is on military strategies. But it seems to me that the same kind of realpolitik approach is also shown in the Confucian discourse on minimal violence. For what prompted the Han Chinese to take the culturalist approach, as discussed above, was the reality that often they either were unable to fend off non-Han invasion or figured that culturalism would be less costly than military operations. In his study of the Han economic relation with the non-Han nomads in the north, Ying-shih Yu draws attention to the variety of nonmilitary policies the Han officials and generals used to deal with their enemies. On many occasions, the Han officials found, these policies “led to expected results.”³²

THE CENTER-PERIPHERY DYNAMICS, OR WHAT WAS IN THE SPACE?

Sima Qian and Ban Gu, although they lived in two different periods, both witnessed the glories of the Han dynasty, which laid the foundation of Han Chinese culture. The fact that most inhabitants of China today refer to themselves as the Han people (*hanren*) indicates the importance of the dynasty in Chinese history. Not only was Confucianism adopted in that period as the official ideology, but also the dynasty's relations with its neighbors shaped the Chinese view of the world order. For in the Han dynasty, even though there were ups and downs in military operations to defend and expand the southern and northern borders, the belief that the Han empire was the cultural center of the world was never shaken. By playing the zero-sum psychol-

³¹ Alastair Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 66.

³² *Trade and Expansion in Han China*, pp. 14–15.

ogy, Han rulers reinforced time and again the sense of cultural superiority: non-Han peoples' aggression was only an indication of their barbaric behavior and cultural inferiority to the Han Chinese.

After the fall of the Han dynasty in the third century, followed by the invasions by various nomadic groups in northern China, this culture-centered world order faced a serious challenge. But for the Han rulers who had retreated to the south, Han culture was still quite viable. First of all, non-Han rulers often relied on remaining Han officials to help consolidate their power after taking the north. This frequently involved efforts to learn about Han culture, adapt to Han agriculture, and adopt Han bureaucracy. A Chinese saying goes: "You can ride on horseback to found a state, but you cannot ride on horseback to rule a state." As a result, although Han people were defeated in the north, their culture remained useful and even attractive to the new rulers.

Second, as far as the Chinese worldview in historiography is concerned, most dynastic histories that appeared in the period after the Han dynasty were written by Han historians from the south, notably such works as the *Songshu* (Song History) and the *Nanqi shu* (Southern Qi History), both of which were accounts of southern dynasties written by southerners. The only exception was the *Weishu* (Wei History), which was written by Wei Shou (506–72), a Han ethnic from the north serving the Northern Wei dynasty (386–534) founded by the Tuoba, a clan of the Xianbei (Sienpi, or Hsien-pi). It was only natural for these historians to describe the Han and non-Han relation from the Han cultural perspective.

The Han framework remained; these historians followed Sima Qian and Ban Gu to create accounts of non-Han peoples in the *liezhuan* (biographies) category and employed the same terminology. However, there was new coverage reflecting the change of history. In the *Songshu*, for example, several new peoples entered the category, including possibly the earliest Chinese mention of Japan and India. In the north, after the decline and the dispersion of the Huns, the Xianbei and its many clans became the focal point. A few new "biographies" were added to record their histories and cultures. Still more detailed accounts were provided for the various peoples in the south, simply because the Song dynasty (420–79, to be distinguished from the Song dynasty in the eleventh and thirteenth centuries) was based in the south. These new additions suggested to the Han Chinese not only an expanded world, but also a sense of realism in designing the frontier policy.

Of the texts that appeared at the time, the *Weishu* is exceptional

because it was an official history of the Northern Wei, a dynasty established by the “barbarians” (as seen by the Han people). Interestingly, however, Wei Shou in the text referred to his dynasty as the *zhongguo*, or the “center of the world,” rather than as a peripheral power. From this point of view, he described various neighboring states, including the dynasties of the Han people in the south. Thus, Wei followed the same center-periphery thinking in defining the world. Yet what differentiates his account from earlier ones is his adoption of a geopolitik perspective—the Northern Wei stood in the central plain (*zhongyuan*) of the continent—rather than the ethnic-cultural perspective. That is, the dynasty’s spatial location, rather than its ethnic superiority, became the important foundation for the center-periphery relation. In Wei’s text, we find less enthusiasm for disseminating Han Confucian culture among others. In fact, he championed the idea of the loose rein and believed in its usefulness in establishing a good relation with others.³³

In the following Tang dynasty (618–907), what had been considered exceptional in Wei Shou’s account became almost normative in its historiography. Wei’s belief in the loose rein was widely shared by Tang historians and statesmen in forming the dynasty’s frontier policy; the Tang dynasty was known in history for its openness and flexibility in regard to the other.³⁴ There was an apparent reason for this. The Tang unification created a great empire that became not only a geopolitical center, but also a cultural center. As a cultural center, however, it was not based on the superiority of a particular ethnic culture, but on a world culture comprehensive enough to encompass all associated ethnicities. As a result, Tang culture became well known for its cosmopolitanism, as different cultures and religions vied for prominence in Tang society. In a sense, the Tang empire eliminated the traditional ethnic boundary between the Han and non-Han.³⁵ The Tang royal family, for example, had come from an ethnic mix in the north.³⁶ The

³³ *Weishu* (Wei History) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1976), ch. 100, p. 2224; ch. 102, p. 2281.

³⁴ Liu Xu, *Jiu Tangshu* (Old Tang History) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), ch. 194, p. 5193; ch. 195, p. 5216; ch. 199, p. 5364.

³⁵ *Jiu Tangshu* recorded a debate in the Tang court about how to deal with the Tujue (Turk) people. Wei Zheng recommended a policy of elimination because of the fundamental racial difference—“not of our race” (*fei wo zulei*)—while Wen Yanbo advocated acculturation, which was accepted by the Tang Taizong. *Jiu Tangshu*, ch. 194, pp. 5162–63; and Ouyang Xiu, *Xin Tangshu* (New Tang History) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), ch. 215, pp. 6037–38.

³⁶ Tang Taizong, or Li Shimin, the second ruler and the real founder of the Tang dynasty, had one-fourth Xianbei blood. See Ping-ti Ho, “In Defense of Sinicization,” pp. 123–55.

grandeur of the Tang dynasty thus paved the way for historians to present the world from a new perspective.

With the establishment of the historiographical office in the Tang court, the writing of official historiography proliferated. In their histories, few authors used terms like *yi* as titles for sections on non-Han history.³⁷ This change reflected the reality that the Tang dynasty had created a large empire that included areas in both the north and south that had been traditionally occupied by non-Hans. If the historiography in the Han dynasty showed a strong concern for the threat coming from the north, this concern was absent from Tang historiography because the threat itself had gone. Put more precisely, the Han dynasty's northern border, which had distressed Han historians earlier, now became an integrated part of the Chinese empire in the Tang account of history. There was therefore no need to designate a special account to record that part of history. In the sections about the histories of southern dynasties, we still find the use of the derogatory term *man*. But even there, some historians occasionally used the term *guo* (state, kingdom) instead of *yi*, as shown in Li Yanshou's *Nanbei shi* (History of the South and North).³⁸

What Tang historiography offers us is a brand-new picture of the world. Except for the islands and peninsulas in the south and east seas—the latter being Korea and Japan—the Tang dynasty conquered much of the land known to the people in the continent of Asia.³⁹ In this new world, there seemed to be no frontier in the north; the Chinese empire seemed to have extended to its end. What remained as a confinement lay in the south and east, where Tang rulers, as well as their predecessors of the Sui dynasty (581–618), failed to eliminate indigenous rulers, in spite of their repeated attempts.

But this new world did not last long. The northern nomads who had been kept effectively on a loose rein by the Tang rose again after the dynasty's fall and challenged its successor, the Song dynasty (960–1279), which represented the power of the Han Chinese. As a result, the traditional Han and non-Han dichotomy replaced Tang cosmopolitanism. In explaining this dichotomy, Song historians again adopted the culturalist approach, attempting to shore up Song politi-

³⁷ Tang historians composed six dynastic histories, but only those about southern dynasties, such as the *Jinshu* (Jin History) and the *Suishu* (Sui History), use titles that contain pejorative terms like *man*.

³⁸ In Li's history, there is a biography entitled "*Hainan zhuguo*" (Various States in the South Sea).

³⁹ Fitzgerald, *The Chinese View of Their Place in the World*, p. 19.

cal power by affirming its cultural superiority to its northern neighbors. In other words, although the Song dynasty remained largely in the south, which was the periphery according to traditional geopolitics, it made a claim to be the cultural center of the world. Its claim was reinforced by, among other things, the rise of neo-Confucianism. Of course, one could argue conversely that it was the rise of non-Han powers in the north that caused the Han people to search for their cultural roots in Confucianism. Whatever the case, Song historians redefined the center-periphery relation in perceiving the world; they compensated for the dynasty's spatial loss with gains in philosophy and literature, hence extending the practice of culturalism.

Nonetheless, a tone of pessimism is detectable in Song historiography. Despite the revival of Confucianism, which epitomized for many the superiority of Song culture, Song historians were not so sure whether this culture could captivate non-Hans, let alone subdue them through assimilation. Ouyang Xiu, the Confucian historian who compiled the *Xin Tangshu*, praised Tang Taizong's ability to deal with the barbarians. But he also acknowledged that many other rulers, including some capable Tang emperors, in the past had failed to develop an effective policy in handling the northern and northwestern barbarians, such as the Turks, the Uighurs, and the Tibetans. According to Ouyang, there was no good policy available. Even the *Chunqiu* (Spring and Autumn Annals) mentioned cases in which ancient rulers had had to make concessions to these barbarians.⁴⁰ What a ruler could do was to consolidate his power at home in order to fortify effectively the dynasty's border.⁴¹

Ouyang Xiu's mention of the *Chunqiu* is quite meaningful here, because the annals were traditionally attributed to Confucius and regarded as one of the five original classics by later Confucians. If the ancient sages had been unable to find an effective method to deal with the barbarians in their times, how could the people living in the Song era expect to do so? By citing the *Chunqiu*, Ouyang Xiu reaffirmed the Han and non-Han demarcation in forming the Chinese worldview. What was missing in Ouyang Xiu's account was the confidence in the universalism of Han Confucian culture shared by his earlier counterparts in the Han dynasty.

Beneath this cultural pessimism lay a recognition of historical reality. Although Song historians could try to claim the dynasty as the cul-

⁴⁰ *Xin Tangshu*, ch. 217, p. 6151.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, ch. 216, p. 6109.

tural center of the world, they were unable to make the same claim in the arena of geopolitics, for the dynasty's location lacked spatial importance in Chinese politics. During the Tang dynasty China's economic center had begun moving from the north to the south—namely, from the Yellow River to the Yangzi River. But the political center remained in the north, even in the late imperial period. The retreat of the Song dynasty to the south from the early twelfth century onward forced the Song historians to describe the world in a dualist fashion, in which they segregated culture from politics. In the *Jiu wudaishi* (Old History of the Five Dynasties), a Song text, we find that the official historian and statesman Xue Juzheng (912–81), used for the first time the neutral term *waiguo* (foreign states) to refer to the non-Han peoples.⁴² To be sure, Xue did not invent the term; Ban Gu and other Han historians had used it. But he was the first one who adopted it as a chapter title in dynastic historiography. This suggests that during the Song period there was indeed a “multistate system” in China, and that the Song dynasty was one among equals, coexisting with other dynasties.⁴³

This multistate system represented a new worldview, according to which the Han Chinese began to envisage themselves as participants in world history, rather than as world rulers and judges. This new position added different meanings to the center-periphery relation and placed the Song dynasty, which was indeed on the periphery, on a par with foreign powers in competing for cultural prominence and political dominance in China proper. In this new world, we find an increasingly visible discrepancy between Han culturalism and Han ethnocentrism. The Han people could still hold on to their cultural superiority, hoping their barbaric neighbors would assimilate, but they were unable to design and depict the world in the same way as they had done before from an ethnocentric point of view. The unity of Han ethnicity and culture was forever lost; non-Han people could also represent Han China, as would be shown in later history. The Han Chinese identity was now defined only culturally, not ethnically.

The historiography of late imperial China from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries provides evidence for the observation of this new worldview associated with a change in identity. In the thirteenth century the Song and its opponents in the north both fell prey to the Mongol conquest. In the Yuan dynasty, established by the Mongols in

⁴² *Jiu wudaishi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1976), ch. 137, pp. 1827–46.

⁴³ See Rossabi, ed., *China among Equals*.

China proper, the Han people were placed at the bottom of its social stratum, which squelched any remaining sense of Han ethnocentrism. By the mid-fourteenth century, when the Han people rose again and overthrew the Yuan, it is imaginable that there was a strong urge for the Chinese to reclaim their lost world. In the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), historians once again used the term *yi* to refer to foreigners. Because of the long tradition of dynastic historiography, however, Ming official historians were required first to compile the history of the Yuan dynasty. In doing so, they took a position that put their own dynasty as the Yuan's successor, hence confirming the Song worldview that non-Han people could extend the linear development of Han culture in China.

In the Ming historical depiction of the Yuan world, it encompassed almost the entire continent, reflecting the extent of the Mongol conquest in Asia. What was placed on its periphery were mostly states in or near the seas, such as Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Burma, Thailand, and so forth; many survived because the Mongols lacked an adequate naval force. Considering them as the *waiyi* (foreign barbarians), Ming historians accepted the Yuan dynasty as a legitimate power in Chinese history.⁴⁴ In this consideration, the center-periphery relation was not demarcated along ethnic lines, but decided by the realpolitik arrangement.

In the subsequent Qing dynasty, founded by the Manchus, this worldview became entrenched in historiography. Han ethnocentrism was diluted considerably by Qing historians in their compilation of Ming history and their comprehension of the world. For example, derogatory terms like *yi* and *man* disappeared almost entirely in the *Mingshi* (Ming History), completed by the Qing historians in 1739. In their place, Qing historians used *waiguo* (foreign states) and *xiyu* (western regions), terms that were free of ethnic-cultural connotations. Regarding the Qing dynasty as representing the *zhongguo*, Qing historians (most of whom were Han ethnics) seem to have settled the ethnic issue in deciding the line of political succession in Chinese history. Their worldview was not premised so much on a "Han and barbarian" axis as on a dynamic relation between the center, the *zhongguo*, and the periphery, the *bianjiang* (frontier).⁴⁵ In other words, that China

⁴⁴ Song Lian, *Yuanshi* (Yuan History) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1976), ch. 208, pp. 4607–76.

⁴⁵ Mark Mancall also notices that the world was viewed by the Qing rulers along ecological rather than ethnic differences ("The Ch'ing Tribute System: An Interpretive Essay," in *The Chinese World Order*, ed. Fairbank, pp. 63–89).

was different from others had less to do with levels of cultural development than with the dynasty's physical boundary as established by military conquest. Of course, the military conquest could reach its limits. But the Qing vision of the world had no limit. The Qing world-view therefore became holistic and universal, encompassing the entire known space.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Through the course of Chinese imperial history, the Chinese world-view underwent several major changes. In the formative years of the Han dynasty, the Chinese view of the world was shaped around the axis of Han ethnic culture, which helped grade and hierarchize the rest of the world according to its acceptance of Han culture. As a result, the Han people and their neighbors formed a dichotomous relation. On one hand, the Han people were wary of their less civilized, barbaric neighbors, especially the northern nomads. The project of constructing the Great Wall, which began as early as the fifth century B.C., suggested that the Han people had been long aware of the nomadic threat from the north. But on the other hand, following the Confucian teaching, which was canonized during the early Han dynasty, Han rulers were also supposed to cultivate morals and virtue among barbarians. Thus a culturalist approach was developed by the Han Chinese to design their frontier policy, which became for the most part defensive rather than offensive. The construction of the Great Wall served the purpose well.

Yet ethnicity was not the only factor that influenced the Chinese worldview. There was also a spatial concern built into its formation from the beginning. This concern was reflected in the dynamic center-periphery relation, alluded to by terms like *zhongguo* and *tianxia*, two important concepts in forming the Chinese worldview. The term *zhongguo*, which meant originally "the capital of all states," referred primarily to the central geographical position Han China occupied in the *tianxia*, or "the entire human world." If the Han Chinese perceived the world hierarchically, this hierarchy was built on ethnocentric as well as spatial thinking (that is, an effort to organize and arrange the known space in the world).⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Although focusing on a modern historian, Xiaobing Tang analyzes the spatial factor in Chinese historical thinking in *Global Space and the Nationalist Discourse of Modernity: The Historical Thinking of Liang Qichao* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996).

Moreover, this spatial dimension of the Chinese worldview became increasingly important in later periods, when the *zhongguo*, the center of the space in the world, was often occupied by non-Han peoples. Although the Han Chinese still held on to the task of *wenjiao*, hoping to sinicize their barbarian rulers, they were no longer able to maintain their ethnocentric approach to imagining the world. Rather, they had to come to terms with the reality and deemphasize the ethnic attachment to Han Chinese culture; this allowed them to accept non-Han dynasties as legitimate extensions of Chinese civilization. But what remained unchanged was the spatial thinking of the center-periphery relation, which continued to influence the Chinese worldview and perpetuated the traditional understanding of the *zhongguo* as the center of the world.

By the Qing dynasty, the ethnic attachment of the Chinese worldview had almost disappeared; Qing/Manchu rulers had become legitimate heirs to and potent defenders of Chinese civilization. Of course, the Manchus received this legitimacy in part because their rulers accepted Han Chinese culture, as many have pointed out. But a more important reason had to do with the fact that they had entered and occupied the *zhongguo*, the center of the known space of the world. The world thus became a unity, in which there was no Han and non-Han difference but only the spatial difference between center and periphery. In other words, the Manchu rule of China eliminated the ethnic distinction and unified the world across ethnic lines. But in the late Qing, especially beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, this sense of world unity seemed not to be helpful in preparing the Manchu rulers to deal with the appearance of the Western world in Asia. They simply refused to acknowledge this new and foreign world, whose existence threatened the perceived unity of *their* world. However, the question of the late Qing relation with the West has gone beyond our concern in this paper; it deserves a more focused study elsewhere.