Middle-Period Discourse on the Zhong Guo: The Central Country

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Geography and Culture

Middle-Period Discourse on the Zhong guo – the Central Country

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September 2009

Abstract
During the middle period (8th-15th century) literati began to discuss Zhong guo as both historical place and as culture. Although such writing made a clear distinction between Zhong guo as the central and superior spatiocultural entity and the surrounding peoples and states (the Yi di), these writers were also opposed to an expansionist foreign policy that tried to incorporate outsiders into the empire. In contrast foreign conquerors typically avoided the discourse of Zhong guo and instead used ethnicity as basis for defining membership in their empires. Although this was a means legislating privileges for the conquering minority it also removed the limits on imperial expansion that were inherent in the discourse of the Zhong guo.

在近古時期（八至十五世紀），士人開始將「中國」同時視為「歷史地點」與「文化」而進行討論。雖然這類著作將「中國」視作處於中央並具優越性的空間 — 文化主體，而將之與其周圍的人民、國家（夷狄）做出清楚的區分，然而這些作者同時也反對試圖將外人納入其帝國的擴張性對外政策。相反的，外國征服者通常避免「中國」論述基礎。雖然這是一種將少數征服者所享有之特權合法化的方法，然而它也移除了內在於「中國」論述中對帝國擴張的限制。
This paper takes up the cultural interpretation of mobility from a spatial perspective. Just as we can view social mobility as crossing limits that otherwise constrain the scope of a person’s or a class’s work and aspirations, we can view spatial mobility as crossing boundaries in space that are constructed to define where a person, or even a country, belongs. A foreign conquest is an example of spatial mobility.

Mobility, whether social or spatial, requires the existence of boundaries and limits, for without them mobility would be a meaningless term. The most concrete manifestation of the idea of boundaries are spatial borders, whether between prefectures or countries. In contrast to social boundaries, which we easily see as being culturally constructed, political borders appear to be closer to physical objects in that they can be described and delineated and easily accepted as real. Yet in practice spatial borders, whether they are human constructs or physical objects, are not constant over space and time. And because they are not constant they must be justified, maintained, and interpreted.

This paper looks at the cultural interpretation of the spatial boundaries of that entity which is essential to any discussion of Chinese history: China itself. It does so from two perspectives: those who defined and defended the borders of that place and those who crossed those borders and redrew them. It asks how this was done, what meaning was attached to being inside them or outside them, and what different approaches were meant to accomplish. This inquiry is focused on the middle period—from the start of Tang’s decline in the mid-eighth century to the consolidation of Ming rule in the early fifteenth—a period of unprecedented border crossing and boundary redefinition, and it considers the views of both Chinese literati and foreign conquerors.

I pursue this in the first instance through an examination of literati definitions of a transdynastic spatiocultural entity during the middle period, and their use of the term Zhong guo 中國 for that entity. The ideological use of the term seems to have been most frequent in thinking about relations with the states and peoples beyond the borders, an issue of particular concern during this period. The term Zhong guo was a vehicle for both a spatial claim—that there was spatial area that had a continuous history going back to the “central states” (the zhong guo) of the central plain during the Eastern Zhou)—and a cultural claim—that there was a continuous culture that had emerged in that place which its inhabitant ought to, but might not, continue. I translate Zhong guo as “the Central Country.”

In brief I argue that spatially and culturally literati always deployed the term Zhong guo in relationship to a wider world to establish an opposition between the Zhong guo and those outside of it, who were typically referred as the Yi di 夷狄. This pairing was asymmetrical. The Zhong guo referred to a state formation and Yi di named the entities outside of it as tribes, thus making a cultural distinction between those who had a state and those who lived in a lesser order of sociopolitical organization. This was purposeful, for all speakers were fully aware that many of those they grouped as Yi di had states of their own, that in fact the known world had a great number of states, and the language of diplomacy recognized this with its reference to “ambassadors of external states” (外國使). The use of the Zhong guo was also a spatial definition. It asserted that this guo was

I thank the participants at the International Conference on Cultural Interpretations of Mobility, particularly Profs. Wang Deyi and Deng Xiaonan, for their comments. Another version of this essay was presented at the International Conference on Translocal and Transregional Dynamics in Chinese History, 960-1911, at the National University of Singapore, May 2008; I thank Profs. Ong Chang Woei and Koh Khee Heong.
central relative to all others (a quality that requires assuming that there were many guo under heaven), thus defining all others as peripheral. This asymmetry helps explain why outsiders were at best ambivalent about adopting the term Zhong guo in a cultural sense, for by doing so they were locating themselves as Yi di. The issue came to a head when outsiders became insiders, when those who had been called Yi di gained sway over part or all of the territory associated with the Zhong guo. One strategy that they adopted—such as the Mongols’ use of tribal terms to distinguish between all the peoples under their sway and to legislate differentiated privileges for these population groups—was perhaps conducive to a certain kind of ethnic nationalism.2

In translating the Zhong guo as “the Central Country” I have rejected its common translation as “the Middle Kingdom.” It seems to me that those who used “the Central Country” were not focusing on political authority but on the cultural qualities of the one country that was at the center. I use the term “country,” reserving “state,” the common translation of the term guo, for dynastic states and government activities. Middle-period writers were interested in the possibility of a transdynastic spatiocultural entity, a country rather than a dynastic empire or a modern nation-state.

The Zhong guo and Zhongguo/China

Before proceeding we need to make a distinction. A reader of middle-period texts who encounters the two characters zhong guo is likely to translate the term as “China” because today the internal name of the country that is known in English as China is Zhongguo. Today China is a nation-state that claims a history that includes many different dynastic states, population groups (or ethnic groups 民族), and cultural traditions. A leading contemporary historian of China points out that “The concept of ‘national history’ in its current Western usage was wholly unfamiliar to Chinese historians before the 20th century.”3 The spatiotemporal term we use, “China,” originates in the Sanskrit cīna but enters into Latinate languages rather late, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, from the Persian toponym Chīnī. Europe of the middle ages used the term Cathay, which came through Inner Asia and stems from “Khitan,” the name of the people who created the Great Liao State (907-1125).4 Whatever the name, outsiders were referring to a place that they believed had an existence over time.

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1 Tuotuo 脫脫, ed., Song shi 宋史, Scripta Sinica ed. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1977), 5.96, 50.996, 50.1006, 114.2719, etc.
2 For reasons that will be made clear, this does not lead me to support the view of China as a multi-ethnic state such as argued in Wang Ke 王柯, Min zu yu guo jia - Zhongguo duo min zu tong yi guo jia si xiang de xi pu 民族與國家：中國多民族統一國家思想的系譜 (Beijing: Zhongguo she ke, 2001).
When we ask what the inhabitants at the end of the nineteenth century called that place, however, the term that came to mind was the dynastic entity, the Great Qing State, 大清国, which was not equivalent to “China” as Westerners at the time used that term, yet in the twentieth century “China/Zhongguo” has become an officially mandated term for this country as a continuous historical entity from antiquity to the present. The argument, which I take from Lydia Liu, goes roughly like this: at the end of the nineteenth century some leading intellectuals, having seen that modern Western nations-states referred to their country by names such as France and England, despite changes in political power, argued that their own country needed a name as well, something that recognized its historical continuity without privileging one dynasty. Ultimately, over the objections of some, the ancient term zhong guo was adopted and entered into the new nationalist education program (over alternatives such as zhong hua 中华 and hua xia 华夏). But this modern term, which I shall transcribe as Zhongguo, was deployed in new ways, as the equivalent of the Western term “China.” In other words the use of “China” and “Chinese” began as a Western usage; they were then adopted by the government of the people the West called “the Chinese” to identify their own country, its culture, language, and population. This took place in the context of establishing the equality of this country in international relations and creating a Western-style nation-state, a “China” to which the “Chinese” could be loyal.5 In using Zhongguo/China to refer to its history, the People’s Republic of China in fact recognizes that its population is composed of different peoples. They are all officially “Chinese” but it still distinguishes among peoples with different heritages and languages. Thus the majority population is said to be people of the “Han ethnicity” who speak the “Han language.” At least officially there is no such thing as the “Chinese” language, although in informal practice the term “Chinese” pertains to the “Han ethnicity.”

China today uses a term that in the ancient Eastern Zhou period referred to the central (zhong) states (guo) of the central plain (zhong yuan 中原) to name a country that asserts its inclusion of the pastoral and aboriginal peoples, lands, and histories that were outside of the “central states” in Eastern Zhou. I can see nothing to object to in this. The referents of the name changed over time; no one period has ultimate authority over its meaning.6 However, when we read this modern Zhongguo/China back onto past texts and past minds, so that every occurrence of the term zhong guo appears to us to be the same as

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5 Lydia H. Liu, The Clash of Empires: The Invention of China in Modern World Making (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 75-81, 264-5. Liu notes that at least one official from the “Great State of Qing” (the official name for the polity from 1644 to 1911) found the Western use of “China” and “Chinese” insulting for its refusal to acknowledge in words the political status of his country.

6 This point is made with great clarity by Tan Qixiang 谭其骧, “Lishi shang de Zhongguo he Zhongguo lidai jiangyu 歷史上的中國和中國近代疆域,” Zhongguo bianjiang shi yanjiu 中國邊疆史地研究 8, no. 1 (1991). For Tan the adoption of Zhongguo as an inclusive term fit the general trend of history in which once excluded peoples came to be part of China. In contrast, Fei Xiaotong and Chen Liankai took the view that this conception Zhongguo/China was taking form over history; see Fei Xiaotong 費孝通, ed., Zhonghua minzu duoyuan y ti geju 中华民族多元一体格局, Revised by Chen Liankai 陳連開 ed. (Beijing: Zhongyang minzu daxue chubanshe, 1999), 167-65, 211-44. Tsutsumi argues that the idea of combining the foreign and native into one state only emerges in Yuan and is adopted in early Ming; Tsutsumi Kazuaki 塚塚一昭, "Chūgoku no jigazō -- sono jikan to kukan o kiteit suru mono 中國的自畫像--その時間と空間を規定するもの," in Gendai Chūgoku chiiki kenkyū no aratana shiken 現代中國地域研究の新たな視覚, ed. Nishimura Shigeo 西村成雄 (Kyōto 京都: Sekai Shisōsha 世界思想社, 2007), 39-49.
“China,” we may be wrongly imputing a particular national historical consciousness to the past. For reasons that will be discussed below, the use of terms such as “Hua,” “Hua-xia” and “Zhong guo” to refer to a transdynastic entity was not the same thing as the modern use of China/Zhongguo as a counterpart to “England” or “France.” Like Ge Zhaoguang, I think the use of the term Zhong guo during the middle period came to encapsulate a particular kind of national historical consciousness, one that was not the same as the modern term “China” yet was different from what had gone before.7

Comprehending Historical Space and Time

A striking feature of middle-period intellectual culture was its interest in envisioning continuity through space and time, even if it lacked the equivalent of a transdynastic country name such as “China.” We find this in well-known historical works. The best example is the series of works that had “continuity/comprehensiveness” (通) in their title: Du You’s Comprehensive Canon 通典 from the late eighth century; Sima Guang’s (1019-1086) Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government 資治通鑑, which created a single 1400 year chronology that included all dynastic states without defining any one as more legitimate than others; Zheng Qiao’s Comprehensive Treatises 通志 from the mid-twelfth century; and Ma Duanlin’s Comprehensive Examination of the Written Record 文獻通考 from the early fourteenth century.8 These attempts to create single frameworks for the understanding of the past were, I think, one possible response to the fundamental reordering of the connections between wealth, power, status, and culture that was taking place.

Even more striking was the attempt to make geographical visualizations and compilations serve the purpose of transdynastic continuity, for a geographic perspective is by its nature better suited to capturing variation through space at a particular moment than to relating change over time. The “Map of the Traces of Yu” 禹跡圖, engraved in 1136, sought to relate the present to the description of the geographic whole found in the “Tributes of Yu” 禹貢 section of the Book of Documents. In that text the Great Yu moved through the terrain, distinguishing regions, recognizing distinctive qualities, and, above all, rechanneling the water system so as to bring all regions into a single system, without erasing their distinctiveness. The “Map of the Traces of Yu” is grid map scaled at 100 lǐ (ca. 30 miles) to the square (about a 1:4.5 million scale). It aims at accuracy in depicting the coastline, rivers, lakes and mountains, with the depicted river system being an attempt to capture the uncertain account of the rivers in the ancient text. At the same time it

7 Ge Zhaoguang 葛兆光, "Songdai "Zhongguo" yishi de tuxian -- guanyu jinshi minsuzhuyi xiangxi de yige yuanruan S代“中國”意識的凸顯--關於近世民族主義思想的一個源流," Wen shi zhe 文史哲 (Qinghua University), no. 1 (2004). Ge argues that the rise of foreign states in the north during the course of the Tang-Song transition led to a new national self-consciousness, in which spatial and cultural boundaries came to be more sharply drawn than before, and a concern over political legitimacy (統) and moral authority (道統)

locates the modern Song capitals and prefectures by on the physical landscape. It does not include the Great Wall and although the map covers parts of Liao, Xia, and Dali, it does not mark their administrative units (with the exception of the sixteen prefectures disputed with Liao). It draws no boundaries—but it is unclear whether it is avoiding the subject or reflecting the court’s aggressive push at the borders. It is bereft of any text and depends on the viewer’s ability to intuitively grasp it as a spatial proposition about and representation of Song relative to the earliest known account of the world. It is far more accurate than other known contemporary maps. It belongs to a tradition of spatially accurate national map-making, dating back to the Pei Xiu (224-271), but the point of the map is not spatial accuracy but a historical claim: the present world is continuous with antiquity.

A different approach, but one that supports the continuity of the present with the past, is evident in the commercially printed Handy Maps of Geography Through the Ages 當代地理指掌圖 from the twelfth century. This atlas creates historical continuity through its depiction of political and administrative features with forty-four maps and accompanying texts, from antiquity through the Northern Song. It begins with a general map of “Territories of the Hua 華 and the Yi 夷 in Past and Present” that identifies Song administrative units and foreign states and a second general map (now leaving out the Korean peninsula), “Names of Mountains and Rivers of the Hua and Yi Through the Ages,” which also names Song administrative units. The maps are based on a common template that includes the Great Wall and Northern Song prefectures; they cover mainly what we would today call “China proper.” Because the maps label the Northern Song prefectures the viewer can look at any past period and locate contemporary prefectures within the administrative structure of the past.

A contemporary work does the same thing without recourse to maps. The Extensive Record of the Realm 興地廣記 is a privately compiled historical gazetteer in two parts. The first lists the upper administrative hierarchy in past periods (Tribute of Yu, Shun, seven Warring States, Qin, Han, Three Kingdoms, Jin, Tang, Tang military governors, and the Five dynasties), but lists within each the Northern Song prefectures. The second part details the Song administrative hierarchy, down to the county 縣 level, and gives the administrative history of each (i.e. its founding and changes over time). The preface suggests that this is not only a reference work, readers should see from it that there is spatial continuity between the present and antiquity, and this conclusion apparently is meant to support the compiler’s stated opposition to the court’s efforts to expand Song territory, a point to which I shall return later. Both works, one mainly cartographic and the other much like a database, construct for the reader a larger entity that is continuous over time, one by focusing on physical geography and the other on administrative geography.

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9 Cao Wanru 曹婉如 and et al., eds., Zhongguo gudai ditu ji 中國古代地圖集, 3 vols. (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1990-94), vol 2, pl. 54-56.
10 Shui Anli 稅安禮, Lidai dili zhizhang tu 當代地理指掌圖 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, rpt. 1989).
11 Ouyang Min 歐陽念, Yu di guang ji 興地廣記, ed. Li Yongxian 李勇先 and Wang Xiaohong 王小紅 (Chengdu Sichuan daxue chubanshe 2003).
12 Ibid., 1247.
Although not one of these three works names the larger entity they are depicting, the Handy Atlas makes clear that the subject is the land of the Hua in its first two maps but almost never uses the term Zhong guo (in one case it means the north and in another both north and south). However, taken together, these works show how much middle period views had departed from what Mark Lewis sees in early China when, he tells us, “Universality was asserted as a privilege of the ruler and his agents, while ordinary people remained locked in the limited realms defined by their households, their village, or their region. This contrast justified the former’s power and the latter’s impotence.”

The Handy Atlas was a commercial product and its contents fed other commercial compilations such as the Extensive Record of the Forest of Affairs (事林廣記), the most popular household encyclopedia of the late thirteenth and fourteenth century. There was enough historical geographic information available to scholars through the market that in the 1180s Ni Pu 倪朴, a local scholar in Pujian 浦江, Wuzhou 妥州, had the means to draw an eight-foot square map showing changes in the northern border throughout history.

These historical compendia, maps, and gazetteers relate the historical succession of dynastic states to a larger sense of spatiotemporal continuity. There was a long tradition of treating a succession of dynastic states as the line of continuity connecting the present to antiquity. Each dynastic state had its own name, administrative system, and territorial claims. Thus the Great Song State (980-1279) succeeded the last of the five short-lived dynasties of the north that followed the demise of the Great Tang State (618-907), and legitimated its claim by having the last emperor of its predecessor formally abdicate the throne. Had there been only one dynastic state at any one moment, abdication ceremonies might have been enough, but during some periods multiple dynastic states coexisted. Since Ban Gu’s History of the Han, which had argued that the Liu family was biologically connected to the sage kings, and thus represented the “correct continuity” (正統) with antiquity, some had tried to make sense out of political change and fragmentation by supposing a single line of succession of “legitimate” dynasties, through a combination of abdication ceremonies and assertions that natural portents had signaled heaven’s reassignment of the mandate to rule. The last great debate over this sort of legitimate succession took place in the Great Jin State (1115-1234) of the Jurchens, who had taken the northern plain from the Great Song State. It has been argued that the decision during the Yuan to compile dynastic histories of Liao, Song, and Jin changed the situation by treating conquest dynasties as equally legitimate.

Dynastic states created a history with a high degree of definition. Dynastic states were finite in time, they had starting points and end points and they were, at any given moment, boundaried space. Dynastic states organized their territory, at first through a feudal

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13 Shui Anli 稅安禮, Lidai dili zhizhang tu 歷代地理指掌圖, 101, 8.
15 Wu Shidao 吳師道, Jing xiang lu 敬鄉錄, Xu Jin hua cong shu (Yongkang: Yongkang Hu shi Meng xuan lou 永康胡氏夢選樓, 1924), 6.10a-11a
16 This is analyzed in Hok Lam Chan, Legitimation in Imperial China: Discussions Under The Jurchen Chin Dynasty (1115-1234) (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1984).
17 Tsustumi Kazuaki 坂本一昭, "Chūgoku no jigazō -- sono jikan to kūkan o kite suru mono 中國的自畫像 -- その時間と空間を規定するもの."
system of power sharing or, beginning with the Qin unification of 221 BC, through a
centralized, hierarchical administrative system of commanderies (or prefectures) and
counties (or subprefectures). The capital(s) where the court and ruler resided defined the
center(s) of a dynastic state. Its laws and rituals defined ranks, privileges and duties. And
the logic of hereditary succession provided for the perpetuation of authority during the
lifetime of the dynastic state. In all these ways dynastic states defined space and time and
social position, making it possible to locate any person or locality with reference to the
state.

The “comprehensive” works discussed above were transdynastic: they did not deny
dynasties as building blocks of historical time and space but they supplied ways of
thinking about the larger entity that states, localities, and individuals were part of. They
were about something more than the traditional discourse of the dynastic state. But why
not make Zhong guo the term for this entity? The answer, to adumbrate the discussion
that follows, is that Zhong guo as “the Central Country” served a different purpose. It
posited an entity that existed in a particular kind of relationship to a larger world, one that
had indefinite boundaries, that existed over time without having a definite temporal span,
and that had no single place as its center. Dynastic states were historical facts, but the
Central Country was an ideological construct that claimed history. Belonging to the
Central County was a matter of cultural participation rather than administrative
subordination. Dynastic states did not define the Central Country, but they could claim to
be it.

Central Country Discourse in the Middle Period

In earlier usage zhong guo was a spatial term with cultural meaning that referred to
the “central states” area of Eastern Zhou, which was constituted by the states that shared
the Zhou rituals and surrounded by peoples who did not. The middle period literati who
drew on this tradition were living at a time when the use of the “central states” to refer
exclusively to the central plain region was being challenged on two fronts: by the
growing economic, cultural, and political importance of the south and the state building
of the northern peoples—the Khitans, Jurchens, and Mongols—who occupied first part
and then all of the central plain of the north and finally took the south as well.

The term Zhong guo appears in discussions of relations with the larger world. Usually
the writer speaks from a position “inside” (内) the Central Country about its relations

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18 The best systematic account of the early development of the term zhong guo is Hu Axian 胡阿祥, Wei zai si ming : "Zhongguo" gujin chengwei yanjiu 伟哉斯名 : "中国"古今称谓研究, 243-80. Hu shows that zhong, “central,” is the value and that the use of zhong guo to refer to the states of the central plain is relatively late; and it is at that point that it came to be used as a term of cultural belonging (253-64). He notes too that this allowed for greater inclusion so that states on the northeastern, northwestern, and southern periphery of the central plain came be included at certain points (261-4). Hu’s conclusions about changes after Qin and Han are generally asserted without textual support. In brief he wants to argue that all the territory of any imperial state was treated as the Zhong guo, although he notes that the examples of it meaning the central plain are very numerous, and that this was the case for both the northern conquest dynasties of the period of division and the middle period dynastic states, whom he thinks recognized each other as parts of the Zhong guo (267-73). A search of the term in the Bei shi and Nan shi (Scripta Sinica editions) suggests, however, that when zhong guo was used in the north in a cultural sense it referred to the conquered natives and that when it was used in the south it was used in the context of making a distinction with various foreign tribal peoples. The middle period case will be examined below. Hu’s arguments for the imperial period would appear to be constrained by official policy on a sensitive subject.
with what is “outside” (外), where the outside is constituted by the other countries and different peoples. Those outside, both pastoral tribal formations and sedentary bureaucratic states, were typically referred to collectively as Yi or Yi di 羿狄. Although middle period writers understood Yi di in different ways, ranging from primitives, to barbarians, to foreigners, this was generally a pejorative term—thus the common translation of “barbarians”—and not accepted by the peoples against whom it was used.\footnote{This is evident not only in official Liao, Jin, and Yuan usage but also in the later altering of many of the passages quoted in this essay by the Qing Siku quanshu editors, who replaced term Yi di with wai yi 外裔 and made other changes. The extent of this kind of editorial work is fully visible in the Scripta Sinica edition of the San chao bei meng hui bian.}

We shall see that the term Zhong guo figures in debates that involve views of foreigners, foreign relations, and frontiers. As middle period writers deployed it, the term Zhong guo was both an historically defined place—the “central states” of the feudal lords loyal to the Easter Zhou in the central plain—and a cultural space, where a body of practices had accumulated that constituted a certain civilization. To avoid confusion this essay treats these two aspects of the Zhong guo as “space” and as “culture.” Space and culture were analytically separate but mutually dependent. The danger was that one could be taken without the other. If the Central Country was only defined by culture then wherever the culture existed defined the space where it belonged—in other words, it was not necessary to hold the central plain to claim to be the Central Country; if it was only defined by an historically given space such as the central plain of the north, then the occupiers of that space defined the culture of the Central Country. We shall see that writers wanted keep a linkage between the culture of the Central Country and its historical space, even when in Southern Song the central plain, the historical center of Eastern Zhou, was lost. The southern statecraft writer Chen Liang used both spatial and cultural perspectives in making arguments for the recovery of the northern central plain. In letters to the Song emperor in 1178 and 1188 he treats the spatial Zhong guo as the “central states” area of Eastern Zhou: “How could heaven make the south limit itself to being beyond this one river [the Yangzi] and not have it be one with the Zhong guo.” 天豈使南方自限於一江之表,而不使與中國通而為一體.\footnote{Chen Liang 陳亮, Chen Liang ji 陳亮集, ed. Deng Guangming. Supplemented edition. ed. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), 1.17, Letter to Emperor Xiaozong of 1188.} Chen grants that the historical culture of the Zhong guo could continue outside its original historical space, but he contends that without recovering that space Song would ultimately lose authority. Chen has two arguments for why the north must be recovered. First, to the emperor:

> Your subject holds that the Zhong guo is the correct qi of heaven-and-earth. It is where heaven’s mandate is planted. It is where the mind of humanity converges. It is where [official] robes and caps, rites and music collect. It is that by which a hundred generations of emperors and kings have continued in succession. How could this be violated by the perverse qi of the Yi di from outside of heaven-and-earth. Unfortunately they were able to violate it, with the result that the robes and caps, rites and music of the zhong guo have been taken and lodged on the periphery. Heaven’s mandate and the mind of humanity still have something they are tied to.
But how can on this account we be secure over the long term and free of trouble?  
臣竊惟。中國天地之正氣也。天命之所鍾也。人心之所□也。衣冠
禮樂之所萃也。百代帝王之所以相承也。豈天地之外夷狄氣之所可
奸哉。不幸而能奸之。 至于挈中國衣冠禮樂而寓之偏方。天命人心
猶有所繫。然豈以是為可久安而無事也。

Chen continues that for the south to seek peace and no longer aspire to recovering the Zhong guo is analogous to putting all one’s energy into one of the four limbs and letting the others atrophy; just as such a body cannot be sustained and neither can Song. He then turns back to the history of the northern and southern dynasties. The southeast may have had a cultural claim but once the foreign Tabgatch occupied in the north and, under Emperor Xiaowen (r. 471–99) of the Northern Wei,
fixed Luoyang at the capital and cultivated the robes and caps, rites and
music of the Zhong guo then the old robes and caps, rites and music to the
east of the Yangzi were no longer that to which heaven’s mandate and the
mind of humanity was tied. Thus those who unify all under heaven in the
end are in the northwest, they are not in the southeast.  

In short, the Song dynasty in the south has the culture but not the space. If those
who occupy the central plain adopt the culture of the Zhong guo as well, then they
will be legitimate and Song will lose its claim to be the rightful ruler of all under
heaven. This argument depends upon the assumption that there is a culture there
and that it can be acquired; Chen is not claiming that foreign peoples can replace
what is there with their own culture and still be legitimate.

This leads to Chen’s second argument, aimed at his literati audience. If those
foreigners who hold the historical place Zhong guo impose their own culture on it then
the inhabitants of the place will lose all that the historical culture of the Zhong guo was
created to do for them—something that Southern Song literati traveling to the north
reported was happening. In this case he opposes cultural assimilation and calls for
recovering the north in order to save the culture:

The sages defended the Zhong guo with canons and limited the Yi di
with borders, thus to make clear that they were not to mix. However, the
mandate resides with the populace, and [in that regard] it was not
appropriate to make a distinction between Yi di and Zhong guo. Thus the
idea of caring for both arose and the principle of peace on both sides
gained currency. It got to the point that [our past dynasties] wanted to
marry daughters to them, counting on the goodwill of kinship to secure a

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22 Chen Liang 陳亮, Chen Liang ji 陳亮集, 1.2.
23 Ge Zhaoguang 葛兆光, “Songdai ”Zhongguo” yishi de tuxian -- guanyu jinshi minsuzhuyi sixiang de yige yuan yuan 宋代“中國”意識的凸顯--關於近世民族主義思想的一個源流,” 11.
day of peace. It is because they are not practiced in ritual
and righteousness that they are called Yi di. Can we then use
the norms of human relations to rein them in?\textsuperscript{24}

Chen then provides an answer to his question:

If there is the Zhong guo there must be the Yi di. The constant
way of handling the Yi di was most developed in Zhou and its
transformation [i.e. its corruption] is recorded in the Spring
and Autumn Annals.

The Zhou solution was separation, but as Zhou declined:

The Zhong guo and Yi di were mixed together and became one.
After that [the southern state of] Chu first usurped [the title of] king
and, using the ways of the Yi di, acted up in Zhong guo. Wu and Yue
rose from the south and competed with Jin and Chu for
hegemony…

Today the central plain has already changed into Yi di. If we understand
the ways of the Zhong guo then it is fine if [domestically we first] clean
house in order to carry out reforms [preparatory to a military campaign,
but] if we should let the populace [of the Zhong guo] be transformed by
the way of the Di without there being a point when it will come to an end,
then what is it that is to be valued about humankind? Thus Yang Xiong’s
words: “That to which the five policies are applied, what the seven taxes
nurture, and is at the center of heaven-and-earth is the Zhong guo.” In
Wang Tong’s words: “The center of heaven-and-earth is nothing other
than humankind.” For it is humankind that enlarges the Way, not the Way
that enlarges humankind."\textsuperscript{25}

Chen’s full answer makes clear that being “human” is to be defined in cultural rather than
natural terms. Humankind is central to heaven-and-earth because the extension of all that
is good depends on there being properly cultivated humans to effect it. To keep the
separation between the Zhong guo and the Yi di is to defend the culture and thus the
possibility of human improvement.

In asserting that the possession of the central plain was of the essence, thus leaving
the south spatially marginal, Chen Liang was taking a narrower spatial view than

\textsuperscript{24} Chen Liang 陳亮, Chen Liang ji 陳亮集, 4.48.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 4.48-9.
\textsuperscript{26}洪 is used to avoid the character 弘 in the name of Emperor Taizu’s father.
necessary. In Northern Song some had included the south: Peng Ruli (1042-1093) wrote that during the Five dynasties period “the Zhong guo was divided into six or seven countries” thus including the southern states; and Wang Anshi spoke of “The Zhong guo having the mandate for over 100 years” apparently meaning the Song dynasty rather than the central plain per se. In Southern Song Hong Mai noted that in Zhou times, in contrast to his own, “The territory of the Zhong guo was extremely narrow,” that many named places were outside of it and that the territory included only several tens of modern prefectures; “it apparently was barely one fifth of all under heaven,” which suggests that for Hong the Central Country was not fixed in space.

When Xu Jing, a southerner, describes his account of the embassy to Koryo (Gaoli) in the early twelfth century as the result of “sifting out those things that were the same as the Zhong guo and selecting those that were different, in all over 300 items arranged in forty chapters,” we assume that he is thinking of Great Song in cultural terms and equating it with the Zhong guo. Similarly, documents from Song, Liao and Jin in the Collection of Documents Relating to Treaties with the North During Three Reigns use the term Zhong guo in relation to outside states 166 times. In contrast “Great Song (State)” appears half as often and then in formal exchanges between states, as in “The Emperor of Great Song transmits this letter to His Majesty the Emperor of Great Jin” still the use of Zhong guo carries a certain spatial ambiguity. Does the common phrase “The Yi di have long been a problem for the Zhong guo” refer to the central plain or to the state that claims to be the Central Country? We might ask the same on reading this call to recover the sixteen lost prefectures: “The Liao state will certainly perish, I hope Your Majesty will consider the suffering of [our] former populace and restore the past borders of the Zhong guo.”

More frequent is the use of the Zhong guo when Great Song is being seen as a political actor in relation to foreign states. When Song speakers use it the term suggests that the Song state is serving a historical imperative greater than itself.

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27 Peng Ruli 彭汝繹, “上哲 上哲宗論太平百年所當戒懼” in Zhao Ruyu 趙汝愚, Song chao zhu chen zou yi 宋朝諸臣奏議 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1999), 43. I thank Jaeyoon Song for this reference.
28 Wang Anshi 王安石, Linchuan xian sheng wen ji 臨川先生文集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 62. It is possible, however, that Wang had precisely the northern central plain in mind and that he was saying that heaven’s mandate had been lodged with the dynasty that held that space, rather than with the older Liao dynasty.
29 Hong Mai 洪邁, Rong zhai sui bi 容齋隨筆, Scripta Sinica ed. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1978), 5.64. Noted in Hu Axiang 胡阿祥, Wei zai si ming : “Zhongguo” gujin chengwei yanjiu 伟哉斯名 : "中国"古今称谓研究, 262.
30 Xu Jing 徐兢, Xuanhe feng shi Gaoli tu jing 宣和奉使高麗圖經 Wenhuayuan Siku quanshu (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1983), Preface. I thank Jaeyoon Song for this reference.
32 Ibid., preface 3A.
33 Ibid., 1.2B.
The caitiffs [i.e. the Khitans in the 16 Tang prefectures Song claimed but never held] know that their state will perish and that the Zhong guo will necessarily want its former territory. Thus they will not fight but will accept our guidance, saying that the Zhong guo has gotten what it wanted, and they still can take advantage of the Zhong guo’s power to preserve their lives. But if the intention of the Zhong guo is focused on necessarily destroying them then the caitiffs will later persuade the Jurchens to violate the central plain and threaten our base, all in order to have vengeance. This would be the worst mistake the Zhong guo could make.”

When foreign speakers (in Chinese texts) use the term it seems to be no more than an acknowledgment that Song is at the center. As when Aguda, the Jin founder, tells a Song emissary, “Of what concern is the Zhong guo to me? I myself have moved into Yanshan [prefecture] and it is now mine. How can the Zhong guo get it? [Zhao] Liangsi was unable to reply.” When we read “The Jin men also sent a proclamation reading: ‘The Zhong guo has made a covenant [with us]. We have come to punish rebellious ministers. You should supply us with provisions.’”

The Centrality of Culture and the Universality of Morality: The Zhong guo and the Yi Di

It is generally held that Confucius already had the idea that the centrality of the Zhong guo was justified by its role as the source of civilizing models. The idea that Confucius used the Spring and Autumn Annals to make a moral-cultural distinction between the Zhong guo and Yi di comes from the Gongyang and Guliang commentaries, but the phrase that sums this up in commentaries from the middle-period on comes from Han Yu’s influential essay, “On the Origin of the Way” 原道. Han’s point was that Confucius put culture ahead of place: although some of the feudal states of Eastern Zhou were regarded as being Yi di and outside of the “central states,” Confucius’ approach was to “treat feudal lords who used Yi rituals as Yi but if they advanced to [using the rituals of] the zhong guo then he regarded them as zhong guo.”

34 Ibid., 9.60B
35 Ibid., 16.112A.
36 Ibid., 18.131A.
37 Han Yu 韓愈 and Ma Qichang 马其昶 (ed.), Han Changli wen ji jiao zhu 韩昌黎文集校注 (Shanghai: Gudian wenxue chubanshe, 1957), On the Origin of the Way. Han’s interpretation owes much to the Gongyang Commentary.
The sage kings had transmitted it and Confucius had preserved for posterity in texts. What set the Zhong guo apart was that “The men of Zhong guo have maintained it through the generations.”

For Han Yu the transmission of this Way had taken place in a certain place, but it had also been lost in that same place; his mission was to persuade literati to rediscover it for themselves. This was a matter of choice; this Culture/Way would only be effective if literati acted self-consciously to choose it.

Han Yu’s “Way of the Sages” was derived from an understanding of antiquity. He was, ultimately, a culturalist. In contrast the Neo-Confucian moral philosophers supposed that the fundamental principles on which the cultural forms of a moral world were based were always immanent in all people, wherever they lived. As the great Neo-Confucian leader Zhu Xi explained: “If there is any distance [from the Way in one’s personal behavior] then this mind will have died. In the Zhong guo it is this principle and in the Yi di it is also just this same principle.”

It followed that just as the Yi di were capable of morality the Zhong guo was capable of abandoning it. Zhu tells his students:

“How Aguda was obstinate; he constantly spoke in terms of maintaining trust. Whenever his generals wanted to raise troops and charge the other side with crimes Aguda did not allow it, saying: ‘The treaty I have made with Great Song is already fixed, how can we break a treaty!’ The Yi di were able to maintain trust and righteousness but the fact of our breaking the treaty and losing trust thus caused such anger among the Yi di. Every time one reads his letter it pains the reader.”

If fundamentally the same moral principles were endowed in all humans (including the Yi di of the present and past) what justified a distinction between the Zhong guo and the Yi di? Theoretically, from a Neo-Confucian philosophical perspective, there was no justification. In a passage frequently cited today Lu Jiuyuan states: “If a sage should appear across the eastern or the western sea, the northern or the southern, this mind will be the same and this principle will be the same. Hundreds of thousands of generations into the past and into the future this mind will be the same and this principle will be the same.”

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38 Ibid., 20.
40 Ibid., 127.3050.
41 Yang Jian 杨簡, Cihu yi shu 慈湖遺書, Yingyin Wenyuange Siku quanshu (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1983), 5.2b.
Why had not the sages solved this problem once and for all when they ruled the world, when they “made all under heaven one family and the Zhong guo one person?” 42 以天下為一家，以中國為一人 Zhu Xi’s answer is that the sages had, by transforming the inhabitants of the central state with culture, differentiated them, although some customs from those primitive undifferentiated times had survived. He explains: “In the most ancient times the Zhong guo and Yi di were about the same. Later when the sages came forth they reformed [us] but there were aspects that they did not finish, such as the impersonator of the dead at a sacrifice.” 43 杜佑說，上古時中國但與夷狄一般，後出聖人改之.有未盡者，皆其一也. Lu Jiuyuan had a similar explanation:

The sages’ valuing the Zhong guo and disparaging the Yi di was not a case of selfishly favoring the Zhong guo. The Zhong guo obtained the qi of centrality and harmony and this necessarily was where ritual and righteousness resided. Their valuing of the Zhong guo was not valuing the Zhong guo it was valuing ritual and righteousness. Even when [the Zhong guo] went through decline and chaos, the models of the Former Kings still existed, their remaining customs were not completely extinguished. 44 聖人貴中國，賤夷狄，非私中國也。中國得天地中和之氣，固禮義之所 在。貴中國者，非貴中國也，貴禮義也。雖更衰亂，先王之典刑猶 存，流風遺俗，未盡泯然也。

In short it was the culture facilitated by superior geography, not inherent human differences, that separated the inhabitants of the two realms. It followed that the Central Country was the only available vehicle for defending that culture against the Yi di.

Lu Jiuyuan’s claim had a precedent in the Comprehensive Canons of Du You, Han Yu’s contemporary, and Zhu Xi in the passage above was citing Du You. The section on foreign states in the Comprehensive Canons begins.

Within what [heaven] covers and [earth] supports, on which the sun and moon shine, Hua xia occupies the center of the land, and living things receive qi that is correct. Its humans have a character that is harmonious and a capability that is generous. Its earth is most productive and its products multitudinous. Thus it could give birth to the sagely and worthy, who continued the use of law and instruction, corrected faults when they arose, and exploited the benefits in things. Since the Three Kings and Five Emperors, every generation has had men appropriate to it. Ruler and minister, older and younger were ranked; the teaching of the Five Constants and Ten Norms were complete. Filial piety and parental caring were born here; kindness and love became strong here. The ruler’s might

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42 This phrase, from the Li yun chapter (9.20) of the Book of Rites, is cited in various Song commentaries on the Classics and, most appropriately in explications of Zhang Zai’s “Western Inscription.” See also Zhu Xi 朱熹, Zhu Xi ji 朱熹集, ed. Guo Qi 郭齊 and Yin Bo 尹波 (Chengdu: Sichuan jiaoyu chubanshe, 1996), 65.536, letter to Lu Zimei.
43 ———, Zhuzi yulei 朱子語類, 90.2310.
44 Lu Jiuyuan 陸九淵, Xiangshan ji 象山集, Yingyin Wenyuan Siku quanshu (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1983), 23.3b. “Lecture on the Great Learning.” I thank Professor Yu Yunguo 虞雲國 for this reference.
was proclaimed and those below were secure. Authority was not divided and the laws were unified. That those who lived there were greatly rewarded was truly due to this.

In the past a worthy said, “After the Way is lost they turn to virtue, after virtue is lost they turn to benevolence, after benevolence is lost they turn to righteousness, after righteousness is lost they turn to ritual.” Truly he meant paring down what is thick to make it thin, diluting strong wine to make it weak. He also said, “Among the ancients people went to their deaths without ever becoming involved with one another; they did not exchange, they did not fight; they sought only to be self-sufficient.” This is a technique for dealing with the sick—praise the purity of the past in order to encourage them to admire it. It is common for humans to feel that the antiquity was better than the present; they were simpler then and there were few problems. Indeed it was admirable. But it was perhaps not free of degenerate customs and corrupt habits. Think back to the Zhong hua of antiquity, they were in may ways like the Yi di of today. Among them there is residing in nests and caves, burials without a planting of trees [i.e. no graveyards], eating with the hands, impersonators of the corpse at sacrifices; I mention but a few examples for I cannot cite them all. Their territories are of the extremes and their qi is obstructed. They do not bring into being sages and worthies; no one reforms their old customs, or instructs them as to what is not permitted; ritual and righteousness does not reach them. They are outside and not inside; they are distant and not close. If they come then control them; if they depart then defend against them. Perspicacious literati of earlier ages have already spoken of this in detail. Du then proceeds to summarize the history of foreign relations to show that cultural superiority does not equate to military superiority. Attempts to conquer the Yi di have

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45 Dao de jing 道德經

46 Du You 杜佑, Tong dian 通典, 185.4978-80. The idea that the Zhong guo was in the midst of geographical extremes and a place where things were perfected is already found in the Xun zi; see Lewis, The construction of space in early China, 210.
failed repeatedly, at tremendous human cost. “To hold what is full is difficult; to know what is enough is not easy.” 夫持盈固難，知足非易. But the lesson is clear, as his own times have shown, foreign adventures lead to loss, not to gain.

Du’s geographic-naturalistic explanation for cultural progress was based on the central plain; he roots cultural superiority in geographic space. But I think, at least in Southern Song, some were more willing than Chen Liang to imagine that in cultural terms the Central Country could exist independently of its spatial origins. The statecraft thinker Ye Shi quoted approvingly from the Strategies of the Warring States (戰國策):

The Zhong guo is the place where perspicacity and intelligence abide; where wealth gathers; where the sages teach; where benevolence and righteousness are practiced; where the Odes and the Documents, ritual and music are employed; where genius and technique are tested; where distant places go to observe; where the Man and the Yi find their models. 中國者聰明睿智之所居也。財用之所聚也。聖人之所教也。仁義之所施也。詩書禮樂之所用也。異敏技藝之所試也。遠方之所觀赴也。蠻夷之所儀行也。

From this perspective the survival of the Central Country (wherever it might be) in world historical terms required understanding that it held its position in the world because it maintained the highest standards and achievements of humanity.

Central Country Rhetoric and Imperialism

In almost the cases discussed above the speakers use the term Zhong guo when they want to make a distinction between their country and the Yi di other. This is not simply to reinforce a sense of superiority; they are making a point about the nature of the difference. The Central Country has its position by virtue of its culture, and it is the preservation of that culture that justifies maintaining the difference. But why make this argument? We can easily suppose that in Southern Song it was self-serving—a way of saying that we may have lost the north but at least we are culturally superior—and that in Northern and Southern Song it was a way of saying that the state-building of the northern peoples did not in fact make them equal to Song. But in fact in some cases the issue was not national self-justification but an internal debate in which a commitment to morality and culture was pitted against an imperialist foreign policy. This was already evident in the passage from Du You quoted above, and it reemerges in Northern and Southern Song. Ye Shi explains this in a series of essays on foreign relations.

One maintains a country with principles, with normative names, and with the ability to change according to the circumstances. For the Zhong guo not to govern the Yi di is principle. For the Zhong guo to be the Zhong guo and for the Yi di to be Yi di is the normative name. We are in control of both. Therefore if they come to pillage then in this case we go to war with them; if they come to submit then in this case we receive them; to order them according to their reasons for coming is the ability to change according to the circumstances…The reason the Zhong guo is the Zhong guo is simply because it has these three thing. If we cast aside the tools by

47 Ye Shi 葉適, Xi xue ji yan 習學記言 Yinyin Wenyuange Siku quanshu (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1983), 18.9a. Citing Zhan guo ce (Scripta Sinica ed.) 19.656.
which we will necessarily be victorious and merely rely on deceit and force than we will have transformed ourselves into Yi di…However, although the Yi di are unprincipled, they always expect good faith and principle from the Zhong guo. The Zhong guo regards the Yi di as unprincipled and thus responds to them without employing good faith and principle. It does not understand that this is the reason it is the Zhong guo. Basically it cannot abandon something because the Yi di lack it.

To argue for living up to one’s own values and against imperial expansion had particular salience because the New Policies emperors from the 1070s into the 1120s had fought to expand the frontiers, resulting in the loss of the north.

In this context to speak in terms of the Central Country as a larger national entity could be an alternative to “all under heaven” with its implicit claim to universal kingship. Lü Zuqian, contemporary and friend of Ye Shi and Chen Liang, taught one of the important texts from the New Policies era, Fan Zuyu’s Mirror of the Tang. I have only translated those comments where Lü adds emphasis to Fan’s text.

The Central Country’s having Yi di is like day having night, yang having yin, and the noble man having the small man. When the Central Country fails in governance then the four Yi attack. We can know in general how the former kings controlled them. Shun said, “Reject schemers and the Man and Yi will lead each other in submitting.”

He also said, “Be without disrespect, be without negligence; the four Yi will come and recognize your kingship.” In which case if you want them to submit nothing is better than rejecting schemers. If you wish them to come and recognize your kingship nothing is better than being free of disrespect and negligence.” “Be kind to the distant, and cultivate the ability of the near.” They ordered the inside and gave security to the outside and peoples of different customs accepted their influence and admired their principles. They did not seduce them with profit, they did not coerce them with might, and they came of themselves. They aided those who wished to

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49 Shun dian, Legge (Shu King, p 42) “Be kind to the distant, and cultivate the ability of the near. Give honour to the virtuous, and your confidence to the good, while you discountenance the artful--so shall the barbarous tribes lead on one another to make their submission.” 遠柔能遜，愷德允元，而雖任人，蠻夷率服 (p 36 in the Google version of the Sacred Books of the East edition)
50 “Da yu mo,” Lü Zuqian notes that this was an admonition to Shun, not his own words. In fact it was Shun to Yu. Legge (Shu King, p 47) “Be without idleness or omission, and the barbarous tribes all around will come and acknowledge your sovereignty.” 無怠無荒，四夷來王. (p 40 in the Google version of the Sacred Books of the East edition)
51 Shun dian, Legge (Shu King, p 42)
adhere. They did not force those who did not wish to. Therefore they did not exhaust the people or waste resources.

As for rulers in later ages: some hated them and wanted to extinguish them, some took delight in them and wanted to get them to come. These two are both wrong. Why is that? Although they are Yi di they are also like the people of the Central Country. They pursue the beneficial and avoid the harmful; they desire life and dislike death. How are they different from people? [Lü Zuqian: That is to say, although the Yi di are not the same sort as the Central Country their desire for life and dislike of death are also the same as the people of the Central Country.] A king nurtures everything within heaven-and-earth. He ought even to care about the birds and beasts, the shrubs and trees; how much more so humans. Would he want to destroy them? Destroying them is certainly not allowable, how much more so when it is impossible to vanquish them and he ends up destroying his own people. This is something a humane person will not do. The one who did it was the First Emperor of Qin.

Given the constraints of the landscape and the influence of the environment, their languages are different and their material desires are not the same. When [one of our rulers] takes their territory he cannot occupy it; when he gets their people he cannot command them. In organizing them into prefectures and countries he values appearances above reality. In addition, since he sees getting them as a meritorious achievement he will have to see losing them as shameful. If the loss does not happen under him then it will happen under his descendants. Thus there are the exhaustion of campaigns and the burdens of provisioning. The people do not survive it and he accordingly perishes. Yangdi of Sui is an example.

Moreover, the territory of the Central Country is extensive, its people are many. Better not to take them and not to lose. Improve our ritual and music and administration. Nurture our people with beneficence, so that “farmers have surplus grain and women have surplus cloth.” Is this not greatly to the credit of an emperor or king?

Thus to make foreign demands is as difficult as those cases and not to have foreign demands is as easy as this. But why then do rulers of men always reject what is easy and practice what is difficult? If they ignore what is near and prefer what is far, if they are fed up with the old and scheme for the new, then if they do not end up as Qin they will end up as Sui. Even if they do not end up perishing they will usually end up with the same problems. Taizong [of Tang] boasted of his achievement and ability, his ambitions were infinite. He wanted to make Hua and Yi, central and foreign, one. This was not the way to create a legacy and bring security to the central country. This ought to be a warning and is not to be admired.

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52 Lü Zuqian: citing the Mencius.
53 Lü Zuqian: citing the Yue ji
Fan Zuyu wants to hold two positions at once: the Central Country as culture is superior and ought to be sought out and emulated by outsiders and there ought to be spatial distinction and non-interference between the Zhong guo and Yi di. In the end Ye, Fan, Lü, Du, and Zhu can only say that the Central Country is responsible for maintaining (its own) standards of morality without pressing them on others and for defending itself. Expansion and conquest are self-destructive.

The Foreign Alternative to Central Country Discourse

State building among the northern peoples, the breakdown of the system of foreign relations, and imperial adventurism led to the loss of the central plain to the Jurchens in 1126, the retreat of the court south of the Yangzi River, and ultimately to the Mongol-empire and its conquest of the Song in the 1270s.

54 Fan Zuyu 范祖禹 and Lü Zuqian 呂祖謙 (annotations), Tang jian 唐鑑, Yinyin Wenyuange Siku quanshu (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1983), 6.
The Jurchens, after their conquest of the northern part of Song, were undecided about whether they would be an external state that had taken possession of the central plain or whether they were going to recast themselves as the latest incarnation of the Central Country. After the attempt to conquer the south failed Emperor Shizong supported a retrenchment. Yet his administration tried both to maintain its otherness, through a program to maintain the Jurchen customs of the northeast for example, and to claim the same ethical values of the Central Country’s antiquity and a commitment to civil culture by reviving the examination system for both literati of the north and for Jurchens (using the new Jurchen script). Texts in Chinese that quote Jurchen leaders occasionally do use the term the Zhong guo, but it is not immediately clear when a speaker is making a reference to the space of the ancient central states or has in mind a spatiocultural claim to being the Central Country. Thus the objection that tea was a “weed from Song soil” for which the “valuable silk textiles of the Zhong guo” should not be traded could merely refer to the central plain. A similar ambiguity crops up when, reflecting on the rise of the Mongols that placed Jin in the middle between enemies, the Jin emperor tells his generals: “The reason the northern troops are always victorious is because they rely on northern horse power against the technology of the Zhong guo. It is indeed difficult for us to match them, but as for the Song people, they are hardly a concern. With three thousand troops I could easily move about between the Yangzi and Huai Ri; you should try harder.”

But at least in one instance a Jurchen leader, in the course of agreeing with a chief councilor’s comment that “Song has long been a defeated state, it will certainly not dare move against us,” appears to grant the Song view of itself: “Although Song is the Zhong guo, its power is inadequate [to threaten us].” Perhaps because they were never as successful in conquest, the Jurchen court’s leaders differ from the Manchus in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in two respects. First, the Jurchens do not assert, as Qing emperors (but not literati) did, that the Zhong guo was coterminous with their territory, thus making the various frontier peoples that earlier times had called Yi di now the “the populace of the Zhong guo” 中國之民. Second, the Jurchens do not make a point of recognizing the Zhong guo as transdynastic cultural entity representing civilized life. The Manchus’ acceptance of that proposition explains their desire to expand the space of the Zhong guo, thus allowing them to be integral to it, in a manner that fits the twentieth century better than the middle period.

56 In addition to the examples cited below, see Tuotuo 脫脫, ed., *Jin shi* 金史, Scripta Sinica ed. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 63.1506, 93.2078, 98.167, 175, 180.
57 Ibid., 49.1109.
58 Ibid., 119.2599.
59 Ibid., 93.2064.
60 This view of the Qing imperial use of the Zhong guo, which contrasts with the conclusions drawn in some recent scholarship, is from Gang Zhao, "Reinventing China: Imperial Qing Ideology and the Rise of
What the Jurchens did contribute was a rather different and, from the documentary evidence, a far more common approach, one that the Mongols’ Great Yuan adopted and extended. This was the legal recognition of ethnopolitical distinctions among the various peoples they had conquered. For the Mongols these were more important than the cultural-political distinctions between officials, literati, and registered population (min) and obviated the need to take recourse to terms like the Zhong guo. An example is a ruling in 1264 that “Meng-gu-ren will fill the post of overseer (darughaci) of each route, Han-ren will fill the post of commander, Hui-hui will fill the post of co-administrator. This is to be the system forever.” And five years later: “Nü-zhen, Qi-dan, and Han-ren serving as overseers (darughaci) of all routes are to be removed. Hui-hui, Wei-wu, Nai-man, and Tang-wu are to continue as before.”

The use of Han-ren to refer to the native inhabitants of the conquered territory began with the medieval northern conquest dynasties and was common currency by Song times. It was an ethnocultural distinction—as in “their clothing and speech is generally like that of Han-ren”—but, I see not evidence that it was used in this period as an ideological foundation for state building. In Song the term comes up in the context of frontier populations, when a distinction is made between our kind of people and the distinctive others on the frontier (the Fan-ren). Thus, for example, in the context of an effort to expand the frontiers, which led to the incorporation of foreign populations, Wang Anshi proposes that “If today the 300,000 Han-ren can exchange goods for land and the Fan-ren get goods, then both sides will get what they want. The fields will be cultivated and goods will flow. Fan and Han will be one; the situation will be easy to manage.” An opponent argued against integration, demanding that intermarriage be forbidden. But an opponent argued against integration, demanding that intermarriage be forbidden.

In Liao, Jin, and Yuan sources there are frequent references to ethnocultural groups, as when a Jin edict orders that “When officials draft announcements, the Jurchens, Khitans, and Han people are each to use their own writing systems.” Perhaps because they had many more groups to deal with and maintained their rule by working with the different population groups that had submitted, the Yuan relied heavily on quotas in apportioning office and giving access to resources; quotas subordinated those they had conquered but also guaranteed a degree of participation and representation. Court policy sometimes distinguished between different groups, as we have seen above, but sometimes it lumped groups into larger categories, in which the

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Modern Chinese National Identity in the Early twentieth Century,” *Modern China* 32, no. 1 (2006): 7-14. I thank Mark Elliott, who has reached much the same conclusion, for referring me to this article.

62 Ibid., 6.118.
63 Tuotuo 脫脱, ed., *Song shi* 宋史, 251.14152.
64 Ibid., 144.4759.
65 This was Liu Xiang 劉庠 (1023-1086), see Ibid., 322.10452.
66 *Jin shi* 金史 4.73.
67 E.g. Song Lian 宋濂, ed., *Yuan shi* 元史, 349, 410, 28, 541, 712, 86.
order of precedence corresponded to the sequence of conquest or submission: the Meng-gu (the various tribes of Mongolia), se-mu (literally “the many kinds,” referring to the various Central Asian peoples), Han-ren (the Khitan, Jurchen, and Han-ren population of Jin), and Nan-ren (the people of Southern Song). In one case we find a larger distinction between the various Central Asian peoples, who are to be given the same privileges as Meng-gu-ren, and the “Nü-zhen and Qi-dan, who are [to be treated] the same as Han-ren. If the Nü-zhen and Qi-dan are from the northwest and do not comprehend Han language they are [to be treated] the same as Meng-gu-ren. Nü-zhen who have lived a long time in Han areas are [to be treated] the same as Han-ren.”

From an imperial perspective one advantage of speaking in terms of ethnopolitical groups was that it avoided suggesting that “the Central Country” and certain population groups had a privileged cultural authority. But this was what literati wanted, as when the northern scholar and Neo-Confucian advocate Xu Heng spoke of it taking thirty years to “change the customs of the north to using the methods of the Central Country. When the Jin State first perished we should have proposed this and it is a great pity that we did not attend to it.”

But another proponent of the reinstatement of sacrifices to the imperial ancestors forsook the appeal to the Zhong guo and argued successfully from precedent: this is what those who held all under heaven, who in the past were Han-ren (but now were not), did. 

The quotas for the civil service examination is a particularly clear case. Ibid., 81.2019-21. I have found one instance of in which the southerners are referred to as “men of Song,” see Yuan shi 元史, 349.

Song Lian 宋濂, ed., Yuan shi 元史, 268.

Ibid., 458.

Ibid., 39.839.


Song Lian 宋濂, ed., Yuan shi 元史, 72.1783-4.
Similarly, the heir apparent could be ordered to “learn the writing of Han-ren” without allowing an implication of centrality, it was just a valuable attribute of one more group of subjects.75

In the memorials and public essays we have those who did deploy the concept of the Zhong guo used it to argue that Great Yuan ought to define the state in terms of the Zhong guo as a transdynastic spatiocultural entity and against policies that used its resources to further expand Great Yuan to areas outside of it. The fact that “Imperial Yuan had integrated all under heaven,” including both the Zhong guo and the foreign was rarely celebrated.76 Instead we find opposition to expeditions against the southwest, Japan, and the Turks, based in each case on the adequacy of the Zhong guo for a state and the harm expansion would do to its inhabitants.77

Great Ming and the Central Country

We may read the pronouncements of Zhu Yuanzhang, the founder of Ming (1368-1644) who rose in the south and drove the Mongols from the central plain, in this context. The Great Ming State went on to fight wars against the Mongols, Vietnamese, and the Japanese in Korea and (after trying to close foreign trade for a century) traded with East and Southeast Asia, India, Arabia, Africa, Europe, and the New World.

The Ming founder attempted to sort out the conundrum created by the fact that despite the ancient distinction between the Zhong guo and the Yi di, for the past century the Yi had also been emperors. After Song, he explained, heaven’s mandate to rule had gone to an extraordinary man from the desert, who “entered the Central Country and became master of all under heaven,” but now he as a man from the southeast had become “the ruler of the Central Country.”78 But in letters to the rulers of foreign states he challenges the legitimacy of the Yuan on cultural grounds. “In the past our Zhong guo was unjustly occupied by the nomads for 100 years, and they then had the Yi di spread across the four quarters, abolishing our Zhong guo’s moral norms...I am now ruler of the Zhong guo and all under heaven are at peace. I fear that the Four Yi do not yet know of this, therefore I am sending ambassadors to report to all countries.”79

75 Ibid., 886.
76 Liu Yueshen 劉岳申, Shenzhai ji 中齋集, Yinyin Wenyuange Siku quanshu (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1983). 東阿縣銅城鎮夫子廟碑 and 雲崖山碑後. Xiao Ju 蕭畜 Qin zhai ji 勤齋集 Yingyin Wenyuange Siku quanshu (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1983). Introduction to the collection by Zhang Chong 張沖. Ouyang Xuan 歐陽玄, Guizhai wen ji 歙齋文集 Yinyin Wenyuange Siku quanshu (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1983). 元故奎章閣侍書學士翰林侍講學士通奉大夫虞雍公神道碑 (for Yu Ji). I agree with the Tsustumi that “united north and south” was aimed at the native audience rather than expressing the Mongols’ view, however it seems to me that this usage refers not to north and south of the Great Wall but the south and the central plain of the north; see Tsustumi Kazuaki 堺 一昭, "Chûgoku no jîgazô -- sono jikan to kûkan o kitei suru mono 中國的自畫像--その時間と空間を規定するもの," 43-44.
77 Su Tianjue 蘇天爵, Yuan chao ming chen shi lue 元朝名臣事略 4.58, Chen Dezhi 陳德芝, Qiu Shusen 邱樹森, and He Zhaoji 何兆吉, eds., Yuan dai zou yì ji lu 元代奏議集録, A.321, B.262.
78 From his announcement on taking the throne, in Qian Bocheng 錢伯城 and et al., eds., Quan Ming wen 全明文 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe 1992), 1.2.
79 Ibid., 18.339 to the King of Zhan-cheng.
I am, he informs the King of Japan, “originally of an old family of the Zhong guo 朕本中國之舊家…” “Since last year I have cut off the northern Yi and ruled the Zhong guo, but I have not yet reported to the four Yi.” 自去歲以來, 殘絕北夷, 以主中國, 惟四夷未報. 80 Earlier, in announcing his intent to the north to take the central plain, he had appealed also to culture and history: “Since antiquity when emperors and kings directed all under heaven, the Zhong guo occupied the inside and regulated the Yi di, and the Yi di occupied the outside and served the Zhong guo. I have never heard of the Yi governing all under heaven. Once the Song gift was transferred, the Yuan as northern Yi entered and ruled the Zhong guo, all inside and outside the four seas submitted as subjects. How could this be due to human strength? In fact it was heaven that gave it. But excellent men and committed literati still were saddened by the overturning of official garb. From that time forth the minister and sons of Yuan did not honor the ancestral instructions, they destroyed the norms.” 81

From the perspective of place, the legitimacy of a dynasty in the “legitimate succession of the Zhong guo” 82 中國正統 was vouchsafed by its possession of the territory. But in speaking the language of the Zhong guo the Ming founder does not appeal to place or the right of the Han-ren and Nan-ren as inhabitants to rule. Rather, he puts culture over place: it is the nomads’ disregard for the civilization that had ancient roots in the Zhong guo that ultimately made their possession unjust even if Heaven had originally given them the mandate to rule. This civilization—the way people lived, their sense of morality, the cultural forms they employed—ought to dominate the Zhong guo and existed distinct from the organization of political power. When he speaks of “my/our Zhong guo” Zhu claims to be committed to it, and it is this that justifies driving out the northern Yi and establishing his own political power. In adopting this language and making his connection to the Zhong guo the primary issue in writing to foreign rulers (he mentions that his state name is Great Ming in passing) the Ming founder was joining those literati from north and south who had distinguished a culture with a history from political authority and thus made southerners equally claimants to the right to define it. 83 Yet he was not immune to the language of population groups, as when he informs the state of Dali that “Over seven years I have restored our Han people’s old country and united the Central Xia. All the states of the four Yi have been informed, and they all have announced themselves as subjects and come with tribute.” 84

80 Ibid., 18.339.
81 論中原檄 in the Huang Ming wenheng皇明文衡 (Sibu congkan); see the discussion in Mittag, “The Early Modern Formation of a National Identity in Chinese Historical Thought—Random Notes on Ming and Early-Qing Historiography”.
82 Qian Bocheng 錢伯城 and al., eds., Quan Ming wen 全明文, 18.339, to the King of Gua-ai.
84 Qian Bocheng 錢伯城 and al., eds., Quan Ming wen 全明文, vol. 1, p. 18.
The founder, although not free of imperial designs (the reconquest of Yunnan being an example), defined the limits on Ming expansion, and thus accepted what his use of the Zhong guo implied, that the Central Country would be surrounded by foreign states on all sides. His successors were less restrained in their exercise of imperial power abroad, but when in 1449 the emperor was captured on an expedition against the Mongols north of the Great Wall, the issue of the Central Country’s relations with the countries of the Yi di came once again to the fore. When in 1487 Qiu Jun presented to the throne his monumental study of statecraft, the Supplement to the Elaboration of Meaning of the Great Learning 大學衍義補, he drew at length on Song literati writings and the founder’s views in arguing for necessity of keeping the Zhong guo and foreign states separate rather than trying to include them in an effort to “make all under heaven one family.”

Qiu spoke not of Great Ming but of the Zhong guo, with origins in antiquity, quoting Zhu Xi: “The Hua xia is the land of the Central Country civilization中國文明之地.” The Ming founder stands out for forcing out the only foreigners to occupy all of the Zhong guo, and recovering the sixteen prefectures that had been lost for 448 years, and the central plain that had been lost for 241 years. The Mongols were illegitimate rulers because they did not honor the cultural tradition of ancient Zhou, and led “our people of the Zhong guo” to forsake it themselves. There is no “great virtue” in trying to attract the Yi di to submit, virtue is culturally specific, it applies to “the land of the Hua xia civilization.” This does not mean that foreign relations should be cut off. Instead they should be intensively managed and supervised. The Ming founder’s view of the world extended into the Pacific Ocean and across Eurasia to the Atlantic, as we know from a giant map (386 cm. x 486 cm) from 1389.

Throughout Qiu makes the point that domestic well-being is the foundation of national security, the central concern of the Central Country is itself and its civilization.

But consistently Qiu Jun argues in terms of population groups and calls for their separation: heaven-and-earth have created a boundary, inside are the Hua, outside are the Yi. Those foreigners who have settled within this boundary must be managed, broken into smaller groups and relocated, so that they disappear as distinct peoples. Perhaps for the first time we have the idea that the Central Country belongs to a certain group of people as much as it does to a culture.

Conclusions

The modern use of Zhongguo/China is different from the middle period use of the Zhong guo/the Central Country. Both are place names (although the place varied over time) but only the second is also an ideological term that defines the cultural position of the country in relation to the outside world. I do not think this is at odds with what we already know.

85 Qiu Jun, Da xue yan yi bu 大学衍義補, ed. Zhou Jifu 周濟夫 (Beijing Shi 北京市: Jing hua chubanshe 京華出版社, 1999), Chapters 143-56 “Controlling the Yi di”.
86 Ibid., 143.1236. I have not located the passage in Zhu Xi’s works.
87 Ibid., 144.1246-9.
88 Cao Wanru 曹婉如 and al., eds., Zhongguo gudai ditu ji 中國古代地圖集, II.pls. 1-5.
89 Qiu Jun, Da xue yan yi bu 大学衍義補, 145.1257-61.
90 Ibid., 143.1237-40.
Worth remarking upon are two other findings. First, those who employed *Zhong guo*/*the Central Country* discourse were in fact proponents of a permanent distinction between themselves and the foreign others in cultural terms (but not necessarily ethnic terms). This precluded the possibility of equality. They also opposed an expansionist foreign policy because they denied that historically different cultures could be harmoniously absorbed into a single polity. Such a position did lead to an acceptance of foreign states, but not to engaging them as partners in any kind of international mission. Doing good was only possible within a domestic context. In this view the relationship with foreign states was fundamentally defensive, and although it did not preclude foreigners coming to acquire cultural and material goods the relationship was one-sided. Assimilation was permitted in theory, although in Qiu Jun’s view true assimilation of a population that was the majority in its own enclave was close to impossible.

Second, another possibility emerged during the middle period. The Jurchens and particularly the Mongols had some success in formally recognizing different population groups as members of a single polity through a quota system. This had the advantage of ensuring a degree of representation to the conquered peoples while writing the privileges of the conquerors into law. This was a system that allowed for the expansion of empire; it was not constrained by culture or place and thus there was no need for cultural assimilation. In fact assimilation was seen as undermining what was in effect a spoils system aimed at privileging the dominant minority population.

It seems to me that these two possibilities do not entirely fit a Chinese/foreign dichotomy. It is true that the proponents of Central Country culture were literati who saw themselves as being the bearers of that culture and who saw cultural learning (and examinations) as a criterion according to which political power should be distributed. But they found allies among highly placed Khitans, Jurchens, Central Asians, and Mongols. Although proponents of quota systems were foreign conquest groups they found supporters among the inhabitants of northern and southern China who were, after all, guaranteed a share. Yet the introduction of ethnopoliitical distinctions as a crucial factor in public life had influence that in Ming could link a people with a polity, the very opposite of what foreign conquerors had tried to achieve.
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