

# The Idea of “Zhongguo” and Its Transformation in Early Modern Japan and Contemporary Taiwan

Chun-Chieh Huang

## I. Introduction

In East Asian intellectual history, while the apparently referential idea of “Zhongguo” received its basic definition in ancient China, it underwent twists and changes in early modern Japan and contemporary Taiwan. In Tokugawa Japan (1600-1868), the idea of “Zhongguo” was altered to denote Japan, not China, in sync with and supported by the development of Japanese national subjectivity. In contemporary Taiwan, the idea of “Zhongguo” contains the two elements of “cultural China” and “political China” and their dialectical relationship. These turns and changes in the idea of “Zhongguo” in Japan and Taiwan are worthy of study in the context of East Asian intellectual history. In Section Two of this paper, we shall examine features of the idea of “Zhongguo” as it evolved in ancient Chinese documents. Section Three then analyzes twists and changes in the idea initiated by Tokugawa intellectuals, who gave it new referential content. Section Four discusses further changes in the idea of “Zhongguo” in contemporary Taiwan. Finally, section Five recounts the main points of this inquiry and offers some concluding reflections.

## II. “Zhongguo” Through China's Process of Self-consciousness Formation: An Assumed Unity of Cultural China and Political China

The expression “Zhongguo” (中國, central state/kingdom) arose during the proto-historic Yin-Shang 殷商 period (14th c.-1045B.C.), appearing initially in oracle bone inscrip-

tions.<sup>(1)</sup> The oracle bone inscriptions included the expression, *wufang* 五方 (five quarters). They all included the expression *zhongshang* 中商 (central Shang), which likely was the direct source of the expression *zhong'guo* (China). Wang Ermin (王爾敏, 1929-) carefully examined 53 pre-Qin texts, and found 28 occurrences of the expression “Zhongguo”. He noted that Pre-Qin writers used “Zhongguo” to express five different meanings, and indicated that, among the five meanings expressed, the most common one took the Xia 夏 people domain as its scope (83%), the next took the boundary of the state as its scope (10%), the third took the imperial capital (*jingshi* 京師) as its scope (5%). All of this indicates that the meaning of the term “Zhongguo” was determined well before the unification of Qin 秦 (221-206B.C.) and Han 漢 (202B.C.-A.D.220). It referred primarily to the territory controlled by the Xia 夏 people and allied states, but sometimes also to the region in which Xia people’s forces were active. The key significance and promise of the term “Zhongguo” lay in providing a systematic ethnic cultural concept.<sup>(2)</sup>

The expression “Zhongguo” in the pre-Qin texts, including the Confucian classics, evolved in the context of East Asia, where imperial China formed a powerful political and cultural backdrop. Out of this special historical backdrop role, the typically Chinese political solipsism,<sup>(3)</sup> Sinocentrism,<sup>(4)</sup> and Sinocentric world order<sup>(5)</sup> took shape. The idea of “Zhongguo” itself evolved in this special political and cultural context. The term “Zhongguo” in pre-Qin texts was not an abstract or general concept, but was subject to the specific explanations or accounts given by the authors and editors of the Chinese classics. Indeed, the term “Zhongguo” used by these authors and editors was an idea imbued with specific content and cultural significance, which reflected and connoted some definite Chinese cultural values.

Broadly, the term “Zhongguo” in the traditional Chinese classics manifested three principal meanings: geographic China, political China, and cultural China. Geographically, China lays at the center of the world. Places located at to the north, south, east and west were regarded as merely peripheral frontier regions.<sup>(6)</sup> Politically, China was the area under immediate imperial jurisdiction. As recorded in the “Yao Dian

堯典” of the *Shangshu*尚書 (*Book of Documents*), the four quarters of China extended to the borders under imperial patrol. Regions beyond imperial jurisdiction were thought to be inhabited by stubborn troublemakers. Hence, the “Yao Dian” speaks of the sage-king Shun舜 expelling four types of troublemakers beyond the four quarters. The *Shijing*詩經 (*Book of Odes*), “Xiang Bo巷伯,” sings, “I would expel them into the north, beyond the border.” And, the *Daxue*大學 (*Great Learning*), reads, “Only the benevolent person (*renren*仁人) can banish such a man and send him into exile, driving him to live amongst the four barbarian tribes, not together with (civilized people) in the central state (China).” As to cultural meaning, “Zhongguo” referred to the civilized world; outlying frontier regions were regarded as uncivilized places, and therefore were called by derogatory expressions as, *guifang*鬼方 (ghost regions), where the people were called “*man*蠻” (southern barbarians), “*yi*夷” (eastern barbarians), “*zon*戎” (western barbarians), and “*di*狄” (northern barbarians).

The expression “Zhongguo” appeared frequently in the Chinese classics. In the *Shijing*詩經, it usually bore political or geographic significance. For example, the ode “Min Lao民勞,” in “Da Ya大雅” (aka “Ta Ya”), reads, “Let us cherish this central kingdom, in order to secure the repose of the four quarters (of the realm).” “Sang Rou桑柔,” also in “Da Ya大雅,” reads, “Lament those of the central kingdom, who met their end in the brambles.” But, when we reach the three commentaries on the *Annals of Spring and Autumn*春秋, i.e., the *Zuozhuan*左傳, the *Gongyang*公羊 and the *Guliang*穀梁, the expression “Zhongguo” takes on a richer, more cultural meaning. For example, a passage in the Duke Cheng成公, eleventh year (508.B.C.) of the *Guliang* 穀梁 reads, “In the state of Ju莒, even though it is a *yi*夷 or *di*狄 barbarian area, it is just like the central kingdom (China).” A passage in the Duke Xuan宣公, fifteenth year (1594B.C.) of the *Gongyang*公羊 reads, “Departing from even (the way of) the *yi*夷 and *di*狄 (barbarians), one cannot comply with (the way of) the central kingdom.” And, in the records of the Duke Zhuang莊公, thirty-first year (662B.C.) of the *Zuozhuan*左傳, reads, “Without the central kingdom, the feudal lords will not release each other’s prisoners of war.” These passages all

express rich cultural connotations. Confucius (551-47B.C.) and Mencius (371-289?B.C.) pressed the cultural significance of China in their thought to the extent that, to them, it signified the highest standard of culture. In the pre-modern East Asian political order, the expression “Zhongguo” carried the political significance of the Chinese imperial court, as well as the cultural significance of Chinese cultural homeland.

Many of the ancient Chinese classics presented “Zhongguo” as the highest state of culture, as the homeland of cultured, ethical people. See for example in the “Qiu Guan Si Kou秋官司寇” in the *Zhouli* (周禮, Rites of Zhou). Another representative expression appears in *Zhanguoce* (戰國策, Stratagems of the Warring States), “Zhaoce (趙策, *Stratagems of the State of Zhao*),”

China (central kingdom) is the place where discerning, wise people dwell, where the myriad creatures and useful implements are found, where the sages and worthies instruct, where benevolence and appropriateness are expressed, where the classics of *Odes, Documents, Rites and Music* are followed, where different ideas and techniques are tried, where distant people are sent to observe, where even the *man*蠻 and *yi*夷 (barbarians) exhibit appropriate conduct.

中國者，聰明叡智之所居也，萬物財用之所聚也，賢聖之所教也，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，蠻夷之所義行也。

This passage expresses vividly the degree of Chinese self-consciousness borne by the term “Zhongguo” even before the Qin-Han unification. This sort of self-consciousness was maintained down through history into the nineteenth century. The Qing (1644-1911) diplomat to Japan, Huang Chunxian黃遵憲 (1848-1905) wrote in the “Lin jiao zhi鄰交志,” chapter of his *Riben Guoji* 日本国志 (*Annals of Japanese History*): “Among the myriad nations of the world, as to the fragrance of fine culture, none is prior to China.”

### III. Reconstruction of the Idea of “Zhongguo” in the Modern Japanese Worldview

The ancient Chinese classics assumed the identity of cultural China and political China in one unified idea of China. When the term was transmitted to Japan, it was twisted,

changed and adapted to the new ethnic and linguistic environment. Let us begin by discussing the Japanese circumstances.

When Tokugawa Japanese Confucianists recited the classics and faced this normative idea of “Zhongguo” and the related Han-barbarian distinction as the core of the East Asian political order and its ideology, they were moved to offer new interpretations in order to ameliorate the resulting split between their own cultural self and political self and to make the Chinese classics more congenial to the Japanese local culture. The Japanese Confucianists applied two methods in reconstructing the meaning of the term “Zhongguo” (central kingdom).

In the first place, they sought to explain the cultural significance of the expression “Zhongguo” in terms of *zhongdao* 中道 (middle way) and its meaning in the *Annals of Spring and Autumn* 春秋.

I cite Yamaga Sokô 山鹿素行 (1622-86), who worked out a cross-cultural analysis and reading of the idea of “Zhongguo”.<sup>(7)</sup> He wrote that he did not know the beauty of Japan herself, but had only taste the delicacies offered through the Chinese classics. Respecting the Chinese lofty personages, how could he give up the quest? How could he lose his will to cultivate? Where should he turn his curiosity? Certainly, he did not need to turn to another place (i.e., geographic China) to cultivate and seek self-realization. Everything existed in Japan. In his reflections, Yamaga boldly changed both the reference and connotation of the expression “Zhongguo” in the Chinese classics. He took “Zhongguo” as referring, ultimately, to Japan.<sup>(8)</sup> After all, China’s (i.e., Japan’s) water and soil truly were beyond compare with that “external court” (*gaichô* 外朝, i.e., China).

Analyzing Yamaga’s method of transforming the meaning of the idea of “Zhongguo”, we discover that the cultural meaning of “Zhongguo” was, for him, the country that hit the mean (obtained the centrality) and had nothing to do with political China. Yamaga said, “Heaven and earth interact, the four seasons rotate, and strike their balance, hence the wind, rain, cold and hot here are not out of balance. Therefore, the water and soil are moist (and fertile), and the people are exquisite. This place is worthy of the name

‘China’ (central kingdom).”<sup>(9)</sup> Yamaga also said that Japan had struck its balance, hence her politics were stable, the human relationships were in good order, and she had not suffered imperial coups.<sup>(10)</sup> In all this, political China could not compare with Japan, the true China. Working out this new interpretation, Yamaga took issue with the old readings of the Chinese classics that had combined the political and cultural aspects of imperial China, arguing effectively that Japan, due to its striking the balance in culture and politics, was superior to the geographic Chinese empire and was much more qualified to be called “Zhongguo” (the central kingdom).

Sakuma Taika 佐久間太華 (?-1783) offered a similar approach to twisting and changing the meaning of the expression “Zhongguo”. Sakuma thought that Japan’s extended period of continuous political rule and secure domestic life provided ample reason to call Japan “Zhongguo”.<sup>(11)</sup> His main argument was that the key difference between Japan and China in this regard was not geographic but in having (or not having) struck the balance and political stability.

Not only Yamaga and Sakuma revised the cultural meaning of “Zhongguo” to refer to Japan, and not to China herself, Asami Keisai 淺見焜齋 (1652-1711) also made a contribution in this regard. Asami considered that, since Japan understood the Way in the *Annals of Spring and Autumn*, Japan could not be considered a barbarian country, and be classified as *yi* 夷 or *di* 狄.<sup>(12)</sup> Like Yamaga, Asami held that, since Japan had struck its balance, Japan was qualified to be called “Zhongguo”. Their patterns of explanation were quite compatible.

Secondly, some Japanese thinkers combined the general meaning of Heaven (tian 天) with “Zhongguo” to create a special reference for the expression.

In “Disputing China” (中國辨 Chûgoku Ben), Asami Keisai drew upon the principle that, “heaven and earth embrace and contain all things (without discrimination),” in order to overturn the age-old distinction between Han and barbarian from the classics, which had always defined the East Asian political order. He argued that Japan had been produced together with heaven and earth, of which each shares a portion of the empire,

with no distinction of social class or wealth observed.<sup>(13)</sup>

Satô Issai 佐藤一齋 (1772-1859) also used the general meaning of “heaven” (*tian* 天) to explain the significance of the expression “Zhongguo”. He wrote:<sup>(14)</sup>

In this vast world, this Way just consists in the “single connecting thread.” When people observe it, they distinguish between China and *yi* 夷 and *di* 狄 (barbarians). When heaven observes it, there is no China nor any *yi* 夷 or *di* 狄.

茫宇宙，此道只是一貫。從人視之，有中國，有夷狄。從天視之，無中國，無夷狄。

Satô considered that the notion of heaven in the classics provided a way to see through the so-called Han-barbarian distinction. We can say that, besides his inborn wisdom, Satô had his creative uniqueness.

Surveying the cross-cultural changes in the expression “Zhongguo”, we note that Tokugawa Confucianists like Yamaga Sokô and the others were able to see through and overturn the established East Asian political order. They forcefully reconstructed the meaning of the expression “Zhongguo” (中國; central kingdom) they had encountered in the Chinese Confucian classics in order to make them more congenial to Confucianism in the Japanese cultural context.

#### **IV. “Zhongguo” in the Contemporary Taiwanese Worldview: Unity and Separation of Political Identity and Cultural Identity**

After Japan defeated China in the Sino-Japanese war in 1895, Taiwan was carved off and given to Japan. From this point, the meaning of “Zhongguo” began to alter for people on Taiwan. We will next discuss changes in the idea of China in contemporary Taiwan.

Throughout the twentieth century, the idea of “Zhongguo” for Taiwanese intellectuals had the two following characteristics:

First, the idea of “Zhongguo” in contemporary Taiwan includes “cultural identity” and “political identity”. Cultural identity is relatively abstract, ideal and long-term, whereas

political identity, in contrast, is relatively concrete and short-term. Cultural identity is more lasting than political identity; in this sense, the Chinese imperial courts and rulers from the Qin and Han dynasties were all travelers in the endless stream of Chinese culture, be they as long as several centuries or as short as a decade. While the political authorities might influence the culture, they absolutely could not alter the content of the culture significantly.

For instance, a wealthy leader of Taiwan after its cessation from Qing China in 1895, Li Chunsheng 李春生 (1813-1924) visited Japan in response to an invitation from the Japanese colonial authority. Writing about his journey upon his return to Taiwan, he reflected that, “although the new grace is compelling, the old legacy are hard to forget.” Li characterized himself as the “people in the lost land” who will not work for the new order.<sup>(15)</sup> Indeed, “people in the lost land” was a full-bodied assessment of the author’s own situation.<sup>(16)</sup> Lian Heng 連橫 (1878-1936), who compiled and wrote the *Comprehensive History of Taiwan* (*Taiwan tongshi* 台灣通史), also wrote “people in the lost land” as a self-description.<sup>(17)</sup> Li Chunsheng and Lian Heng’s self-description as people who would not work for the new order was based upon their Chinese cultural identification, but which was far from any sort of political identification with the ruling authorities in China. This sentiment was shared by the master of national studies, Zhang Binglin 章炳麟 (1869-1936), who wrote, “Taiwan, that is my country.”<sup>(18)</sup>

During the Japanese occupation (1895-1945), Taiwanese intellectuals held a romantic image of cultural China. For example, the Taichung-area cultural figure, Ye Rongzhong 葉榮鐘 (1900-56), writer Wu Zhuoliu 吳濁流 (1900-76), doctor-writer Wu Xinrong 吳新榮 (1906-67) and Taiwanese merchant in China, Wu Sanlian 吳三連 (1899-1988) all viewed China as their own cultural homeland.<sup>(19)</sup> Writer Zhang Shenqie 張深切’s (1904-65) recollection of being forced to have his pigtailed cut off during the Japanese occupation expressed the Taiwanese sense of Chinese cultural identification at that time. He wrote:<sup>(20)</sup>

When we were about to have our pigtailed cut off, our whole family cried. Kneeling before our

ancestors' tablets, hot tears flowed down our faces as we repented and promised our descendents would not do the same and live up to the standard. Today we had our pigtails cut, so we can receive Japanese education and be authorized to be Japanese citizens. But, we wish to expel these Japanese devils and grow back our hair in order to pay our respects to our ancestors. After kowtowing, we knelt down to have our hair cut. Mother just couldn't do it. Dad is braver; he steeled himself, gritted his teeth, grabbed my queue and lopped it off with one stroke. My skull suddenly felt lighter and I knew my hair was gone. I let out a loud cry, as if I was in mourning.

Zhang's cry expressed his lament at being split off from his Chinese cultural identity in this dramatic way.

Second, in contemporary Taiwan, both the cultural identity and the political identity components of the idea of China have become abstract ideals, which in the give and take of daily life can unite or conflict, can become complex or stressed. During the Japanese occupation, Taiwanese nostalgia for traditional Chinese culture could not be suppressed by the oppressive powers of Japanese colonial rule. Still, because the Taiwanese intellectuals' view was sentimental and romanticized, they were unable to grasp the long-term stress and conflict between cultural ideal and political authority in Chinese history. They did not recognize the underlying contradiction between the cultural identity and the political identity in their image of China. This was the reason behind the sense of broken dreams of the ancestral homeland of Taiwanese who visited China during the Japanese occupation and the roots of hopelessness about the Kuomintang (KMT) felt by the Taiwanese after the retrocession of Taiwan back to China in 1945.<sup>(21)</sup>

This separation and struggle between cultural China and political China latent in the Taiwanese worldview persists to this very day. During the past two decades of democratization in Taiwan, this tension and struggle have become ever more pronounced and evident.

## V. Conclusion

In the course of this discussion of the formation of the idea of "Zhongguo" and its

twists and transformations in Japan and Taiwan, we found that “Zhongguo” or “Chineseness” in fact is not a simple notion, but an *ideas complex*. The idea of “Zhongguo” contains at the very least the elements of “cultural China,” “geographic China” and “political China,” with “cultural China” occupying the most important position. In terms of historical unfolding, the idea of “Zhongguo” followed two streams: One was “sea route China” taken through Fujian福建, Guangdong廣東, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Southeast Asia, Europe and the American Chinese communities. The other was “land route China” taken through Mongolia, Central Asia, and Silk Road.<sup>(22)</sup> The “Zhongguo” that unfolded historically along these two routes should be expressed as the “Chineseness” of the communities.

From the perspective of East Asian border regions, the idea of “Zhongguo” also included the ideas of “China as spiritual diaspora” and “China as imagined community.” No matter whether past or present, the idea of Chineseness cannot be contained by geographic parameters. On the contrary, China or Chineseness is a geographically fluid concept. In the third section of this paper, we have described how Japanese intellectuals from the seventeenth century have taken “Zhongguo” (central kingdom) to refer to their own homeland, Japan, because they felt that Japan had adopted Confucius’ Way and the authentic spirit in the *Annals of the Spring and Autumn* more adequately than had China. In Section Four, we then explored the idea of China in the contemporary Taiwanese worldview, which can be divided into cultural China and political China. While these two elements are not completely cut off from each other, there is a degree of tension and struggle between them. Given the long-term cross-strait separation between Taiwan and Mainland China and the rapid democratization process of Taiwan, the tension and struggle between them will inevitably grow deeper and more intense, and this phenomenon will be especially worthy of our attention.

## Notes

- (1) Houxuan Hu胡厚宣, “Lun wufang guannian yu zhongguo chengwei zhi qiyuan論五方觀念與中國稱謂之起源,” in *Jiaguxue shangshi luncong* 『甲骨學商史論叢』, vo. 2 (Chengdu: Qilu daxue guox-

- ue yanjiusuo齊魯大學國學研究所, 1944).
- (2) Ermin Wang王爾敏, “Zhongguo’ mingcheng guannian suyuan jiqi jindai quanshi 「中國」名稱溯源及其近代詮釋,” in *Zhongguo jindai sixiang shilun* 『中國近代思想史論』 (Taipei: privately published, 1977), pp.441-80. Statistics given on p.442f. For a discussion of the idea “Zhongguo” in ancient China, see Michael Loewe, “The Heritage Left to the Empires,” in Michael Loewe, Edward I. Shaughnessy eds., *The Cambridge History of Ancient China, From the Origins of Civilization to 221B.C* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp.992-995.
  - (3) Gongquan Xiao蕭公權, *Zhongguo zhengzhi sixiang shi* 『中國政治思想史』 (Taipei: Lianjing聯經出版事業公司, 1982), vol.1, p.10 & p.16, n.54.
  - (4) J. K. Fairbank, *The Chinese World Order* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1968), p.1.
  - (5) Lien-sheng Yang, “Historical Notes on the Chinese World Order,” in Fairbank., *op. cit.*, p.20.
  - (6) Cf. Paul Wheatley, *The Pivot of the Four Quarters: A Preliminary Enquiry into the Origins and Character of the Ancient City* (Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co.,1971).
  - (7) Yamaga Sokô山鹿素行, “Chûchô Jijitsu中朝事實,” in Hirose Yutaka廣瀨豐 ed., *Yamaga Sokô Zenshû*山鹿素行全集 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1942), ch.13, vol.1, p.226.
  - (8) *Ibid.*, p.234.
  - (9) *Ibid.*, p.234.
  - (10) *Ibid.*, p.250.
  - (11) Sakuma Taika佐久間太華, “Wakan Meiben和漢明辨,” in *Nihon Jurin Sôsho* 『日本儒林叢書』 (Tokyo: Ôtori Shuppan, 1978), vol.4, “Disputations,” “Preface,” p.1.
  - (12) Asami Keisai淺見炯齋, “Chûoku Ben中國辨,” in *Yamazaki Ansai Gakuha* 『山崎闇齋學派』 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1982), p.418.
  - (13) *Ibid.*, p.416.
  - (14) Satô Issai佐藤一齋, “Genshiroku言志錄,” in *Satô Issai-Ôshio Chûsai* 『佐藤一齋・大塩中齋』 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1990), p.227.
  - (15) Chunsheng Li李春生, *Dongyou liushisiji suibi* 『東遊六十四日隨筆』 (Fuzhou: Meihua shuchu, 1896), p.51.
  - (16) *Ibid.*, pp.9, 51, & 82.
  - (17) Heng Lian連橫, “Yu Lin Zichao xiansheng shu與林子超先生書,” in *Yatang wenji*雅堂文集 (Taiwan Document Collection台灣文獻叢刊), p.127.
  - (18) Binglin Zhang章炳麟, *Taiwan tongshi xu*臺灣通史序(1927), in *Zhangshi congshu sanbian - Taiyan wenlu xubian* 『章氏叢書三編・太炎文錄續編』 (Suzhou: Zhangshi guoxue jiangxihui章氏國學講習會, 1938), vol.2, 下.
  - (19) Chun-chieh Huang, *Taiwan in Transformation 1895-2005* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2006, forthcoming), pp.1-28.
  - (20) Fang-Ming Chen et.al. eds., 陳芳明等編, *Zhang Shenqie quanji* 『張深切全集』 (Taipei: wenjing-she文經社, 1998), vo.1, p.84.
  - (21) Chun-chieh Huang, *Taiwan in Transformation, : 1895-2005* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2006), pp.151-188.
  - (22) Mizoguchi Yûzô溝口雄三, *Hôhôte no Chûgoku* 『方法としての中國』 (Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 1989), p.306.