

Four Dimensions for Understanding China: Region, Ethnicity, Culture and State

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Abstract: With the in-depth advancement of globalization, China, as a super-large country with a long history, profound cultural heritage, and distinct national characteristics, often faces the challenge and risk of being interpreted through a one-sided lens. This article approaches the analysis from three fundamental elements of a modern state: sovereignty, territory, and people. It explores the rich connotations of China from four key dimensions: territory acts as the physical space for the distribution and cultural growth of the Chinese nation; the Chinese nation itself is the subject of cultural inheritance and political identity; Chinese culture serves as the spiritual bond maintaining national sentiment and national identity; and the state is the highest political form integrating territory, ethnicity, and culture. By analyzing the dynamic interactive relationship among the four elements, it is revealed that the territory, nation, culture and state do not exist in isolation but are interwoven and mutually constructive as an organic whole. The key to correctly understanding China lies in grasping its inherent multiple dimensions and dialectical unity.

1. Introduction

When referring to “China”, the term is most commonly perceived as an abbreviation of the “People’s Republic of China”, primarily functioning as a national symbolic symbol, representing an important member among more than 200 countries and regions around the world. The term “China” first appeared in bronze inscriptions during the Western Zhou Dynasty. Over time, its meaning evolved from a geographical designation for the royal domain to an appellation for the Huaxia ethnic group, then to a cultural community, and eventually became the symbol of identity for a unified multi-ethnic nation-state^[1]. This transformation is not a linear replacement but the result of the continuous superposition, mutual construction, and integration of multiple dimensions-region, ethnicity, culture, and state in history, presenting a typical “unity in diversity” feature in its connotative structure, which is the key to understanding both the continuity of Chinese history and the contemporary form of the Chinese nation.

2. Region: The Physical Foundation for the Emergence and Development of Chinese Civilization

In the 1960s, archaeologists excavated a bronze vessel named “He Zun” in the suburbs of Baoji, Shaanxi Province. It symbolizes the profound heritage of Chinese civilization, with the inscription

“Taking root in China” engraved on its bottom, which is the earliest written record of “China”. Obviously, “China” here refers to the royal capital of the Zhou Dynasty, mainly functioning as a geographical concept. Subsequently, the region referred to by “China” has been constantly changing and flowing with historical evolution and regime changes, expanding from the initial royal capital to the area covered by dynastic power, showing a growing trend. The change in territorial scope promoted the formation of the ancient Chinese concept of “all under heaven” (Tianxia), shaping the territorial and monarchical concepts of “All land under heaven belongs to the king; all people within the four seas are his subjects”, which ran through the entire dynastic state period. In contemporary terms, “China” mainly refers to the vast territory located in East Asia and the western edge of the Pacific Ocean, spanning approximately 62° in east-west longitude and 50° in north-south latitude. China’s territory presents the characteristics of a trinity of land, sea, and air, and a three-dimensional integration of outer space, the earth’s surface, and subterranean domain.

Although the referred region and scope have changed, the tradition of rulers of successive dynasties in ancient China establishing political power in "the center of heaven and earth" has continued. "In ancient times, the Huaxia people founded a country along the Yellow River Basin, believing it was located in the center of the world, hence they call it “China”, while other regions around our country were called the “Four Directions”, and later it became the exclusive name of our country."^[2] The early concept of "China" was closely linked to the selection of "the center of the land". The Zhou people determined the "central land" through scientific measurement and built Chengzhou, aligning the political center with "the center of the world"^[3]. The establishment of this geographical center not only endows the capital with sacred political authority but also initially constructed a hierarchical governance space with the royal capital as the core and radiating to the surrounding areas. With the advancement of history, the Central Plains region, due to its geographical advantages and early development, gradually became the core area of politics, economy, and culture, long playing the role of the national governance hub and civilization radiation source; while the vast border areas formed distinctive social and economic forms in the process of ethnic integration and cultural interaction, forming a complementary and interdependent whole with the core area. The geographical environment not only shapes the livelihood methods and social structures of specific ethnic groups but also, in the long historical interaction, becomes one of the boundary markers distinguishing "our ethnic group" from "other ethnic groups". The ethnic characteristics anchored by space are not static but constantly redefined and strengthened in the process of cultural exchange and political integration with other ethnic groups. Therefore, the formation and maintenance of an ethnic group can never be separated from the specific regional space on which it survives and develops. Space is not only the stage of national history but also the container for the precipitation and inheritance of its cultural characteristics. This functionally complementary structure formed based on geographical conditions is an important spatial foundation for maintaining the "unity in diversity" pattern, enabling different regions to assume differentiated roles within the framework of a unified state and jointly supporting the continuation and development of Chinese civilization.

3. Ethnicity: An Important Carrier for the Inheritance of Chinese Civilization

In ancient historical documents, there are records of referring to "China" together with the peoples of the four directions. The so-called "peoples of the four directions" are usually interpreted as ethnic minorities and the political regimes established by them. Therefore, when China is contrasted with them, it should also have ethnic and political attributes, mainly referring to the Huaxia nation and the political regimes established by it. "After the establishment of the Western Han regime, the Huaxia nation developed into the Han ethnic group, and the Han ethnic group and

the political regimes established by it became synonymous with 'China'.^[4] From an ethnic perspective, early “China” had significant ethnic connotations—this is one aspect. Secondly, the ethnic connotation and extension of “China” are constantly expanding. The difference between the Han ethnic group and other ethnic minorities is mainly reflected in culture, and the boundaries between ethnic groups are not obvious. "Those who accept the royal education naturally belong to China; those who dress with dignity, emphasize filial piety in customs, and pursue etiquette and morality in life are called China."^[5] "Ethnic minorities and their regimes also actively identified with the Central Plains regime, as well as the Huaxia and Han regimes, often claiming to be the successors of the Huaxia and Han regimes and also calling themselves 'China'." Therefore, the ethnic attribute of "China" is not purely and simply the Huaxia nation or the Han ethnic group, but constantly incorporates new blood in the process of "three interactions" . "Huaxia was an outcome of the differentiation and assimilation of the Man, Yi, Rong, and Di peoples. From the perspective of the Man, Yi, Rong, and Di peoples, Huaxia emerged through processes of differentiation stemming from uneven rates of social development among these groups. From the Huaxia perspective, it took shape through the assimilation of segments of the Man, Yi, Rong, and Di peoples, driven by comparable stages of social development and frequent interactions. Both biologically and culturally, Huaxia was collectively formed by the Man, Yi, Rong, and Di peoples. It can therefore be argued that China was jointly founded by these ancient ethnic groups."^[6]

With the increasingly strengthened connections among various ethnic groups, the increasingly common phenomenon of interethnic scattered residence, the increasingly close emotional bonds among various ethnic groups, and the continuous deepening and expansion of the foundation and scope of identity, an inherent national entity that has existed in China for thousands of years—the Chinese nation—has been formed. Modern China suffered from aggression and oppression by foreign powers. The common suffering experience accelerated the conscious transformation of the centripetal force and cohesion of various ethnic groups. Driven by the common goal of resisting Western powers and saving the nation from subjugation, the Chinese nation began to transform from an inherent national entity to a conscious national entity, and has been further consolidated and strengthened in the new journey of realizing the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation in contemporary times. "On this vast, beautiful, and fertile land, all ethnic groups have a common home, which is China; all have a common identity, which is the Chinese nation; all have a common name, which is Chinese; all have a common dream, which is to realize the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation!"^[7]

In the process of the formation and development of the Chinese nation community, Chinese society has long been committed to the great cause of eliminating ethnic estrangement, promoting ethnic equality, and realizing common prosperity. As China's first biographical history book, Records of the Grand Historian included chapters such as "Biography of the Xiongnu" and "Biography of the Southwest Barbarians" that record the history and culture of ethnic minorities into the Seventy Biographies, ranking them alongside the biographies of Han princes and generals, indicating that they have been part of the Chinese nation family since ancient times; the Tang Dynasty established Jimi Prefectures and States, allowing the leaders of border ethnic minorities to inherit their positions and manage their own affairs, while accepting central enfeoffment and being incorporated into the national administrative system; the Ming Dynasty realized border governance through the Tusi System, maintaining local traditional order while gradually promoting national integration. By the Qing Dynasty, the central government replaced native chieftains with centrally appointed officials, which further integrated border regions into its direct administrative jurisdiction. This policy promoted the unification of legal, taxation, and educational systems, while certain privileges of ethnic minority elites were preserved to ease tensions arising from social transformation. These institutional practices not only reflect the flexibility and inclusiveness of

ancient Chinese national governance but also reflect the deep logic in the construction of the Chinese nation community: pursuing unity on the premise of acknowledging differences and realizing integration on the basis of respecting diversity. The formation of this "unity in diversity" pattern is not only the result of long-term interactions between geography, history, and culture but also the product of continuous adaptation and innovation of political systems. To this day, China still inherits this traditional wisdom. Through a series of initiatives such as the system of regional ethnic autonomy, paired assistance policies, and the protection and promotion of ethnic cultures, it continuously promotes national unity and solidarity while striving to ensure the common development of all ethnic groups and their sharing of modernization achievements. History has shown that the vitality of the Chinese nation community lies precisely in its tolerance and integration of diversity. "All ethnic groups have jointly developed the magnificent rivers and mountains and vast territory of the motherland, and jointly created the long history and splendid culture of China. The prosperity of the Qin and Han dynasties, the grandeur of the Tang Dynasty, and the heyday of the Kangxi and Qianlong reigns were all brilliant achievements jointly forged by all ethnic groups." ^[8] It is in this continuous institutional evolution and cultural interaction that the Chinese nation constantly radiates new cohesion and creativity.

4. Culture: The Spiritual Core Uniting the Chinese Nation Community

Chinese civilization has maintained its cultural context for thousands of years, with its core lying in the inheritance of the spirit of "Zhong Dao". "China", which first appeared as a geographical concept, has been continuously endowed with political and cultural connotations in the process of development and evolution. From a political perspective, "the ruler residing in the center" can maximize the saving of governance costs, achieve the shortest distance, and theoretically maximize administrative efficiency, with the binding force of the core model decreasing from the center to the surrounding areas. From a cultural perspective, only when "the ruler resides in the center" can he receive the care and protection of heaven's mandate, which is a concrete manifestation of the unity of heaven and man, and the source of the legitimacy and orthodoxy of power, integrating political and religious nature. The rise and fall of dynasties are positively correlated with whether they follow the concept of the mean, which has gradually become a distinctive feature that distinguishes Chinese civilization from other civilizations in practice.

"Since Yao and Shun, the mean has been the way to establish a country." ^[9] "The tradition of the mean as the core and the education tradition emphasizing the mean have profoundly influenced the national character of the Chinese people and the national nature of China, and are the essence of why 'China' is called 'Zhong' (the mean) Guo (country)." ^[10] First, the tradition of the mean has shaped the governing strategy. Rulers of successive dynasties governed the country and the world with the mean, resolving contradictions and conflicts, which contains a simple thought of governing the country with the mean pursuing harmony, balance, and unity; contemporary China resolves the principal social contradictions within the country with the "Five-Sphere Integrated Plan" (economic, political, cultural, social, and ecological construction), consciously fulfills its great-power mission and responsibility through building a community with a shared future for mankind and the "Belt and Road" Initiative, advocates seeking common ground while shelving differences, cherishes peace, and enriches the contemporary connotation of the tradition of the mean with the diplomatic concepts of amity, sincerity, mutual benefit, and inclusiveness. Secondly, the tradition of the mean has strengthened family and country identity. The origin of Chinese civilization presents a "starry sky" feature, but "the doctrine of the mean occupies an extremely important position in the hearts of the Chinese people, as evidenced by their naming their country 'China'. The meaning contained in the two characters 'China' is not only a geographical impression but also shows a norm of life." ^[11]

This norm of life is concentrated in the tradition of centripetal force and emphasizing the mean. Although Chinese history has experienced the invasion of the Central Plains by ethnic minority regimes, which intensified the idea of distinguishing between Huaxia and barbarians, the ability of the tradition of the mean to rebuild balance at historical fractures has enabled the national character to consciously maintain subjectivity when absorbing foreign cultures and avoid extreme opposition in internal integration, thus creating the only country in the world that has not interrupted its development sequence. After Rome, there was no longer Rome, but after China, there is still China. Third, the tradition of the mean has shaped the national character. "Uphold the mean" reminds people to follow the principles of impartiality and balance when observing and handling problems, avoiding extremism and bias; the ritual and music system concretizes the tradition of the mean into various social norms, restricting personal behaviors and thoughts, guiding people to learn to restrain their desires and emotions, and abide by social order and moral norms; in the core socialist values, there are not only the inheritance and promotion of traditional mean thoughts such as honesty, friendship, and harmony but also new connotations endowed in combination with the requirements of the times, which is manifested in emphasizing both personal freedom and development, as well as social responsibility and collective interests, and pursuing the harmonious coexistence of individuals and society, and man and nature... The tradition of the mean is also reflected in various literary and artistic works, such as the blank space in painting techniques, the symmetry in architectural design, and the antithesis and rhyme in poetry and prose. The value orientations emphasized by the tradition of the mean, such as moderate harmony, fairness and justice, and upholding integrity and innovation, have further shaped the gentle, kind, warm, friendly, calm, wise, and unyielding national character of the Chinese people, making it a shining business card of the Chinese nation. Fourth, it has enriched the connotation and extension of Chinese culture. "China" has aliases such as "Huaxia" and "Zhonghua". "Mianfu Caizhang Yue Hua , Da Guo Yue Xia". In terms of word meaning, "Hua" refers to clothing, and "Xia" refers to the country; in terms of part of speech, both "Hua" and "Xia" have adjective attributes, describing beautiful clothing and a large territory, and later extended to mean cultural prosperity and the prosperity of etiquette. In ancient times, "China" was usually regarded as a representative of advanced culture including material civilization and spiritual civilization. Culture has centripetal force. With political unification, the trend of cultural integration has gradually become obvious. Although early "China" had a distinction between "Huaxia" and "the four barbarians", ethnic assimilation and integration have never been interrupted. As a link connecting multiple dimensions, culture unites regional differences and ethnic diversity into an overall identity with "China" through shared symbol systems and historical memories. This identity is not static but constantly narrated and reconstructed in the historical process, responding to the inquiry about the nature of the state. Cultural practices not only carry regional characteristics but also transcend specific boundaries, shaping a sense of community that tolerates differences, enabling multiple elements to maintain the internal unity and continuous evolution of the state in dynamic mutual construction.

5. State: The Highest Political Form Integrating Region, Ethnicity, and Culture

The term "China" as a country name originated during the Ming and Qing dynasties. With the continuous influx of foreign groups such as missionaries and merchants, they began to refer to this ancient eastern land as "China". Influenced by this, the correspondence, memorials, and works of the scholars and missionaries during the Ming and Qing periods often identified themselves as "China" and used "China" to refer to their own country, juxtaposing it with foreign terms like "Western" and "Taitai", reflecting sovereignty and national consciousness. The term "China" officially became the country name after the Xinhai Revolution. On January 1, 1912, the "Republic

of China" was established, and it was abbreviated as "China". Thus, "China" became the official country name at that point. On October 1, 1949, the People's Republic of China was officially established, and the "Constitution of the People's Republic of China" stipulated: "The People's Republic of China is a socialist country under the leadership of the working class, based on the alliance of workers and peasants."

"Modern countries all have specific names for their nations. The names of these countries usually have a historical formation process, and once formed, they are stable. Their most notable feature is their exclusivity, representing the international identity of the country in the international community, and this identity does not change with the alteration of the regime name." This stability and exclusivity are specifically manifested as follows: Firstly, the People's Republic of China is the sole legitimate representative representing the entire China. No other country or region can use this name or claim to represent China. When a country establishes diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China, it must simultaneously recognize that Chinese Taiwan is an inseparable part of China's territory, and must rule out the possibility of recognizing Chinese Taiwan as having a state status. Recognizing one means excluding the other, and prohibiting the recognition of dual representation. Secondly, as the sole legitimate representative of the entire China, the People's Republic of China must strictly abide by the principles of reciprocity and dignity in diplomatic practice. Correctly using the country's name, flag, and national anthem is the most basic manifestation of mutual respect and national dignity. Intentionally using incorrect country names, flags, national anthems, or using the terms of separatist forces are all regarded as serious diplomatic insults and provocations. Thirdly, the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the People's Republic of China are sacred and inviolable. Any acts of aggression and separatism not only violate the relevant provisions of the UN Charter but also undermine the foundation of mutual trust in the global order. Fourthly, all ethnic groups in the People's Republic of China are equal, covering all fields such as politics, economy, and culture. Any form of ethnic discrimination and separatist behavior is prohibited. Any form of ethnic separatist forces and activities are illegal; ethnic group is an important identifier of citizenship, and the People's Republic of China does not recognize that Chinese citizens have dual ethnic group.

Contemporary China has integrated diverse elements such as regions, ethnic groups and cultures into a unified governance framework through institutional design and policy implementation, forming a stable political community: The system of regional ethnic autonomy guarantees the cultural rights and political participation of all ethnic groups, and the promotion of the national common language facilitates cross-regional communication and economic cooperation; Cultural identity is based on public education and media dissemination, incorporating local traditions into the narrative of Chinese civilization, further strengthening citizens' sense of national belonging; The Western Development Strategy and regional coordination policies have narrowed regional disparities through infrastructure interconnection and resource allocation, laying the material foundation for national integration... These measures jointly constructed a governance system that maintains political unity and social stability amid diversity, achieving the structural integration of "diversity within unity".

6. Conclusion

The key to correctly and comprehensively understanding China lies in transcending the limitations of a single perspective, recognizing that region, ethnicity, culture, and the state are not isolated concepts but an interconnected, dynamically shaped unity. This composite structure requires us to avoid viewing China through a static or fragmented lens, and instead grasp its inherent relevance and historical fluidity: regions serve as the physical space for the distribution of

the Chinese nation and cultural development; the Chinese nation is the subject of cultural inheritance and political identity; Chinese culture is the spiritual bond sustaining national sentiment and national identity; and the state is the highest political form integrating regions, ethnicities, and cultures. This multi-dimensional cognition reveals that only by dynamically examining regional space, ethnic interactions, cultural practices, and national development within a unified analytical framework can we better approach the complex and authentic historical and realistic context of China, forming an objective and accurate overall understanding of contemporary China.

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