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The genesis and evolution of the Chinese "Great Unity" ideology

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Abstract

The concept of "Great Unity" originates from China's "Great Unity" political practice, which is primarily embodied in the "great unity" state form and structure. Therefore, to examine the genesis and evolution of the Chinese "Great Unity" ideology, we must begin with the historical evolution of the form and structure of ancient Chinese states. From the Qin and Han Dynasties to the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the "Great Unity" ideology was built upon the state form and structure of the commandery-county system. After Qin Shi Huang unified the six states, successive dynasties regarded unification as the highest political achievement. Even during periods of division, the ideology of unity persisted, with contending regimes often claiming legitimacy and pursuing unification as their ultimate goal. Tracing back from the Qin and Han to the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, an era of social transformation, the "Great Unity" ideology encompassed both ideals of unity and the historical foundation of the composite dynastic state structure of Xia, Shang, and Western Zhou dynasties, which integrated plurality into a unified whole. Further back, during the Five Emperors period, powerful Clan-State Confederations were established in the Central Plains. Thus, from the times of Yao, Shun, and Yu, through the Three Dynasties of Xia, Shang, and Western Zhou, to the Qin and Han, changes in state forms and structures gave rise to three distinct conceptions of "Great Unity": the concept of "tianxia unity" (unification under heaven), aligned with the Clan-State Confederation of the Yao, Shun, and Yu era; the concept of "unity," aligned with the "composite dynastic state structure" of the Xia, Shang,

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and Western Zhou; and the concept of "Great Unity," aligned with the centralized imperial state under the commandery-county system from the Qin and Han dynasties onward. This constitutes the origin and evolution of the "Great Unity" ideology in China.

Keywords Great Unity · Commandery-county system · Composite dynastic state · Clan-State confederation

Abbreviations

CE	Common Era
BCE	Before Common Era
AAT	Anyang Archaeological Team
IA	Institute of Archaeology
CASS	Chinese Academy of Social Sciences

1 Introduction

The "Great Unity" ideology is a well-known part of traditional Chinese political thought. However, its origins and evolution have not been deeply explored by scholars. Little is it realized that the "Great Unity" ideology is closely linked to the structure and identity of the "Great Unity" multi-ethnic state (i.e., a unified multi-ethnic state). Therefore, research into the evolution of the "Great Unity" ideology necessitates an examination of the historical trajectory of the state structure in ancient China. In this study, we seek to understand the development of the "Great Unity" ideology through the evolutionary trajectory of ancient Chinese state structures.

2 Methods

The research methods of this study primarily employ historical analysis and documentary research, aiming to achieve a unity of logic and historical context. The historical analysis is based on the theoretical premises that the "Great Unity" ideology originated from the political practice of "Great Unity" and that "Great Unity" politics is primarily embodied in the structure of a unified state. This study traces the evolution of ancient state structures to interpret how the "Great Unity" ideology evolved alongside these structural changes. The documentary research involves extensive citations from ancient texts such as *Records of the Grand Historian*, *Spring and Autumn Annals*, and *Book of Documents*, systematically reviewing and interpreting relevant records to construct the historical origins and developmental trajectory of the "Great Unity" ideology. The logical analysis follows a chronological approach, progressing from recent to more distant periods, starting from the commandery-county state structure of the Qin and Han Dynasties, tracing back to the social transformation of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, further

to the composite dynastic state structure of the Xia, Shang, and Western Zhou, and finally to the Clan-State Confederation of the Five Emperors era, gradually revealing the evolution of the "Great Unity" concept at different historical stages.

3 Results and discussion

3.1 The "commandery-county" state structure and the "Great Unity" ideology

The "Great Unity" ideology originates from the socio-political structure of a unified state. It is a consensus among historians that the first true "Great Unity" state in Chinese history began with the Qin Dynasty. In 221 BCE, King Ying Zheng of Qin unified the six states, ending the prolonged division among the feudal polities and establishing the first centralized, unified, multi-ethnic state in Chinese history. According to the "*Shiji:* Qin Benji (*Records of the Grand Historian*: The Annals of Qin)", "In the twenty-sixth year of his reign, the King of Qin first unified All-under-Heaven (Tianxia), established thirty-six commanderies (郡, jun), and proclaimed himself the First Emperor (Shi Huangdi)" (Sima 1959, 220). The structure of this state was fundamentally different from that of the Xia, Shang, and Western Zhou Dynasties in that it abolished hereditary lordships across the entire territory and established a singular, two-tier local administrative system of commanderies and counties directly governed by the central government. This constituted a centralized administrative system of "central government-commandery-county." The diverse ethnic groups within the empire were incorporated into this administrative jurisdiction of the commanderies and counties. The political integration enforced by this administrative system acted to dissolve and even reduce ethnic differences. The commanderies and counties controlled the local areas, and the commandery-county system reinforced centralization and unity. To consolidate his unification, Qin Shi Huang (the First Emperor of Qin) implemented a series of standardization measures: "standardizing the gauge of cart axles (che tong gui)" to unify transportation; "standardizing the written script (shu tong wen)" to unify the written language; and unifying currency, weights, and measures. These unification measures, together with the commandery-county system, have played a crucial role in maintaining the "Great Unity" state for over two millennia that followed.

The Han Dynasty inherited the Qin's institutional framework. Although subsequent dynasties varied in their local administrative hierarchies—some implemented a two-tier commandery-county (or prefecture-county) system, while others adopted a three- or four-tier province-prefecture-county system—this does not prevent us from collectively referring to them as the "commandery-county system." The institutional mechanisms of the commandery-county system and the state structure it manifested constituted a fundamental feature of the ancient Chinese unified, multi-ethnic state. The "Great Unity" ideology was aligned with the centralized "central government–commandery–county" system; that is to say, from the Qin and Han to the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the "Great Unity" ideology was built upon this "Great Unity" state structure. Although from the Qin and Han onward, Chinese history underwent cycles of unification, division, and renewed unification—for example,

from the unification of the Qin and Han to the division of the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties, and then to the unification of the Sui and Tang; from the division of the Five Dynasties, Song, Liao, Jin, and Western Xia to the unification of the Yuan, Ming, and Qing—unification remained the overarching trajectory of China's historical development. The reasons unification became this overarching trend can, in my view, be attributed to three main factors: First, in terms of state governance, the centralized "central government–commandery–county" system proved to be both effective and highly resistant to reversal. Second, after Qin Shi Huang unified the six states, successive dynasties regarded unification on a grand scale as the paramount political achievement. Even during periods of division, the ideology of unity persisted, with contending regimes often claiming legitimate orthodoxy and pursuing unification as their ultimate goal. Third, a cultural tradition rooted in a unified writing system and imbued with the consciousness of a Greater Chinese cultural sphere, which included the "Great Unity" ideology, fundamentally served to preserve and consolidate unification.

Regarding the centralized "central government–commandery–county" system being both effective and irreversible, this was self-evident during periods of unification. Even during periods of division, the various contending regimes within their respective territories typically adhered to this centralized model as a fundamental characteristic of their governance. For example, during the Three Kingdoms period, although the state of Wei in the north made some adjustments to its administrative institutions and functions, and Cao Cao proposed recruiting officials based on talent alone ("wei cai shi ju"), these measures were compatible with the centralized "province–commandery–county" structure and its unitary mode of governance. The same was true for the Shu-Han state. After Zhuge Liang was entrusted with assisting the young emperor Liu Shan following Liu Bei's death, in addition to faithfully implementing the statecraft outlined in the "Longzhong Dui" (Longzhong Plan)—such as "forging an external alliance with Sun Quan," "improving internal administration," "fostering harmony with the western tribes and pacifying the southern Yue peoples," and subsequently launching the Northern Expeditions to restore the Han dynasty (Chen 2006)—the governance within the Shu-Han state was also characterized by a centralized "province–commandery" or "commandery–county" structure. Similarly, the Wu state implemented a military-agricultural garrison (tuntian) system, similar to that of Cao Wei, which included both military and civilian colonies and further developed the economy of the Jiangnan region (south of the Yangtze River). Within its territory, Wu also adhered to a centralized "province–commandery–county" governance structure. Another example is the Former Qin during the Northern and Southern Dynasties period, which unified the north and, in its local administration, adopted a three-tier system of "province–commandery–county" modeled after the Wei and Jin dynasties, with a Regional Inspector (Cishi) or Governor (Zhoumu) administering each province.

Historically, whenever contending regimes grew stronger, they invariably moved toward the path of unifying All-under-Heaven (Tianxia), always striving to claim legitimate orthodoxy and make unification their ultimate goal. For instance, during the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties period, the rulers of the regimes established by non-Han ethnic groups, who were referred to as the "Five

Hu" (Wuhu), frequently invoked the theory of "Wude Zhongshi" (五德终始, the Cycle of the Five Virtues)—the sequential conquest cycle of Earth, Wood, Metal, Fire, and Water—which was established during the Warring States, Qin, and Han periods, to assert the legitimacy of their rule. According to the "*Jinshu*: Zaiji (*Records of the Jin Dynasty*: Records of the Peripheral States)", Liu Yao of the Xiongnu-led Former Zhao and Shi Le of the Jie-led Later Zhao both claimed their regimes succeeded the (prior) Jin (Metal) Virtue with their own Shui (Water) Virtue. When Murong Jun of the Xianbei-led Former Yan ascended the throne, his ministers declared that he succeeded the ruler representing the Black Essence (Water) and thus replaced the (prior) Jin (Metal) Virtue, and Murong Jun accepted this. Furthermore, according to the "*Jinshu*: Murong Wei Zaiji," Guo Qin presented a proposal, stating that Murong Wei succeeded Shi Jilong (Shi Hu) as the Mu (Wood) Virtue, which Murong Wei accepted. This shows that although there were changes in the specific Virtue (De) claimed by the Xianbei rulers of Former Yan between Murong Jun and Murong Wei, their adherence to the theory of "Wude Zhongshi" was unquestioned. Similarly, for Yao Chang of the Qiang ethnic group, who founded the Later Qin state, the "*Jinshu*: Yao Chang Zaiji" records: After Yao Chang ascended the throne, he declared that he succeeded the Fu clan's Mu (Wood) Virtue with his own Huo (Fire) Virtue. The Former Qin ruler Fu Jian, though of the Di ethnic group, according to the "*Jinshu*: Fu Jian Zaiji", accepted Wang Diao's view that he was a descendant of Zhuanxu, and, based on the conquest cycle of the Five Virtues, believed he represented the Mu (Wood) Virtue. The Northern Wei Dynasty followed a similar approach. According to the "*Weishu*: Lizhi (*Book of Wei*: Treatise on Rites)", in the first year of the reign of Emperor Daozu (Tuoba Gui) (398 CE), the capital was established in Pingcheng, and he ascended to the throne. An edict was issued to determine the state's Virtue sequence, and the ministers proposed that, since the state traced its lineage from the Yellow Emperor, it should represent the Tu (Earth) Virtue. They cited that the divine beast, resembling an ox (an earth-associated animal), and the prominent yellow star, were considered auspicious confirmations of the Earth Virtue. From then on, the Tu (Earth) Virtue was adopted, with five as the primary number, and yellow as the preferred color for clothing (Rao 2018, 351–352).

During the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties, non-Han ethnic groups (ethnic minorities) entered the Central Plains and established their own regimes. They adopted the theory of "Wude Zhongshi" (the Cycle of the Five Virtues)—which dictated dynastic succession and had been revered by previous Central Plains dynasties—primarily to legitimize their rule. This phenomenon has been thoroughly studied by the late esteemed historian Rao Zongyi[1] in his book *Orthodoxy in Chinese Historiography* (Rao 2018, 12–26). Thus, the theory of legitimate succession (Zhengtong Lun), as expressed through "Wude Zhongshi," was intrinsically linked to the "Great Unity" (Da Yitong) ideology. A case in point is Fu Jian of the Former Qin. With the assistance of his chancellor Wang Meng, he achieved

[1] In this article, Chinese names are presented in the traditional Chinese format, with the surname preceding the given name.

significant social and economic development through political and economic reforms, which enabled him to launch military campaigns that conquered Former Yan, Former Liang, and Dai, thereby unifying northern China. Following this unification, Fu Jian not only believed he embodied the Mu (Wood) Virtue within the Five Virtues cycle but also actively planned to attack the Eastern Jin to achieve the ultimate goal of unifying All-under-Heaven. However, his unification of the north was precarious, with persistent ethnic tensions within his realm. Compounding this was his severe miscalculation of the Eastern Jin as a "moribund state." Disregarding prudent counsel, he arrogantly committed the entirety of his nation's strength to a swift conquest, which culminated in a catastrophic defeat at the Battle of Feishui. This defeat precipitated the rapid collapse of the Former Qin, which fell to the Later Qin the following year. In historical analysis, while Fu Jian's ambition to unify China was commendable and driven by the "Great Unity" ideology, the historical conditions were not yet ripe, the timing was inopportune, and tactical misjudgments were made. Consequently, his endeavor resulted in a profound historical tragedy rather than the intended unification.

Throughout Chinese history, from the Qin and Han dynasties to the Ming and Qing dynasties, the ideology of "Great Unity" has exerted a profound and positive influence on the unification and stability of the state. This influence is primarily manifested in two ways: First, the "Great Unity" ideology evolved into an enduring tradition, forming a core element of orthodox political thought, and a genetic cornerstone of traditional Chinese culture. Second, within the "Great Unity" worldview, the unification of the state, the identification of this unified state, and the cohesion of the Chinese nation were conceived as an indivisible trinity.

3.2 The ideology of "unity" during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods and its origins

We assert that the historical perspective of "unity" in Sima Qian's *Shiji* and the "Spring and Autumn Unity" (Chunqiu Yitong) ideology expounded by Dong Zhongshu in his "*Chunqiu:* Fanlu" were grounded in both the socio-political realities of their time and in historical antecedents. The socio-political basis for the "unity" concepts of Sima Qian and Dong Zhongshu lies in the centralized "central government–commandery–county" state structure established during the Qin and Han periods, which we commonly refer to as a unified, centralized, multi-ethnic state. The historical roots of this "unity" historical perspective in Sima Qian's *Shiji* can be traced back to pre-Qin classics, which describe the Five Emperors, as well as the pluralistic-yet-integrated composite structure of the dynastic state during the Xia, Shang, and Western Zhou periods.

It is generally believed that the historical materials in the "*Shiji*: Wudibenji (*Records of the Grand Historian*: The Basic Annals of the Five Emperors)" primarily originate from the *Shang Shu* (Book of Documents), particularly the chapters "Yaodian (Canon of Yao)", "Counsels of Gaoyao (Gao Yao Mo)", as well as the "Dixi (Imperial Lineage)" and "Wudi De (Virtue of the Five Emperors)" from the *Da Dai liji* (*Elder Dai's Book of Rites*), which was compiled during the late Warring

States period. "Yaodian," "Gao Yao Mo" and "Yugong (Tribute of Yu)" are the first three chapters of the *Shang Shu*. Traditional historiography once held that the "Yaodian" was a work from the Tang-Yu period, "Gao Yao Mo" from the Yu-Shun period, and "Yugong" from the time of Yu the Great of the Xia Dynasty. However, since the 1920s, scholars from the "Doubting Antiquity School" (Gushi Bian) led by Gu Jiegang have conducted critical examinations, and it is now generally accepted that "Yaodian," "Gao Yao Mo" and "Yugong" were finalized during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods[2] (Xu 1960, 22). Liu Qiyu further argued that "Yaodian" was compiled by Confucius, who collected and edited ancient materials handed down from ancient times for instructing of his disciples. That is, "Yaodian" was overseen by Confucius and it was later transmitted by his 70 disciples and their successors during the Warring States period, and may have been altered or expanded in the process. The content of the "Gao Yao Mo" was transmitted from the early Spring and Autumn period, with possible alterations or additions. The content of "Gao Yao Mo" was known by the early Spring and Autumn period and continued to be transmitted thereafter. Regarding the date of composition of "Yugong," Gu and Liu found the theory proposed by Wang Guowei and Xin Shuzhi—that it was completed during the Western Zhou Dynasty—to be reasonable. However, influenced by Shao Wangping's article "An Archaeological study of the nine provinces in the 'Yugong'," Liu suggests that the prototype of the "Yugong" originated from Shang Dynasty scribes, was finalized by early Zhou historians, and incorporated some Warring States historical facts when transmitted during that period (Gu and Liu 2005, 384, 509, 840–842). In summary, "Yaodian" and "Gao Yao Mo" in the *Shang Shu* preserved a significant amount of orally transmitted ancient material, which was finally recorded in writing during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. Works finalized during this era inevitably reflect contemporary ideologies, among which the concept of "unity" (yitong) was a core one. For example, "Yaodian" and "Gao Yao Mo" recast the activities and deliberations of figures from various lineages—such as Yao, Shun, Huan Dou, Gong Gong, Siyue, Gaoyao, Yi, Kui, and Yu—which originally occurred within a "Clan-State Confederation,"[3] portraying them instead as ministers in the courts of Yao and Shun, embodying the fundamental principle of "unity." The depiction of Yao and Shun in the "*Shiji*: Wudibenji" draws on the "Yaodian" and "Gao Yao Mo," though much of the language is adapted to that of the Han Dynasty. Therefore, we argue that the historical origins of the "unity" concept in Sima Qian's "*Shiji*: Wudibenji" in the texts of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods are, of course, also related to the state structure of the Xia, Shang, and Western Zhou dynastic states, which we will discuss later.

[2] Xu Xusheng, in *The Legendary Era of Chinese Ancient History*, wrote: "The greatest contribution of the 'Doubting Antiquity School' (古史辨派) was to re-date the compilation of the three most authoritative chapters in the *Book of Documents* (尚书)—the 'Canon of Yao' (尧典), 'Counsels of Gaoyao' (皋陶谟), and 'Tribute of Yu' (禹贡) —to the Spring and Autumn period (for their initial drafting) and the Warring States period (for their final compilation)."

[3] Clan-State Confederation: An alliance of clan-states, characterized by a single dominant clan, the fusion of kinship and politics, and shared ancestral worship. This structure was pivotal in the evolution from tribal society to the early Chinese state and the formation of a Huaxia identity (Wang 2013b).

The historical roots of Dong Zhongshu's concept of "Great Unity" (Da Yitong) derive from the "*Chunqiu*: Gongyang Zhuan (*Spring and Autumn Annals*: Gongyang Commentary)". In his "*Chunqiu:* Fanlu: San Dai Gai Zhi Zhi Wen (*Spring and Autumn Annals:* Luxuriant Dew: Institutional Reforms and the Substance-Culture of the Three Dynasties)", Dong Zhongshu states:

> The *Chunqiu* mentions "the King's First Month" (Wang Zhengyue)… Why is it called "the King's First Month"? This is because a true King (Wang) must receive the Mandate of Heaven (Tianming) before he can rule. The King must reform the calendar (correct the beginning of the year and the first month), change the colors of ceremonial garments, institute rituals and music, and thereby unify All-under-Heaven (Yitong yu Tianxia). This demonstrates that the change in dynastic surname signifies a new beginning received directly from Heaven, not merely the continuation of a previous human ruler... Thus, when Tang received the Mandate and became King, he responded to Heaven by transforming the Xia and establishing the Yin (Shang) Dynasty, aligning it with the White Sequence (Bai Tong)...
>
> The Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties each reformed the calendar, establishing their own beginning month of the year and promulgating it throughout the land. Thus, each of the Three Dynasties possessed its own specific first month and its system of the five directions (east, west, south, north, and center), which formed the foundation for civilizing the four quarters. As the celestial calendar discarded the old and adopted the new, the terrestrial realm emphasized the central position. Thus, the Three Dynasties necessarily resided in the Central Kingdom (Zhongguo). By modeling themselves on Heaven, and by grasping these essential elements of time and space, they unified All-under-Heaven and received the homage of the vassal lords.

The phrase "unify All-under-Heaven" (yitong yu tianxia) in the text conveys the meaning of "Great Unity" (Da Yitong). As Dong Zhongshu states in the "*Hanshu*: Dong Zhongshu Zhuan (*Book of Han*: Biography of Dong Zhongshu)": "The 'Great Unity' of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* is the constant principle of Heaven and Earth, the universal norm of past and present." Dong Zhongshu's concept of "the Great Unity in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*" originates from the "*Chunqiu:* Gongyang Zhuan (*Spring and Autumn Annals:* Gongyang Commentary)". The "*Chunqiu:* Gongyang Zhuan", in its commentary on the entry for the first year of Duke Yin's reign, states: "'Spring, the King's First Month.' Why does it mention 'the King's First Month'? To emphasize the Great Unity." The "Gongyang Zhuan" was completed during the early Han Dynasty. Yang remarks: "He Xiu's 'preface' to the 'Gongyang Zhuan' and Xu Yan's 'Subcommentary' cite Dai Hong's 'Preface', which states that 'it was not until the reign of Emperor Jing of the Han that [Gongyang] Shou, together with his disciple Huwu Zidu of Qi, wrote it down on bamboo and silk.' Thus, there is clear textual evidence that the "Gongyang Zhuan" was written in the Western Han. *Siku Quanshu Tiyao* (*The Summary of the Complete Library of the Four*

Treasuries) directly attributes the "Gongyang Zhuan" to Gongyang Shou, assisted by Huwu Zidu in its completion" (Yang 1981, 24). Thus, we see that the "Great Unity of the *Chunqiu*" discussed by Gongyang Shou during Emperor Jing's reign and by Dong Zhongshu during Emperor Wu's reign both originated from the exegesis of the "King's First Month" formula in the *Chunqiu*'s calendrical records.

The *Chunqiu*, now a canonical classic, was originally a chronicle of the State of Lu spanning from the first year of Duke Yin to the fourteenth year of Duke Ai, and was later compiled and edited by Confucius. "*Shiji*: Kongzi Shijia (*The Records of the Grand Historian*: Hereditary House of Confucius) states: "The Master (Confucius) said, 'Alas, no! A gentleman hates to die without leaving a reputation. My principles make no way, how shall I be remembered among posterity?' Thereupon he made the Chunqiu from the historical records, beginning with Duke Yin and coming down to the fourteenth year of Duke Ai, embracing twelve dukes" (Sima 1959, 1934). Consequently, it is generally accepted that the "*Spring and Autumn Annals* brush"[4] conveys Confucius's ideological stance. The "king" in the *Chunqiu*'s phrase "king's first month" is the King of Zhou. "King's first month" signifies that the calendar used for chronology in the Chunqiu was the Zhou calendar, reflecting the conscientious effort by the State of Lu and Confucius to uphold the orthodox status of the Zhou king. Tradition holds that the Zhou court would issue the calendar for the coming year to all the vassal lords at the end of each year, and the lords would receive and implement it. Thus, what is the meaning of "king's first month"? It means unifying All-under-Heaven through the calendar promulgated by the Zhou king. Therefore, we can say that what we now call "Great Unity" (Da Yitong) often refers to spatial unification, whereas the "Great Unity of the *Chunqiu*" in the *Gongyang Zhuan* denotes unification by the Zhou calendar—a concept derived from the temporally-oriented idea of the Zhou calendar's definition of the year's commencement. To be sure, the chapter "Institutional Reforms and the Substance-Culture of the Three Dynasties"[5] in the "*Chunqiu*: Fanlu" already transforms this temporal unification of the calendar into a spatial unification, as articulated in its statement: "Therefore, the Three Dynasties necessarily resided in the Central Kingdom. By modeling themselves on Heaven and upholding the fundamental, by grasping these essential elements of time and space, they unified All-under-Heaven and received the homage from the vassal lords." In essence, the origin of the "Great Unity of the *Chunqiu*" concept in the *Gongyang Zhuan* and Dong Zhongshu's thought lies in the use of the Zhou calendar, the "king's calendar," for chronology in the *Chunqiu* as compiled and revised by Confucius.

During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, evidence of a systemic "unity" (yitong) ideology can be found beyond the "Yaodian (Canon of Yao)", "Gao Yao Mo (Counsels of Gaoyao)", and "Yugong (Tribute of Yu)"in

[4] The "*Spring and Autumn Spring and Autumn Annals* Brush" (*Chunqiu* Bifa, 春秋笔法) refers to the nuanced and morally charged writing style traditionally attributed to Confucius in his editing of the Chunqiu annals. It conveys subtle judgment and profound meaning through the deliberate selection of specific words, phrases, and the inclusion or omission of events.

[5] In Chinese:《三代改制质文》 (San Dai Gai Zhi Zhi Wen).

the *Shang Shu*; the "Dixi (Imperial Lineage)" and "Wu Di De (Virtues of the Five Emperors)" in the *Da Dai Li Ji*; and the use of the "Wang Li (King's Calendar)"in the *Chunqiu* to emphasize legitimacy and unity. The *Zhou Li* (*Rites of Zhou*), compiled during this era, also reveals a "unity" ideology through its content, structure, and compilation style. Even Zou Yan's theory of the "Great Nine Regions" (Da Jiu Zhou) contains elements of "unity." Moreover, the concept of "unity" is evident in the writings of various philosophers. For instance, the "*Mengzi:* Liang Hui Wang Shang" records King Hui of Liang asking Mencius, "How can the world (tianxia) be stabilized?" Mencius replied, "It will be stabilized through unity (ding yu yi)." When the king asked, "Who can achieve this unity?" Mencius answered, "One who takes no pleasure in killing can achieve it." (Jiao 1987). Here, the term "yi" (one) signifies "unity" (tongyi). The philosopher Feng Youlan, in his *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, observed that this passage clearly expresses the aspiration of the age.

As for the reasons behind the formation of the "unity" (yitong) concept during the Warring States period, the conventional explanation is that people, suffering from constant wars and "beggar-thy-neighbor" practices of various states, yearned fervently for a unified realm. I contend that this captures only a partial truth and fails to address the fundamental nature of the issue. It is recognized that the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods constituted an era of social transformation, transitioning from a "lineage aristocracy society" (zongzi guizu shehui) to a "landlord-bureaucrat society" (dizhu guanliao shehui). During the Warring States period, the seven powerful states and others were all sovereign and independent entities. From the perspective of the interactive relationship in which social existence shapes social consciousness, and social consciousness in turn reacts upon social existence, it is difficult to argue that the "unity" ideology of the Warring States period directly originated from the reality of independent and contending states of that era. In fact, the "unity" ideology of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods can be traced back to the "unity" ideology of the Xia, Shang, and Western Zhou periods, which was itself grounded in the historical reality of the "composite dynastic state structure" that characterized those earlier eras.

3.3 The composite state structure of the Xia, Shang, and Western Zhou and the concept of "unity"

Regarding the state structure of the Xia, Shang, and Western Zhou Dynasties, there have traditionally been two viewpoints. One posits that they were "unified centralized states" (Yang 1983; Xie 1995). While this perspective conveniently explains the historical origins of the "unity" concept in the Warring States period, the "unified centralized states" theory itself diverges from historical truth. The vassal states of the Xia, Shang, and Western Zhou periods were fundamentally different from the administrative organs or divisions under the later commandery-county system; they were not comparable entities. Specifically:

(1) The rulers of the vassal states in the Xia, Shang, and Western Zhou dynasties were hereditary, whereas the administrative heads of the Qin and Han commanderies

and counties were appointed and could be dismissed by the central authority. (2) Some of the subordinate polities (shubang) under the Xia, Shang, and Western Zhou dynasties were polities that had existed even before the rise of these dynasties. During the Three Dynasties, these subordinate polities maintained a relationship of subordination to the Xia, Shang, or Zhou kings, and could be dispatched and commanded by them; however, they were not integrated into a tightly knit, hierarchical administrative structure extending from the center to the localities, as was characteristic of the Qin and Han systems. (3) Their submission or subordination to the Xia, Shang, or Western Zhou dynasties meant that their sovereignty was incomplete and not fully independent; nevertheless, they retained other attributes of polities, thus forming "states within a state" within the dynasty. The control exercised by the Xia, Shang, and Zhou kings over these vassal states was indirect, in contrast to the direct, centralized control exerted through the administrative hierarchy of the commandery-county system from the Qin and Han periods onward. Therefore, characterizing the Xia, Shang, and Western Zhou dynasties as unified centralized states similar to the Qin and Han dynasties clearly does not align with historical reality.

The second viewpoint regards the Xia, Shang, and Western Zhou dynasties as a confederation of numerous regional states (fangguos)[6] (Lin 1981). This interpretation, however, swings from one extreme to the other, as it overlooks the dominant role exercised by the Xia, Shang, and Zhou kings over the local vassal states. In terms of territorial structure, it fails to account for the declaration in the "*Shijing*: Xiaoya: Beishan (*Book of Songs*: Lesser Odes: North Mountain" that "Under the vast heaven, / There is no land that is not the king's. / To the farthest borders of the earth, / None are not the king's servants." It likewise cannot explain the statement by Zhan Huanbo, a minister of the Zhou king, recorded in the *Zuo Zhuan* (Ninth Year of Duke Zhao), who enumerated the Zhou domains: "Wei, Tai, Rui, Qi, and Bi—these are our western lands"; "Pugu and Shangyan—these are our eastern lands"; "Ba, Pu, Chu, and Deng—these are our southern lands"; and "Sushen, Yan, and Bo—these are our northern lands." This viewpoint ignores the fact that the vassal states lacked independent sovereignty in the political sphere; were obliged to deliver tribute to the royal court in the economic sphere, with economic resources, particularly strategic ones, funneled to the central kingdom; and were required, militarily, to provide troops for the king's campaigns or to campaign at his command. In other words, the vassal states subordinate to the dynasty acknowledged the king as the "common sovereign of All-under-Heaven" (Tianxia Gongzhu) and were subject to his dispatch and control. Although these vassal states maintained internal autonomy without a direct, layered administrative subordination to the king, and the king's control

[6] Fagguo (方国): "The term regional state (fangguo) generally refers to local states that existed during the Xia, Shang, and Zhou periods in relation to the central royal state. Before the Shang replaced the Xia, the Shang was a regional state of the Xia royal house; however, after conquering the Xia, it could no longer be called a regional state, for it had become the central royal dynasty itself. The same applied to the Zhou: before overthrowing the Shang, the Zhou was a regional state under the Shang dynasty, known as the 'Zhou regional state'; after replacing the Shang, the Zhou became the new central royal state (Wang 2003)."

over them was primarily indirect, the dynasty as a whole—comprising all the vassal states—constituted a "pluralistic unity" (duoyuan yiti).

In response to the limitations of these two perspectives, I have proposed that "the Xia, Shang, and Western Zhou dynasties constituted a composite state structure characterized by pluralistic unity." The so-called "composite state structure" can be likened to a composite function in mathematics, where functions are nested within functions: the various vassal states in the "Outer Domains" (waifu) were "states within the state" of the dynasty; the royal domain (wangbang), located in the "Inner Domains" (neifu), was the "state above the states" within the dynasty, serving as the very foundation and mainstay of royal power; yet, the Inner and Outer Domains together formed an integrated whole (Wang 2010, 2012, 2013a).

Specifically, the composite structure of the Shang and Zhou dynasties, known as the "Inner and Outer Domains System" (neifu waifu zhi), can be elucidated through the *Shang Shu* and bronze inscriptions. Among the various proclamations of the early Zhou, the chapter "*Jiugao* (酒诰, Announcement about Alcohol)" in the *Shang Shu* provides the most comprehensive description of the Shang's system of Inner and Outer Domains:

> "I have heard that: In the past, the wise kings of Yin… from Cheng Tang down to Di Yi, the accomplished kings, reverent and mindful, employed managers of affairs. They restrained themselves with reverence, not daring to allow themselves leisure or idleness—how much less would they dare to indulge in drinking? As to those in the Outer Domains: the regional rulers and lords, specifically the Hou, Dian, Nan, Wei, and Bangbo; and as to those in the Inner Domains: the various officials, the ministers, the assistant officers, military commanders, clan artisans, and the heads of the various clans and lords—none dared to immerse themselves in drink. Not only did they not dare, but they also had no leisure to do so." (Gu and Liu 2005, 1403).

This passage from the "Jiugao" records that the structure of the Shang state was divided into Inner and Outer Domains. The Inner Domains comprised the various officials (bailiao), the ministers (shuyin), the assistant officers (weiya), the executive officers (weifu), the ancestral temple officers (zonggong), and the heads of the various clans and localities (baixing lijun)—all belonging to the bureaucratic system serving at the court. The Outer Domains consisted of the Hou, Dian, Nan, Wei, and Bangbo—constituting the system of vassal states outside the royal domain. The record in the "Jiugao" can be usefully read alongside the inscription on the Da Yu Ding bronze (大盂鼎), which states: "惟殷边侯田 (甸) 粤殷正百辟" The phrase "Yin bian Hou Dian" (殷边侯甸) in the inscription refers precisely to the Hou and Dian lords in the border regions of Yin (Shang), while "Yin zheng bai bi" (殷正百辟) refers to the many officers of the central administration. The character "yue" (粤) is a conjunction meaning "and." Thus, the "Hou, Dian, Nan, Wei, Bangbo" of the Outer Domains mentioned in the Jiugao correspond to the "Hou and Dian lords of the Yin border regions" in the Da Yu Ding inscription; and the "various officials, ministers, assistant officers, executive officers, ancestral temple officers, and heads of the various clans and localities" of the Inner Domains in the "Jiugao" correspond

to the "many officers of Yin's administration" in the Da Yu Ding. This cross-reference confirms that the account in the "Jiugao" is well-grounded and reliable.

The situation in the Western Zhou was similar, as it also implemented the "Inner and Outer Domains" system (neifu waifu zhi). The Inner Domains of the Western Zhou comprised the Zhou Polity (Zhou Bang), or royal domain, directly controlled by the Zhou king. The Outer Domains consisted of the vassal states enfeoffed by the Zhou king, which did not possess independent sovereignty. Under the authority of the kingship, these two components together constituted the Western Zhou dynastic state as a "pluralistic-yet-unified" (duoyuan yitong) entity.

The composite state structure of the Western Zhou is also seen in the *Shang Shu* and Western Zhou bronze inscriptions. The "*Shang Shu:* Kang Gao, (*Book of Documents*: The Announcement to Kang)" records:

> "In the third month, when the moon began to wane, the Duke of Zhou commenced the foundations and proceeded to build the new great city at Luo, in the eastern lands. The people from the four quarters assembled in great harmony.Hou, Dian, Cai, and Wei—regional lords of various ranks—along with the hundred officers and artisans (Baigong), and the transplanted people (Bomin),[7] all harmoniously attended the court of Zhou." (Gu and Liu 2005, 1292)

The "*Shang Shu*: Zhaogao (*Book of Documents*: The Announcement of the Duke of Shao)" states:

> "On the seventh day, Jiazi (the first day of the traditional Chinese sixty-day cyclical calendar), the Duke of Zhou, in the morning, issued a charge to the multitude of the Yin people who were relocated to Luoyi and the lords of the Hou, Dian, Nan, and Bangbo domains." (Gu and Liu 2005, 1433–1434).

In the "Kanggao" the terms "Hou, Dian, Nan, Bang, cai, and wei" represent the vassal system of the outer domains, while the "hundred officers (Baigong)" and the "transplanted people (Bomin)"—the Yin remnants who were relocated to the eastern capital, Luoyi—belong to the system of the Inner Domains. In the "Zhao Gao", the "multitude of the Yin people (Shu Yin)" refers to the Yin remnants relocated to Luoyi, who were situated within the royal domain (Wangji)—the Inner Domains; while the "Hou, Dian, Nan, and Bangbo" constitute the vassal system of the Outer Domains.

The Inner and Outer Domains system described in the "Kang Gao" and "Zhao Gao" corresponds with records in Western Zhou bronze inscriptions. The "Ze Ling Fang Yi" (矢令方彝) inscription states: "The king charged Mingbao with the administration of the Three Affairs—which encompassed the Qing Shi Liao (Secretariats), the various Yin officials, the Li Jun (Local Heads), and the Bai Gong (Hundred Artisans)—and with the administration of the Four Quarters—which included the regional lords of domains such as Hou, Dian, and Nan." in the inscription belong

[7] Bomin: The Yin remnants who were relocated to the eastern capital, Luoyi.

to the bureaucratic system of the Inner Domains; the corresponding "Vassal Lords: Hou, Dian, Nan" from the "Four Quarters" belong to the system of vassal states. The so-called system of enfeoffment (Fengjian) in the Western Zhou, which established politics throughout the land, created the vassal system of the Outer Domains. This, combined with the bureaucratic system of the Inner Domains, together constituted the "composite structure of the dynastic state."

The Inner and Outer Domains system recorded in the Western Zhou bronze inscriptions "Da Yu Ding" and "Ze Ling Fang Yi" corresponds perfectly with that recorded in the Western Zhou texts of the "*Shang Shu*: the Jiu Gao", "Kang Gao", and "Zhao Gao". This is a manifest example of what the historian Wang Guowei termed the "Dual Evidence Method" (Er Zhong Zhengju Fa), where newly excavated textual evidence from underground and received transmitted texts mutually corroborate one another.

The composite state structure of the Shang and Zhou Dynasties is manifested in their political-territorial division, which consisted of the Inner and Outer Domains —that is, the royal domain (Wangbang) and the vassal states. However, this division did not result in a strict separation between the two. A crucial link connecting them was that individuals from the vassal states served as court officials, residing in the royal capital and participating in royal affairs. Taking the Shang Dynasty as an example, oracle bone inscriptions mention an official named "Xiaochen Chou," who held the title of "Xiaochen" (Minor Servitor or Junior Official). This "Xiaochen Chou," who served in the court (Guo 1978–1982, 36419), originated from the vassal state of "Yachou," identified with the large Tomb No. 1 at Subutun in Qingzhou, Shandong Province (Shandong Museum 1972; Shandong Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology and Qingzhou undefined 1989). Numerous similar examples can be found in both oracle bone inscriptions and tombs excavated at the Yinxu site. For instance, the prominent aristocratic tomb No. 54 at Huayuan Zhuang, Yinxu, yielded bronze ritual vessels inscribed with the characters "Yachang," indicating that the deceased was a high-ranking military officer sent from the vassal state Chang polity to serve in the court at the Yin capital (AAT, IA CASS 2004). In oracle bone inscriptions, the rulers of the Chang lineage are referred to as "Chang Bo" Elder of Chang) (Guo 1978–1982, 6987 recto) or "Chang Zi" (Son of Chang) (Guo 1978–1982, 27641). Notable military leaders of the Chang lineage, such as "Chang Youjiao" and "Chang Youtang," are also mentioned in the divination records (Guo 1978–1982, 6057 recto, 6063 verso). By linking Tomb No. 54 at Huayuanzhuang, Yinxu, with the oracle bone records concerning the rulers and generals of the Chang lineage, it can be inferred that the tomb's occupant was a high-ranking noble sent by the Chang polity to serve as a military official at the Yin capital. Additionally, the family bearing the clan emblem "Guang," discovered in the cemetery at Meiyuanzhuang Village in modern Anyang, corresponds to the "Guang" mentioned in oracle bone inscriptions (Guo 1978–1982, 94 recto, 182) and to "Hou Guang (Marquis Guang)" (Guo 1978–1982, 20057), who were sent by their vassal state to serve as officials in the Yin court.

Many other such examples exist. The reason individuals from these vassal states (subordinate polities) of the "Outer Domains" or the "Four Territories (Situ)" could hold office within the "Inner Domains," that is, the royal state, lies precisely in

the composite state structure of the Shang dynasty, which integrated both the Inner and Outer Domains.

Tracing back from the Shang and Zhou Dynasties to the Xia Dynasty, pre-Qin literature and the "*Shiji*: Xia Benji (*Records of the Grand Historian:* The Basic Annals of the Xia)", indicate that the Xia polity comprised several components: the Xiahou Clan, which constituted the royal domain (Wangbang); various surname-sharing polities such as the Youhu, Younan, Zhenxun, Tongcheng, Bao, Fei, Qi, Zeng, Xin, Ming, and Zhenge clans; and vassal states that held a subordinate status, such as Wei, Gu, Kunwu, the Youyu Clan, the Shang Hou (Lord of Shang), and the Xue Guo (State of Xue). Consequently, the state structure of the Xia Dynasty was a multi-layered, composite dynastic structure integrating various polities, with the Xia king as the "common sovereign of All-under-Heaven" (Tianxia Gongzhu).

Within the Xia Dynasty, an unequal relationship existed between the Xiahou clan (the royal house) and the vassal states. For example, in the *Zuo Zhuan* (third year of Duke Xuan) records: "In the past, when the Xia dynasty was virtuous, [they] depicted things from distant lands, and the Nine Pastors (Jiu Mu) contributed metal, casting cauldrons on which these things were represented" (Yang 1981, 669). "*Meng Z*i: Teng Wen Gong Shang" states: "Under the Xia dynasty, a land allotment system was implemented, with each household receiving fifty mu of land, upon which a tax of one-tenth was levied." (Jiao 1987). This indicates that the vassal states were obligated to pay tribute to the royal domain. Furthermore, the "*Mozi*: Geng Zhu" *chapter* notes: "In ancient times, Emperor Qi of Xia sent Fei Lian to obtain metal from mountains and rivers and had it cast at Kuwu" (Sun 1986). Here, Fei Lian—an ancestor of the Qin state—being tasked by Xia Qi with mining and metallurgy, represents another form of tribute service.

The *Zuo Zhuan* further records that Xizhong, the ruler of the State of Xue, served as the "Chariot Master" (Che Zheng) for the Xia dynasty, specializing in manufacturing chariots for the Xia king. Similarly, Hou Ming of Shang served as the "Water Controller" (Shui Guan) for Xia and died in the line of duty while managing floods. The "*Guo Yu*: Zhou Yu Shang (*Discourses of the State*s: Discourses of Zhou I" states that the ancestors of the Zhou people once "served the Yu (Shun) and Xia Dynasties." That these rulers or nobles of the vassal states held office in the central court signified not only their participation in the affairs of the dynastic state but also their recognition of the central kingdom as the "common sovereign of All-under-Heaven." Simultaneously, as politics dispersed across the land, they fulfilled the duty of acting as a protective screen for the royal domain, guarding its territories and frontiers.

Thus, we argue that the Xia, Shang, and Western Zhou Dynasties all constituted composite dynastic states, a structure that manifested as a "pluralistic unity." "Pluralistic" denotes that they comprised people of many different surname groups, including numerous vassal states. "Unity" signifies that the entire dynastic state possessed an integrated nature. Consequently, the Zhou people, living within this composite structure, perceived their dynasty as "unified" (tongyi)—this being the social reality underlying the aforementioned declaration in the *Shijing* that "Under the vast heaven, / There is no land that is not the king's. / To the farthest borders of the earth, / None are not the king's servants." Confucius, living

in the late Spring and Autumn period, lamented, "When the Way prevails under Heaven, the rites, music, and punitive expeditions are initiated by the Son of Heaven. When the Way does not prevail under Heaven, the rites, music, and punitive expeditions are initiated by the feudal lords" ("*Lunyu*: Jishi"), a sentiment born from his reverence for the "unified" Western Zhou. In contrast to the "Great Unity" (Da Yitong) ideology that developed under the centralized, unitary commandery-county system of the Qin and Han Dynasties, the concept of "unity" (yitong) arising from the "pluralistic-yet-unified composite state structure" represents a relatively early form of the "Great Unity" concept. This concept of unity was handed down through the Three Dynasties, forming a foundational orthodox political tradition (zhengtong). By the Warring States period, as people suffered from the conflicts between rival states, their yearning for unification was both a practical desire and one with deep historical roots.

3.4 The Clan-State Confederation and the ideology of "unity" in the era of the Five Emperors

Tracing back further from the Three Dynasties, what was the form and structure of the political entities during the era of the Five Emperors described in the "*Shiji*: Wudibenji", and during the period of Zhuanxu, Yao, Shun, and Yu mentioned in the "Yaodian" and "Yugong"? Most previous scholarship has characterized the era of the Five Emperors, including Yao and Shun, as a "tribal alliance."[8] However, my research over the past decade argues that while it was indeed a form of alliance, it was not a "tribal alliance" but rather a "Clan-State Confederation," or what might be termed a "confederation of states (邦国联盟)."

The Clan-State Confederation in the Central Plains during the Five Emperors era can be divided into two phases: the first encompasses the periods of the Yellow Emperor (Huang Di), Zhuanxu, and Diku; the second is the periods of Yao, Shun, and Yu. The Clan-State Confederation during Huangdi's time was formed through the unification achieved after his victories over the Yan Emperor (Yan Di) and Chiyou.

According to the "*Guo Yu*: Jin Yu Si (*Discourses of the States*: Discourses of Jin IV)", the Yellow Emperor's (Huangdi) clan and the Yan Emperor's (Yandi) clan originally shared a "brotherly" (fraternal) relationship. As it states:

> "In ancient times, Shaodian married a woman from the Youjiao clan and begat two sons, the Yellow Emperor and the Yan Emperor. The Yellow Emperor grew up by the Ji River, and the Yan Emperor by the Jiang River. And thus, as

[8] Tribal alliance (部落联盟): This term refers to a union formed in relatively egalitarian societies, typically for collective military defense, featuring a supreme military chieftain. Previous scholarship conventionally labeled the Yao-Shun-Yu coalition as such. However, since the "myriad states" (万邦) of that time already encompassed early states—termed "clan polities" (族邦, zubang) or simply "states" (邦国, bangguo)—a more precise classification, adhering to the principle that a phenomenon's nature is defined by its dominant aspect, characterizes their relationship not as a "tribal alliance," but as a "confederation of states" or, more specifically, a Clan-State Confederation (Wang 2013c).

> they grew, their inherent virtues (de) differed. Therefore, the Yellow Emperor came to bear the surname Ji, and the Yan Emperor the surname Jiang. The two emperors used their armies to aid and control each other, and this was because of their differing virtues (de)" (Shanghai Normal University Ancient Books Collation Group 1978).

This indicates that both the Yellow Emperor's and the Yan Emperor's clans originated from a large tribe or "tribal alliance" in the ancient Shaanxi-Gansu region. However, as they migrated and expanded eastward, conflicts arose between them due to their respective expansions. The "*Shiji*: Wudibenji" records:

> "At the time of Xuanyuan (the Yellow Emperor)… the Yan Emperor sought to invade and oppress the various lords (zhuhou), and the lords all turned to Xuanyuan. Thereupon, Xuanyuan cultivated virtuous governance (xiu de), strengthened the military, studied the movements of the Five Elements (wu qi), propagated the five grains (wu zhong), comforted the myriad people, and surveyed the four directions. He trained his troops, symbolized by bears, brown bears, PiXiu, Chu, and tigers, and fought with the Yan Emperor in the wilderness of Banquan. After three battles, he then realized his ambition" (Sima 1959, 3).

After the Battle of Banquan, the alliance between the Yellow Emperor and the Yan Emperor faced Chiyou in the Battle of Zhuolu. According to the *"Lost Book of Zhou*: The Explanation on Tasting Wheat:

In the beginning, the High God established two sovereigns and set up the fundamental laws. He commanded the Yan Emperor to appoint two ministers and assigned Chiyou to reside in the domain of Shaohao to govern the four directions and manage the unfinished tasks of the High God. But Chiyou then drove out the Yan Emperor and fought him at the River of Zhuolu, bringing chaos to all Regions (resulting in "no corner of the nine regions remaining untouched"). The Yan Emperor was terrified and sought help from the Yellow Emperor. Together, they captured Chiyou and killed him in Zhongji. They vented their anger with weapons, established order in accordance with the High God's will, and recorded this event with the Supreme Sovereign. The battlefield was named the Field of the Severed Bridle. They then appointed Shaohao Qing—known as Zhi—to take Chiyou's place in commanding the east. Through this, the High God's work was completed, and from then until now, the All-under-Heaven has remained in order (Huang et al. 1995).

Chiyou originally "resided in the domain of Shaohao to oversee the four directions." After Chiyou was killed, the Yellow Emperor appointed Shaohao Qing (Shaohao Zhi) to replace him, "to rectify the offices of the Five Emperors." Regarding the ethnic affiliation of Chiyou, Xu Xusheng argued that Chiyou belonged to the Dongyi people (Xu 1960, 50–53). During the Han Dynasty, scholars like Gao You and Ma Rong stated that Chiyou was the leader of the Jiuli (九黎), which is generally considered part of the Sanmiao confederation. This paper, however, does not aim to delve into the debate on Chiyou's ethnic affiliation. The fact that the Yellow Emperor appointed Shaohao Qing to replace Chiyou in commanding the eastern tribes suggests that the Yellow Emperor's clan

and the Dongyi people had formed a confederation, with the Yellow Emperor as the head of the confederation and the Dongyi, led by Shaohao Qing, as the allies.

This situation finds corollary evidence in a passage from "*Hanfeizi*: Shiguo (*Hanfeizi:* Ten Faults)": "In the past, the Yellow Emperor assembled the ghosts and spirits on Mount Tai… Chiyou marched at the front, the Earl of Wind swept the path ahead, and the Master of Rain sprinkled water to settle the dust…" (Liang 1960). This passage, though mythological in form, reflects certain historical facts. According to the "*Classic of Mountains and Seas*: The Great Wilderness North," the Earl of Wind and Master of Rain were deities summoned by Chiyou during the Battle of Zhuolu to "unleash great storm" against the Yellow Emperor. Yet, in the account from *Hanfeizi*, they are depicted as part of the Yellow Emperor's retinue. If even Chiyou, the Earl of Wind, and the Master of Rain submitted to the Yellow Emperor's authority, it stands to reason that the various tribes under Shaohao, who replaced Chiyou, would form a friendly confederation with the Yellow Emperor's clan.

In ancient legends, personal names, clan names, and theonyms were often interchangeable (Wang 2015). The narrative in "*Hanfeizi*: Ten Faults" exemplifies this fusion of myth and history, demonstrating the interchangeability of personal and clan names (as with Chiyou and the Chiyou clan), as well as that of human and divine figures (as with the Earl of Wind, the Master of Rain, and the deified Chiyou). Therefore, after the Battles of Banquan and Zhuolu, not only did the Yellow Emperor's clan and the Yan Emperor's clan form a confederation, but the Yellow Emperor's clan also formed a friendly confederation with the Dongyi tribe.

Regarding the Clan-State Confederation during the period of Yao, Shun, and Yu, its nature is generally illustrated by the accounts of succession (shanrang) in documents such as the "*Shang Shu:* Yaodian" and the "*Shiji*: Wudibenji."

Emperor Yao said, "Oh! Chief of the Four Peaks, I have been on the throne for seventy years. You are capable of carrying out the Mandate entrusted to me; it is you who should succeed to my imperial throne." The Chief of the Four Peaks replied, "My virtues are insufficient and would only bring disgrace to the imperial throne." Emperor Yao said, "Very well. Then I bid you to thoroughly scrutinize my kinsmen and those of virtuous character, as well as to discover and elevate any worthy talent who remains obscure and unrecognized among the common people." The ministers then said to the Emperor, "There is an unmarried man of lowly status named Yu Shun, who is such a person." The Emperor said, "Yes! I have heard of him. What is he like?" The Chief of the Four Peaks replied, "He is the son of a blind man. His father is unprincipled, his stepmother is insincere, and his half-brother Xiang is arrogant. Yet, through his filial piety devotion, Shun brought harmony to his family and fostered such thriving domestic life that they all ceased their wicked conduct." Emperor Yao said, "I shall put him to the test!" Thereupon, Yao gave his two daughters in marriage to Shun, to observe how Shun conducted himself by managing his household and treating others. The two daughters went to Shun's residence at Guirui—located in the area of the winding Gui River in present-day Yongji, Shanxi Province—and became the wives of Yu Shun. In the end, Emperor Yao was greatly satisfied and encouraged Yu Shun, saying, "Be reverent in attending to governmental affairs, and do your utmost!" (Gu and Liu 2005, 86). This passage from the "*Shang*

Shu: Yaodian" vividly depicts the process by which Yao effected the transition of the leader of the Clan-State Confederation to Yu Shun.

Some pre-Qin documents, however, contend that the transition of power among Yao, Shun, and Yu was not one of voluntary abdication (shanrang) but of "forced usurpation." For instance, the ancient *Bamboo Annals* (*Zhushu Jinian*) records: "Shun imprisoned Yao in Pingyang and seized the imperial throne."

"Hanfeizi: shuoyi (*Hanfeizi*: Expressing Doubts)" states: "Shun forced Yao to abdication, Yu coerced Shun, Tang exiled Jie, and King Wu attacked Zhou. These four rulers were all sovereigns slain by their ministers" (Liang 1960). I believe these two accounts reflect two possible scenarios for the transfer of leadership within the Clan-State Confederation: the "abdication theory (shanrang)" describes a peaceful and orderly transition of the leadership within the confederation, while the "forced usurpation theory (bigong)" suggests intense struggles among Yao, Shun, and Yu. This, from one perspective, reflects the shifting balance of power among the various polities in the Central Plains region. Nevertheless, regardless of which theory one subscribes to, it is undeniable that a powerful Clan-State Confederation existed in the Central Plains during the periods of Yao, Shun, and Yu.

At that time, Yao, Shun, and Yu all held dual roles—they were both the rulers of their own states (Bangjun) and the leaders of the confederation. What Yao, Shun, and Yu ceded or contended for was the position of confederation leader, not their authority as the rulers of their native states. The era of Yao, Shun, and Yu is also referred to as the "Era of the Myriad States (Wan Bang)," a landscape of numerous small, sparsely-populated polities. For instance, the "*Shangshu*: Yaodian" states that under Yao, "he harmonized the myriad states." The *Zuozhuan* (Duke Ai, 7th Year) records: "Yu assembled the lords at Mount Tu, and those who attended bearing jades and silks numbered ten thousand." The term "myriad" in "myriad states" is an expression denoting a very large number. Among these "myriad states," polities such as the state of Tang Yao, the state of Yu Shun, and the state of Gonggongshi were of the nature of early states. Although some entities remained at the tribal stage, the nature of a thing is determined by the principal aspect of its fundamental contradiction. The polities that had already evolved into early states represented the most advanced political entities of the time. Therefore, the alliance formed in the Central Plains region should be termed a "Clan-State Confederation," not a "tribal alliance" as was conventionally done. A "tribal alliance" belongs to the category of primitive society, whereas the Clan-State Confederation is not confined to primitive society and can also exist in civilized society (state society). Thus, I disagree with labeling the alliance described in the "Yaodian" and "Gaoyao Mo" as a "tribal alliance" and argue instead that it was a "Clan-State Confederation."

The Clan-State Confederation was neither a dynasty nor equivalent to the states of later periods. However, as it evolved toward a "pluralistic yet unified composite state structure," the Clan-State Confederation also developed a corresponding ideology of "confederation unity." People of the Spring and Autumn, Warring States, Qin, and Han periods, lacking modern anthropological concepts such as "tribal alliance" or "Clan-State Confederation," could only describe and interpret the society of the Five Emperors era by analogy with the state formation of the the Three Dynasties (Xia, Shang, Western Zhou) and the Qin and Han periods. They depicted the

Clan-State Confederation of Yao, Shun, and Yu as the imperial courts of Yao and Shun, distinguishing them from the Three Dynasties only by emphasizing "abdication (shanrang)" versus "hereditary rule (jia tian xia)." Consequently, the notion of "confederate unity" was reinterpreted as a form of "Great Unity (Da Yitong)." This is exemplified in the "*Records of the Grand Historian*: Annals of the Five Emperors," which recounts that after defeating the Yan Emperor and Chiyou, "all the lords (zhuhou) honored Xuanyuan as the Son of Heaven" and "gathered at Mount Fu to harmonize their tallies." It also explains why texts such as the *Annals of the Five Emperors* and the chapters "Yaodian," "Gaoyao Mo," and "Yugong" in the *Book of Documents* describe the Five Emperors era as a time when "All-under-Heaven (Tianxia)" was unified, thereby giving rise to the concept of "Great Unity."

4 Conclusion

In summary, the ideology of "Great Unity (Da Yitong)" emerged from the politics of "Great Unity," which was primarily embodied in the structural form of the "Great Unity" state. Therefore, to investigate the origin and evolution of the "Great Unity" ideology, we must begin with the developmental trajectory of state structure in ancient China.

From the eras of Yao, Shun, and Yu, through the Three Dynasties, and into the Qin and Han dynasties, concomitant with transformations in state form and structure, three distinct context-oriented concepts of "Great Unity" concepts emerged sequentially:

1. The notion of "Unity of All-under-Heaven (Tianxia)," characterized by a "confederate unity," which corresponded to the framework of the Clan-State Confederation during the Yao-Shun-Yu period.
2. The concept of "Unity (Yitong)," which aligned with the "Composite Dynastic State Structure" of the Xia, Shang, and Western Zhou dynasties.
3. The ideology of "Great Unity (Da Yitong)," which suited the centralized, imperial state structure under the Commandery-County System from the Qin and Han dynasties onward.

From the perspective of intellectual history, these three layered concepts of "Great Unity," each with its specific historical context, serve as markers of three stages of historical development and reflect both the continuity and the phased characteristics of Chinese civilization. In terms of China's historical trajectory, the background associated with the "Great Unity" ideology reveals an evolution from the "unitary system of states" and their Clan-State Confederation during the Five Emperors era, to the "Composite Dynastic State" of the Three Dynasties, and further to the unified "Central Commandery-County" Imperial State since the Qin and Han. This progression manifests two interrelated dimensions of a single overarching process: the interactive development between the evolution of China's state structure and the evolution of the "Great Unity" political ideology.

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Comments