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AT THE CENTER OF THE UNIVERSE

Contemporary China sees itself through an ancient tradition, one that is founded on the awareness of a deep continuity with the past, on the admiration for a mythical golden age, and on a deferential attitude toward its ancestors and roots. This respect for antiquity and the foundations of civil life were developed during one of the more turbulent periods of Chinese history, characterized by a profound crisis in both material and spiritual terms, but also by unprecedented intellectual and technological wealth. It led, in 221 BC, to the foundation of a great empire that lasted for over two thousand years. It was during the early centuries of this empire that the distinguishing traits of Chinese civilization assumed their definitive form. The Chinese identity, I would argue, is inseparable from the awareness that China is a political and cultural *unicum* based on the continuity of this empire which, although alternating between periods of unity and division, administered and defended vast territories. This was thanks to the strong bureaucracy of its ruling class whose instruments of government made it capable of overcoming crisis after crisis, unlike the Roman Empire, which disintegrated and remained incapable of reconstituting itself.

The history of the last few centuries and the new relationship with the West show just how vital the roots of the various traditions of ancient thought still are today. But they also show how important a knowledge of China's historical and philosophical background is: without it, political and ideological positions nurtured on a kind of pragmatism that is well informed by traditional principles risk being viewed as contradictory and inconsistent. A feeling of national unity is an integral part of the awareness of the intellectual, cultural and material wealth of China's past, giving good reason for the Chinese ambition to exercise its influence over the Far East and beyond by fully as-

suming the role of a leading power, a claim pursued today more in politics and economics than in the military sphere. This claim was bolstered over past millenia, however, by the conviction that China was the center of the world, the cradle of civilization, and a beacon of light to those who lived not only within the vast empire but also beyond its endless confines. It is certainly no coincidence that China is still referred to as Zhongguo 中國, a word consisting of the two morphemes *zhong* 中 (middle, center) and *guo* 國 (kingdom, state), which we find as the first and last constituents of the official names adopted in 1912 by the Republic of China (Zhonghua minguo 中華民國) and in 1949 by the People's Republic of China (Zhonghua renmin gongheguo 中華人民共和國). In spite of the countless symbolic implications and meanings incorporated over the past two thousand years into the term Zhongguo, which at different times connoted a geographic, political, and cultural entity, the same word that was used for centuries was still maintained.<sup>1</sup>

When and how the concept of «center» (*zhong*) became one of the constitutive elements of Chinese identity is the subject of this paper.<sup>2</sup>

«Heaven is round and the earth is square» (*tian yuan di fang* 天圓地方):<sup>3</sup> this is how the world was imagined in antiquity. The idea of a universe composed of a flat, square earth (rectangular according to some sources) surrounded by the *sihai* 四海, the Four Seas, which flowed around its perimeter like the Oceanus of the ancient Greeks, already appears clear from the first written sources, the so-called oracle-bone inscriptions (*jiaguwen* 甲骨文) of the Late Shang 商 dynasty (ca. 1250-1045 BC). The celestial dome was imagined to be circular, held up by sacred mountains placed like pillars at the cardinal points.<sup>4</sup> The dominators of the

<sup>1</sup> The word China derives from the name of the first imperial dynasty, Qin 秦, which inherited it from the powerful state of Qin which unified the empire in 221 BC.

<sup>2</sup> The philosophical meanings of *zhong* are not explored here. For a recent treatment of this topic, see M. Scarpari, *Il confucianesimo. I fondamenti e i testi*, Torino, Einaudi, 146-61.

<sup>3</sup> *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (Masters of Huainan), ch. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Maurizio Scarpari, «Le montagne sacre nella tradizione cinese», in Amilcare Barbero, Stefano Piano (eds.), *Religioni e Sacri Monti*, Ponzano Monferrato, Centro di Documentazione dei Sacri Monti, Calvari e Complessi Devozionali Europei, 2006, 275-86.

most fertile areas of the Chinese continent, lying roughly along the central valley of the Yellow River – first the Shang (ca. XVI sec.-1045 BC) and then the Zhou 周 (1045-221 BC) – imagined themselves to be in the center of this vast *plateau*, surrounded in every direction by barbarians or semi-barbarians.<sup>5</sup>

An inner area called Zhong Shang 中商, the Central Shang, or *zhongtu* 中土, the Central Land, was the religious, political, economic and military center of the Shang state. This is where the ancestral capital, the political and administrative capital, and the royal hunting reserve were located. Stretching out in all directions around it were the *situ* 四土, the Four Lands, vast populated areas that were an integral part of the Shang state, producing an enormous amount of foodstuffs, primarily grains. Beyond their borders, which varied depending on the changing political and military conditions, there lay an outer area with the lands inhabited by peoples who were viewed as less developed or even downright crude and potentially hostile. The royal court kept up various types of relations with these peoples, from whom they procured their slaves and sacrificial victims for funerary rites. In the oracle-bone inscriptions these lands were generically referred to as *fang* 方, the External Territories, sometimes as *duofang* 多方, the Many External Territories. This term is variously interpreted as denoting a geographical and political entity external to the Shang world, and the peoples who lived there. It also refers to sorts of spiritual entities that were inhabited by strange beings, spirits, and natural powers like winds and rain – a complex of forces from the universe commanded by the High God Di 帝 (Thearch, Lord) or Shangdi 上帝 (Supreme Thearch) who used them to determine the well-being of the Shang. When *fang*, the External Territories, are part of the expression *sifang* 四方 (the Four External Territories or the Four Quarters, as it is generally translated), it refers to non-Shang lands in the four cardinal directions and to the universe in its widest and most inclusive sense: a real place but one that is also abstract and spiritual, with strong cosmological connotations. From here, the High God Di

<sup>5</sup> The literature on these topics is vast. The main texts in English I drew on are: Sarah Allan, *The Shape of the Turtle: Myth, Art, and Cosmos in Early China*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1991; David N. Keightley, *The Ancestral Landscape: Time, Space, and Community in Late Shang China (ca. 1200-1045 B.C.)*, Berkeley, Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California (China Research Monograph 53), 2000; and Aihe Wang, *Cosmology and Political Culture in Early China*, Cambridge (UK), Cambridge University Press, 2000.

exercised his divine power, sending calamities and misfortunes or precious goods and gifts depending on the circumstances.

The relationship between the center and the rest of the world was thus well defined, just as their borders appear to be, while continuing to be flexible in response to changes in diplomatic and political relations. The Shang defined themselves and their world as *wo* 我, «we, us», while everything that was not felt as *wo* was automatically perceived as *fang*, namely, alien, hostile, or unknown and at times shrouded in mystery. To use the words of David Keightley, «both politically and cosmologically the border zone peopled by the *fang* marked the limits of reliable Shang Power and understanding». <sup>6</sup> It is precisely in relation to the «otherness» and «outerness» of the *fang* (the External Territories) that the centrality of *wo* (we, us, the Shang) was defined; and «the centrality of a homogeneous «us» was defined in turn by contrast to the heterogeneous «others», as Aihe Wang has observed. <sup>7</sup>

The ruler was firmly placed at the center of this universe, or, more precisely, *he himself* was the center. The oracle-bone graph for «center» (*zhong*) is written with pennants at top and bottom. The expression *li zhong* 立中, «to establish the center», refers to a particularly important rite performed personally by the ruler, in which a flagpole was raised as a gnomon to measure the shadow that the sun cast when it was at its apex in the sky. Its purpose was to establish the exact time (called *zhong ri* 中日 «when the sun is at the center») for the most important rites to be performed. <sup>8</sup> According to another interpretation, however, the expression *li zhong* means «to set up the standard of the center» or «to set one's self at the center». <sup>9</sup> This points to the fact that the presence alone of the ruler at the heart of the political and religious system of the Shang was sufficient in itself to indicate the center of the world and the universe, not only physically but also conceptually. The power that he was granted to communicate with his ancestors who had ascended over the centuries to join the High God Di in the heavens legitimized his religious and political power. As Aihe Wang expresses it

[...] the *Sifang*-center cosmology of Shang China was a three-dimensional spatial and temporal structure. It functioned as a cultural totality in which both political interactions among human beings and

<sup>6</sup> David N. Keightley, 67.

<sup>7</sup> Aihe Wang, 27.

<sup>8</sup> *Idem*, 54.

<sup>9</sup> David N. Keightley, 85.

ritual communication with the divine world were carried out. With this single structure of time and space, the ancient Chinese scheduled their political, economic, and ritual actions, built their cities, temples, and tombs, constructed calendars and geography, conceptualized space and time, and classified all the events, forces, and beings in the universe. The center of this structure was crucial both cosmologically and politically, and occupation of this central location itself constituted divine authority and political power. When the Western Zhou replaced Shang as the center, they inherited this cosmology and reinforced the political dominance of the center through a more efficient system of monarchy.<sup>10</sup>

The advent of the new dynasty in 1045 BC caused a substantial change in the previous religious and institutional organization. The place where Shangdi and the ancestral royal spirits lived, *tian* 天 «sky» or «heaven», was identified with the High God of the Zhou and, consequently, the king was called *Tianzi* 天子, Son of Heaven. Although the centrality of kinship and ancestor worship was maintained, the ruler was placed at the top of a pseudo-feudal organization in which much of the authority was founded on the principle of hereditary succession and on a set of rigid ritual and ceremonial norms, the *li* 禮. Taking as their model the order of nature and the universe, these norms established a direct link between the world of human beings and the supernatural world of the spirits, instilling in the individual a deep sense of participation in the wider processes of existence. It was a period of great transformation and remarkable technological and social progress, leading to a long and rather difficult process of cultural, political and economic integration between the northern regions and those lying more to the south and in the peripheries.

In the ceremonial bronze inscriptions of the Western Zhou 西周 dynasty (1045-771 BC) and in literary texts thought to date from the same period, the expression *sifang*, the Four Quarters, occurs with some frequency, as well as *situ*, the Four Lands, *siguo* 四國, the Four States, and sometimes also *zhonghuo* 中或, the Central Regions. The latter, *huo* 或, is a geographic concept used in reference to the four regions (Northern, Southern, Western, and Eastern) and together with *zhong* it is a probable precursor of the term we are examining here, first appearing in the various literary sources of the time: namely, *zhongguo* 中國, which in this context indicates the territories placed under the direct control of the Son of Heaven and for this reason translatable as «Central

<sup>10</sup> Aihe Wang, 73.

States» and not «Middle Kingdom» as it is generally mistranslated, or as «China», which would be completely anachronistic.<sup>11</sup>

In the pre-imperial literature of the period there is a clear distinction between *guo*,<sup>12</sup> a political and administrative entity with well-defined borders, and *zhongguo*, a less clearly defined entity that was not only political and administrative in nature but primarily cultural, based on a heritage of civilized values that were believed to be lacking outside its confines. These values could be exported, though, thanks to the positive, moral effect of enlightened rulers and to the influence of idealized models of government and society. This was the undisputed seat of power of the Zhou dynasty and has always been regarded by the Chinese as the cradle of civilization, comprising two distinct areas inside its borders: the first, known as the Zhouyuan 周原, the Plain of Zhou, which covered an area of about ten square kilometers, was the most important religious and cultural center of the Zhou; the second housed the political and administrative capital, situated near the modern city of Xi'an 西安, in present-day Shaanxi 陝西 Province, a hundred or so kilometers from the Plain of Zhou. The people living in this area considered themselves members of the Xia 夏 lineage, from the name of the dynasty that preceded the Shang. In this respect, Xia (later also Huaxia 華夏) was used at times to indicate one's ethnic and cultural identity, and at other times as a synonym of *zhongguo*.

Shortly after the victory of the Zhou over the Shang, a new capital was built at Luo 洛 (Chengzhou 成周), situated near the modern city of Luoyang 洛陽, in present-day Henan 河南 Province.<sup>13</sup> Its purpose was to create better conditions for political and military control over the central plain, but it was also planned for cosmological and religious reasons: it was in the new capital situated in the central region that the Zhou kings received the Mandate of Heaven (*Tianming* 天命) to govern the Four Quarters, whose conquest and annexation became one of the main objectives in the political agenda of the first Zhou rulers. In this light, the universal meaning of the expression *sifang* as an entity

<sup>11</sup> Cho-yun Hsu and Katherin M. Linduff, *Western Zhou Civilization*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1988, 96-7. See also Aihe Wang, 65, n. 110.

<sup>12</sup> At times also *bang* 邦 «kingdom, state».

<sup>13</sup> Archeological findings have not yet entirely cleared up whether the remains of the city of Chengzhou correspond to the fortified city of Luoyi 洛邑, both of which appear in the ancient sources as the eastern capital of the Zhou kingdom, founded on the banks of the River Luo 洛 during the reign of King Cheng 成王 (ruled 1042-1006 BC).

that encompasses all under Heaven receives its definitive form, just as the semantic field of *zhongguo*, essential to the Zhou for maintaining the divine Mandate to govern over all under Heaven, is traced out with precision.

Starting in the 8th century BC, the central power gradually weakened while the political and administrative center that had made the Zhou powerful in the first centuries of their dominion eventually disintegrated, giving life to dozens of states of varying sizes who demanded their independence. The relationship with the central court also weakened over time until a solid tie was only maintained in religious affairs. More and more powerful states competed to dominate larger and larger territories, fueled by the desire to reinstate the lost unity under their own direct control. It was during this period of enormous political and military turmoil that new theories of cosmology gradually came to the fore, influenced by the profound changes that had taken place in the system for communicating between Heaven and Man. The notion of a sacred and eternal center with the four subordinate *fang* around it was gradually abandoned and replaced by a more elaborate and sophisticated system which broke with the previous hierarchy patterned on a static numbering system based on four (e.g., Four Winds, Four Quarters, Four Seasons, etc.). In its place a new dynamic system was created based on the number five (e.g., Five Directions, Five Powers, Five Energies, Five Colors, etc.) with the place at the center no longer in a distinctive and dominant position but rather equal to the other ones. The evolution of the cosmos was seen as a continuous and infinite interconnection of relationships whose reflections were made manifest in human affairs. The theoretical elaboration of an organic system that defined the constant interaction and transformation of the cosmic energies in cycles correlated with cosmic patterns of order led to the well-known system of the five interactive phases, normally called the Five Phases or Five Processes (*wuxing* 五行): the Five Powers or Elements – *wucai* 五才: Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water – interacted with one another in cycles of mutual overcoming (or conquest) and of mutual production (or meeting), giving rise to various complex systems of correlations. This system was later combined with the *yin-yang* 陰陽 system, which was based instead on a binary opposition. New forms of connection between the realm of the cosmos and the realm of man, and new concepts of spatial order, political power and human sovereignty were re-defined in the imminent prospect of a unified era.

The ideal of Great Unity (*da yitong* 大一統) took shape during the same period.<sup>14</sup> A new conception of the world emerged, one that would take on increasing importance in political debate, ultimately represented by the term *tianxia* 天下, literally «All under Heaven». The semantic field of *tianxia* was gradually defined over time, taking on various meanings over the course of the centuries. At times it seems to derive from the same signification as *sifang*, while at others it seems to identify or even overlap with that of *zhongguo*. In some instances, finally, it represents the idea of one great universal state with a highly-developed nucleus located at the center vested with the mission to acculturate peoples in more peripheral areas, whose level of civilization is considered lower in proportion to their distance from the center. The concept of *tianxia* does not have a stable definition, then, and is subject to reformulation depending on the changing political conditions. The ruler, as the representative of Heaven on Earth, was «firmly placed at the center of this world» (*zhong tianxia er li* 中天下而立).<sup>15</sup>

The term *tianxia* began to appear in the political lexicon starting in the 5th century BC when the need to turn to a precise ethical and authoritative system became increasingly urgent for the re-establishment of peace and order in a world that seemed to be precipitating into chaos. The new system could only refer to the rich heritage of the past, to the values and ideals advocated by the legendary founding fathers of civilization and put into practice by the Former Kings (*xianwang* 先王) who had ruled the *zhongguo*, the Central States. It soon became clear how limiting it was to view *tianxia* and *zhongguo* as equivalents: *tianxia* supposedly included *zhongguo*, but it also included the adjoining territories inhabited by the so-called barbarians, who were considered to be outside the jurisdictional area of the *zhongguo*.<sup>16</sup>

Thanks to a new universal consciousness directed toward an organized, unified world which was established during the second period of the Zhou dynasty, the state of Qin 秦 was transformed

<sup>14</sup> On the ideal of Great Unity see Yuri Pines, «The One That Pervades the All» in *Ancient Chinese Political Thought: The Origins of "The Great Unity" Paradigm*, *T'oung Pao*, 86, 2000, 280-324, and Roberto Tognacci, «Il concetto di *da yitong* (grande unità) secondo Dong Zhongshu», in Maurizio Scarpari, Tiziana Lippiello (eds.), *Caro Maestro... Scritti in onore di Lionello Lanciotti per l'ottantesimo compleanno*, Venice, Cafoscarina, 2005, 1151-61.

<sup>15</sup> *Mengzi* 孟子 (Master Meng), ch. 7A.21.

<sup>16</sup> On the concept of *tianxia* see Yuri Pines, «Changing Views of *Tianxia* in Pre-Imperial Discourse», *Oriens Extremus*, 43, 1-2, 2002, 101-16, and Maurizio Scarpari, «"Sotto il Cielo": la concezione dell'impero nella Cina antica», in

into a great economic and military power, made powerful by a systematic application of wide-reaching reforms based on rational, pragmatic principles. The other states, concerned by its growing power and hoping to oppose its crushing military might, united in support of traditional values and in opposition to the alleged «barbarianism» of those who seemed to have abandoned those values, thereby transforming themselves into «a state of tigers and wolves» (*hu lang zhi guo* 虎狼之國).<sup>17</sup> Convinced that it was the authentic repository of the Mandate of Heaven, the state of Qin viewed itself as superior to the others, believing that it had been invested by the highest divinity with the task of reunifying the *tianxia* and redefining its confines, in the widest acceptance of the term.<sup>18</sup> The efforts its adversaries made to resist its hegemonic policy had little effect: the winds of history had already shifted in favor of unification. One after another, in the span of a decade all the states were defeated and the dream of unity to which everyone had aspired was finally realized.

The man behind this immense undertaking was the king of Qin, Ying Zheng (259-210 BC) who in 221 BC proclaimed himself Qin Shi Huangdi 秦始皇帝, First August Emperor (or Thearch, to convey the new religious and political implications of the word *di*) of Qin. Never before had a ruler made use of such a bombastic title: the term *di* designated the highest Shang divinity, also worshipped by the Zhou, and calls to mind the mythical rulers of the pre-dynastic era, traditionally called Di, in particular the Yellow Emperor, Huangdi 黃帝 (written with a different graph for *huang*, meaning «yellow»). *Huang* 皇 was used as an honorific for one's ancestors or for the highest divinities; Huangdi 皇帝 was used with a markedly religious valence in the inscriptions on ceremonial bronzes to refer to the Divine; *shi* 始, the «beginning», was an appeal to the authentic values of the Zhou tradition<sup>19</sup> and was placed before Huangdi to

*Semantiche degli imperi*, in Aldo Ferrari, Flavio Fiorani, Federica Passi, Bonaventura Ruperti (eds.), *Semantiche dell'Impero*, Napoli, Scriptaweb, 2009, 15-44.

<sup>17</sup> *Zhanguo ce* 戰國策 (Intrigues of the Warring States), ch. 14.

<sup>18</sup> Yuri Pines, «Changing Views of *Tianxia* in Pre-Imperial Discourse», III.

<sup>19</sup> In all probability, the character *shi* 始 «beginning» refers to the concept of *shiji* 始基 «the foundation of the [correct] Beginning», described in the preface to the *Shijing* 詩經 (Classic of Odes) as «the Way of the correct Beginning and the foundation of the influence of the Enlightened Ruler» (*zheng shi zhi dao, wang hua zhi ji* 正始之道·王化之基), an explicit reference to the authentic values of the Zhou tradition. See Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 and Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (eds.), *Maoshi zhengyi* 毛詩正義, in *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏 (The Thirteen Classics with Commentaries), Shanghai, Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1997, 259-629, 273a, and *Zuozhuan* 左傳 (Zuo Tradition), Xiang 襄, ch. 29.13.

announce to the All under Heaven that a new era had begun, breaking with the past and destined to last ten thousand generations (*wanshi* 萬世) and to transmit the imperial power down to infinity (*zhuan zhi wuqiong* 傳之無窮).<sup>20</sup>

To give prominence to the close relationship between the human and the supernatural worlds, the August Thearch first went back to the old capital of Qin to pay homage to the spirits and ancestors that had always aided the Qin in their endeavors. He then went to the heart of the *zhongguo* and dutifully visited the ancestral temples of the Zhou to show the entire world his desire to respect and embrace the traditional heritage that had been a beacon of civilization for centuries. Only after fulfilling these obligations did he set out for the remote borders of the empire to announce to divinities, ancestors, spirits and all human beings the advent of the unification. After studying the movements of the stars and the constellations and verifying that they were properly aligned with the coordinates of the new empire, the August Thearch climbed up each summit of the Sacred Mountains (*yue* 嶽), where he officiated over the traditional sacrifices and had the chronicle of these events immortalized on stone stelae. In this way he redefined the new boundaries of the world and celebrated the renewed unity between Heaven, Earth, and Man, which was the foundation of the new imperial ideology: All under Heaven, the *tianxia*, meaning here the entire civilized world, was now enclosed within the confines of the empire rather than being traced out on the basis of contingent historical events. What these confines represented was the perfecting of a higher cosmic order, since they were made to coincide with geographic boundaries shaped in a precise geometric design, determined by the ordering power of the divinities.<sup>21</sup> Finally, he established the proper mutual correlations, officially proclaiming the end of the era of Fire (symbol of the Zhou) and the beginning of the era

<sup>20</sup> Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the Historian), ch. 6.

<sup>21</sup> To sanction the expediency of the rite, tradition was invoked by alluding to the feats of the mythical emperor Shun 舜, one of the founding fathers of civilization who was said to have carried out the same actions as the First Thearch. The evidence all seems to suggest that this legend was actually created during the Qin era to superimpose the image of the First Thearch on top of the legendary figure of the ancient ruler: the primary font of all legitimization was the memory of the world at the dawn of civilization which had given rise to the complex ritual organization of later epochs. See Martin Kern, *The Stele Inscriptions of Ch'in Shib-Huang: Text and Ritual in Early Chinese Imperial Representation*, New Haven, American Oriental Society, 2000, 110-2.

of Water (which became the symbol of the Qin empire), adopting black as the official color for clothing and standards, setting the number of horses that pulled the imperial carriage at six, and establishing that the new year would start in the middle of winter, on the first day of the tenth month.

By these acts, the August Thearch made himself a God on Earth in the eyes of the entire world, capable of dialoguing directly with the supernatural world, without the need for mediation from his ancestors. This renewed magical power (*de* 德), essential to the particular charisma that the August Thearch exercised, would serve to allow him to model the human world in perfect harmony with the ordering principle of the universe (*li* 理), a power that up until then had been considered the sole prerogative of the divine. His exceptional destiny had placed him forever in the divine sphere, so much so that he yearned and sought for the elixirs of eternal life, whose secrets were supposedly guarded on distant islands populated by fantastic creatures. The deeds of this God-Emperor extended to the extremities of the Four [Heavenly] Quarters (*sifang zhi ji* 四方之極),<sup>22</sup> including the Six Combined Directions (*liube* 六合),<sup>23</sup> an expression that precisely defines the cosmological dimension that was desired for the empire: the zenith and the nadir, the high and the low, the Heaven and the Earth were added to the four cardinal points in a vision of the world that was complete, unified, and harmonious, with the emperor placed «at the center of the universe», *yuxian zhi zhong* 宇縣之中, a formula that we can read in one of the seven imperial inscriptions cut on stone «to eulogize the virtuous power of Qin» (*song Qin de* 頌秦德) and erected by the August Thearch on the Sacred Mountains.<sup>24</sup>

In spite of the vastness of the empire and the marked differences between its various ethnicities, the undertaking of the Qin was never understood as an annexation of foreign territories. It

<sup>22</sup> The expression *sifang zhi ji* 四方之極 «the Extremities of the Four [Heavenly] Quarters» comes from Ode 305 of the *Shijing*. In the stele inscriptions of the First Thearch we find the expression *siji* 四極, Four Extremities, clearly a contraction of the expression used in the *Shijing*. See the stele inscriptions on Mt. Yi 嶧, on Mt. Langye 琅邪, on Mt. Zhifu 之罘, and on the eastern vista of Mt. Zhifu 之罘東觀山 reproduced in *Shiji*, ch. 6, and translated in Martin Kern's volume, 10-49.

<sup>23</sup> Stele inscription on Mt. Langye. The expression *liube* 六合, Six Combined [Directions], is also used in the inscription on Mt. Kuaiji 會稽, reproduced in *Shiji*, ch. 6.

<sup>24</sup> Stele inscription on Mt. Zhifu.

was viewed, rather, as the reunification of the *tianxia*, the restoration of a unity that was prefigured in the most distant antiquity and now represented by the August Thearch who epitomized all powers and all mediation between Heaven and Earth in his person. After centuries of wars and destruction, the peoples who lived in the *tianxia* were finally in the position to feel that they belonged to one lineage, to one big family (*yijia tianxia* 皇帝壹家天下), to use another expression taken from the vocabulary of the August Thearch.<sup>25</sup>

The distinction between the various notions of *zhongguo* and *tianxia* gradually faded away, with *zhongguo* finally incorporating the universal value that had been attributed to *tianxia*. It was not so much or exclusively the geographic and political aspect that prevailed in this process so much as the intimate and profound awareness of belonging to a magnificent civilization and to a world that was imagined – and which had long been imagined – to have no equal in the universe: the sense of belonging to a cultural tradition and a set of values of a higher order that will always be perceived as the distinguishing, constitutive trait of Chinese identity.

#### ABSTRACT

An essential part of the Chinese identity is the well-rooted conviction that China represents a political and cultural unicum founded on an ancient tradition and on the awareness of a deep continuity with the past, the admiration for a mythical golden age, and the cult of the ancestors. Just how vital the roots of the various traditions of ancient thought persist today is demonstrated by the history of the last few centuries and the new relationship with the West. To understand recent events, then, calls for a deep knowledge of China's historical and philosophical background. Without it, political and ideological positions nurtured on a sort of pragmatism that is well informed by traditional principles risk being viewed as contradictory and inconsistent. This paper presents one of the founding concepts of Chinese identity, that of «centrality» (*zhong* 中), and its relevance to the history of ancient Chinese political thought from the perspective of its current importance.

#### KEYWORDS

Chinese history. Chinese political thought. Political cosmology.

<sup>25</sup> Stele inscription on Mt. Yi.