

# The historical evolution of the "great unification" pattern and the formation of the community of the Chinese nation

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**Abstract.** As the core concept of ancient Chinese political civilization, "great unification" has profoundly shaped the historical formation trajectory of the community of the Chinese nation. During the Qin and Han dynasties, with the establishment of the centralized system and Confucianism being enshrined as the official orthodox ideology, "great unification" gained a solid foundation both institutionally and ideologically. After hundreds of years of division in the Wei, Jin, Southern, and Northern Dynasties, the Sui and Tang dynasties reunified the country once again, and the concept of "All ethnic groups within China form an integrated community" gradually took root in the hearts of the people, bringing ethnic interaction and integration into a new stage. By the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, territorial integration reached perfection, the "great unification" system became stereotyped, and the territorial outline of modern China was basically established during this period. Retracing the above evolutionary context, it can be found that the connotation of "great unification" has evolved from geographical integration to ethnic identity and cultural centripetal force, ultimately condensing into a spiritual bond maintaining the Chinese nation.

**Keywords:** great unification, ethnic interaction, communication, and integration, the community of the Chinese nation

## 1. Introduction

In the spectrum of ancient Chinese political thought, "great unification" occupies a pivotal position, whose academic foundation can be traced back to pre-Qin documents. *Gongyang Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals·First Year of Duke Yin* states: "Why is the first month of the king mentioned? It is for the great unification" [1]. In its original context, this expression emphasized the supremacy of royal power and the unified norms for the promulgation of the calendar, embodying the political vision of unifying the four seas and standardizing orders. With the passage of generations, the connotation of "great unification" has continued to expand: from a mere declaration of royal power, it has gradually evolved into a systematic political theory encompassing territorial integration, institutional construction, academic unification, and ethnic governance, and further become a basic principle followed by successive dynasties in governing the country.

As a unified multi-ethnic country with a long history, China's formation trajectory is inseparable from the concept of "great unification". After the Qin and Han dynasties, pursuing and defending national integrity and unification has almost become the persistent mission of every ruler; even in the era of separatism and disputes,

all forces often took reunification as their political goal. Such unwavering adherence to "great unification" is, on the one hand, inherited from the profound influence of Confucian political philosophy, and on the other hand, rooted in the common historical memories and cultural identity accumulated by all ethnic groups over generations. For this reason, many ethnic groups on the land of China have condensed into an integral whole with shared destiny through long-term mutual interaction and integration, and the "pluralistic integration" ethnic structure has thus taken shape.

Forging a strong sense of the community of the Chinese nation is the core thread of ethnic work in the new era. Against this background, a systematic study of the historical evolution of the "great unification" concept and its role in shaping the community of the Chinese nation not only helps to reveal the inherent mechanism of ancient national governance but also provides historical wisdom for safeguarding unification and enhancing ethnic solidarity today. Based on the above considerations, this paper selects three key periods—the Qin and Han dynasties, the Sui and Tang dynasties, and the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties—as observation windows, sequentially depicts the evolutionary trajectory of the "great unification" pattern from its foundation, deepening to perfection, and analyzes the specific measures taken by rulers in each period in terms of institutional creation, ideological integration, and ethnic governance, in order to clarify why this concept has exerted a profound and lasting impact on the formation of the community of the Chinese nation.

## 2. The foundation and practice of the "great unification" pattern in the Qin and Han dynasties

The Qin and Han dynasties have a foundational significance in the evolution of ancient Chinese political systems. What was accomplished during this period was not only the geographical integration of territorial territory but also the finalization of the institutional framework and mainstream ideology—the "great unification" paradigm thus established has endured for more than 2,000 years.

### 2.1. The establishment and improvement of the centralized system

After unifying the six kingdoms, Emperor Qin Shi Huang resolutely abandoned the enfeoffment system that had prevailed for hundreds of years, created the unprecedented title of "Huangdi" (Emperor), and concentrated the supreme power of the world in his own hands. According to *Records of the Grand Historian·Biography of Emperor Qin Shi Huang*, at that time "all matters under heaven, whether big or small, were decided by the emperor" [2]; all administrative, military, and judicial affairs were subject to the monarch's decision. In terms of the structure of the central government, the Qin court appointed the Chancellor to oversee state affairs, the Grand Commandant to command military power, and the Censor Doctor to take charge of supervision. The three had distinct responsibilities and checked each other, jointly safeguarding the operation of royal power. At the local level, the feudal system was replaced by the prefectural and county system: counties were governed by prefectures, and prefects had to assess the officials of subordinate counties through the "shangji" (annual report) procedure at the end of each year, thus forming a vertical management chain extending from the capital to the grassroots. This governance structure centered on imperial power with a clear hierarchy between the central and local governments outlined the basic framework of China's political system for the next more than 2,000 years.

### 2.2. The supremacy of confucianism and ideological integration

The Qin Dynasty regarded Legalism as the guiding principle for governing the country, but its harsh laws and cruel punishments intensified social contradictions, leading to its collapse after only two emperors. At the

beginning of the Western Han Dynasty, it turned to Huang-Lao thought and implemented a policy of inaction and tranquility; when Emperor Wu came to the throne, the national treasury was abundant and national strength was growing day by day, urgently needing a new governance theory to support his grand strategies. Against this background, Dong Zhongshu synthesized the essence of Yin-Yang, Daoist, and Legalist schools, systematically transformed pre-Qin Confucianism, and put forward the policy propositions of "the great unification of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*" and "abandoning all non-Confucian schools of thought and exalting the Six Classics." He used "the interaction between heaven and humans" as the basis to prove the inviolability of imperial power, and took "the three cardinal guides and five constant virtues" as the outline to regulate ethical order, which not only strengthened the centralized authority of the imperial court but also endowed the regime with moral legitimacy. Emperor Wu adopted his suggestions, ordered the establishment of doctors of the *Five Classics*, founded the Imperial Academy, and selected officials based on Confucian classics. Thus, Confucianism rose to become the core standard for official selection and the main content of social education, and the "great unification" in the ideological field was thus achieved.

### 2.3. Border development and ethnic governance

In the eyes of the rulers of the Qin and Han dynasties, expanding territory was an important way to demonstrate the legitimacy of the dynasty. The Qin army marched south to conquer the Baiyue tribes, dug the Lingqu Canal, and formally incorporated the Lingnan region into the central territory; Emperor Wu of Han attacked the Xiongnu in the north, opened up the Western Regions trade route, and recovered the former territory of Nanyue, doubling the territorial scale compared with the Qin Dynasty. To ensure the long-term stability of the newly conquered lands, both dynasties implemented the policy of migrating people to border areas to consolidate them: the Qin court moved the nobles of the former six kingdoms to the Longxi area, allowing them to live mixed with the Rong people; the Han Dynasty organized a large number of poor people from Guandong to settle in Shuofang, Hexi, and other commanderies. These measures objectively broke the geographical barriers between ethnic groups and promoted daily interaction and cultural integration among different groups.

In terms of border governance strategies, both the Qin and Han dynasties adopted flexible and adaptive policies of governing according to local customs. The Qin Dynasty set up "dao" (a special administrative unit) in areas inhabited by ethnic minorities to distinguish them from inland counties, and established the position of Dianke (Minister of Guests) in the central government to be specifically responsible for ethnic affairs. The Western Han Dynasty inherited this system and expanded it: "shuguo" (dependent states) were set up on the northern border, allowing surrendered tribes to handle their internal affairs "according to their original customs"; in the southern border commanderies, a dual governance system of native and appointed officials was implemented, appointing local leaders as kings, marquises, and district chiefs, which laid the foundation for the chieftain system in later generations. This pragmatic and flexible border governance policy effectively guaranteed the unification and stability of the multi-ethnic country.

The establishment of the "great unification" pattern in the Qin and Han dynasties gradually eliminated the regional estrangement inherited from the pre-Qin Zhuxia (Hua-Xia) peoples, laying the institutional foundation and cultural soil for the final cohesion of the Huaxia ethnic community. The unified writing system, currency, and weights and measures greatly facilitated economic exchanges and cultural communication between various regions; the enshrinement of Confucianism as the official orthodoxy shaped the core values of Chinese society that have continued to this day. It is worth noting that it was during this historical period that the ethnic name "Han people" gradually replaced "Qin people" and gained a clear ethnic

reference meaning, and the economic advantages of agricultural civilization made the Han nationality increasingly an important link connecting the interaction and integration of all ethnic groups.

### **3. The reconstruction and deepening of the "great unification" pattern in the Sui and Tang dynasties**

After hundreds of years of division and turbulence in the Wei, Jin, Southern, and Northern Dynasties, the Sui and Tang dynasties re-established a unified order and elevated the concept of "great unification" to an unprecedented height. The historical contribution of this period was far more than the re-integration of territory, but also the breakthrough progress made in political identity and cultural integration—thus the development of the community of the Chinese nation gained a solid historical foundation.

#### **3.1. Territorial integration and border development**

After Emperor Wen of Sui defeated the Chen Dynasty in the south, he proclaimed to the world that "the whole land is unified" [3], announcing the end of the nearly 300-year north-south confrontation since the fall of the Western Jin Dynasty. The Tang Dynasty inherited the Sui system, and during the reigns of Emperor Taizong and Emperor Gaozong, it alternately used military campaigns and political accommodation to successively incorporate the Turks, kingdoms in the Western Regions, Goguryeo, and other surrounding regimes into its territory, with a territory broader than any previous dynasty. Emperor Taizong being honored as "Tian Kehan" (Heavenly Khagan) is particularly symbolic: the nomadic ethnic groups on the border publicly recognized the emperor of the Tang Dynasty as the "suzerain of the world", marking the first time that two distinct economic forms—agricultural and nomadic—achieved in-depth integration at the political level.

The emperors of the Tang Dynasty were deeply influenced by the traditional concept of "tianxia" (all under heaven), and regarded expanding territory as an inherent part of a prosperous dynasty. Taking the Guanzhong Plain as the foundation, after consolidating its rule over the agricultural areas in the Central Plains, the Tang court gradually extended its influence to the semi-agricultural and semi-nomadic transitional zones and even the more distant grassland hinterland. This process not only embodied the admiration for the "stories of Emperor Wu of Han" but also was closely related to the special background of the Li-Tang royal family with both Han and Hu bloodlines.

In terms of border governance, the Tang Dynasty created the Jimi prefecture and county system of "preserving their tribes and following their local customs". Specifically, on the one hand, it established military governors' offices and prefectures and counties according to the original geographical distribution of various tribes, bringing border areas into the national administrative jurisdiction; on the other hand, it appointed local leaders as military governors, inspectors, and other positions, allowing them to inherit their titles, so as to ensure the continuity and stability of governance. This policy of adapting to local conditions and governing according to customs well reconciled the inherent tension between central authority and local autonomy. Admittedly, after the mid-Tang Dynasty, the national strength declined and the border territory shrank, but the cultural influence of the Tang Dynasty did not fade, and its depth and breadth of influence far exceeded those of the Qin and Han dynasties.

#### **3.2. The evolution and breakthrough of orthodoxy concepts**

During the hundreds of years of the Wei, Jin, Southern, and Northern Dynasties, the northern and southern regimes engaged in a protracted struggle for the ownership of orthodoxy. The Southern Dynasties claimed to be the authentic inheritor of Huaxia culture, while the Northern Dynasties declared to inherit the mandate of

heaven by occupying the Central Plains hinterland. In the historical records of both sides, they mocked each other as "Suolu" (barbarians with braids) and "Daoyi" (barbarians on islands), clinging to their own views and refusing to give in. However, a phenomenon is worth pondering: most of the rulers of the northern nomadic regimes that entered the Central Plains chose to proclaim themselves emperors instead of merely retaining the title of khan. This choice shows that they clearly realized that only by relying on Huaxia political symbols could they obtain the legitimacy of governance. It can be seen that the ethnic origin of "Hua-Yi" (Huaxia and barbarians) is not the fundamental standard for judging orthodoxy; the recognition of political culture is the key.

After the Sui and Tang dynasties unified the world, the concept of "All ethnic groups within China form an integrated community" gradually took root in the hearts of the people and gradually condensed into a social consensus. Emperor Gaozu of Tang was proud of "Hu and Yue being one family" [4]; Emperor Taizong further clearly declared: "Since ancient times, all have valued Huaxia and looked down on barbarians, but I love them equally" [5]. This statecraft mind transcending ethnic boundaries is not only a positive response to the reality of in-depth ethnic integration at that time but also reflects the unique broad-mindedness of rulers with a multicultural background.

This concept was also implemented in the compilation of historical records. In the early Tang Dynasty, the official compilation of Book of Jin adopted the "Zaiji" (biographical records) format to include the various regimes of the Sixteen Kingdoms, only referring to them as "usurpers" without distinguishing between Hua and Yi. This approach not only maintained a unified framework of historical narration but also properly solved the problem of historical writing during the period of coexistence of multiple ethnic regimes. Liu Zhiji praised this move highly in Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance, calling it "choosing the good and following it, skillfully learning from the ancients" [6], believing that it effectively resolved the difficult problem of how to record regimes that "did not recognize the imperial calendar" in history books.

### 3.3. Ethnic integration and cultural identity

During the Sui and Tang dynasties, the interaction and integration among various ethnic groups reached an unprecedented depth. The marriage alliance policy is a notable example. Unlike the passive marriage alliances in the early Han Dynasty due to military pressure, the marriage arrangements of the Tang Dynasty were often more proactive. Princess Wencheng's marriage to Tibet and Princess Jincheng's remarriage to Tibet were both far-reaching events in the history of Tang-Tibet relations. In his memorial to Emperor Xuanzong of Tang, the Tibetan Zanpu called himself "nephew" and expressed his expectation that "being one family, all people in the world will live in peace and joy" [4], which shows that the marriage alliance policy did achieve practical results in promoting political identity.

Large-scale population flow constituted another important channel for ethnic integration. According to scholars' research, in just one year of Zhenguan 4, the number of Han people who moved inward from surrounding ethnic groups and returned from beyond the *Great Wall* reached more than one million. After a large number of Hu people entered the Central Plains, their lifestyles and cultural customs also spread. During the heyday of the Tang Dynasty, Hu food and Hu clothing were popular among all social classes: "the delicacies of nobles are all Hu food" [4], and "nobles and scholars like to wear Hu clothing and Hu hats" [7], showing a general attitude of inclusiveness towards multiculturalism among all social strata.

At the level of political participation, the Tang court showed considerable openness and trust towards surrendered ethnic groups. After Emperor Taizong pacified the Eastern Turks, a large number of Turkic nobles were appointed to important positions such as generals and military governors", more than a hundred of them were above the fifth rank, almost half of the court officials" [5]. These Hu people who entered officialdom also

deeply recognized the concept of "the four seas being one family", as evidenced by Qi Bi Heli's feat of cutting his ear to show his determination and shouting "a loyal minister of the Tang Dynasty" when he was imprisoned. The Tang Law clearly stipulated: "Children born after submission shall be treated the same as common people" [8], so the descendants of naturalized ethnic groups enjoyed the same qualifications as Tang people in the imperial examination for official selection. This institutional arrangement effectively promoted cultural integration and identity among all ethnic groups.

In summary, on the basis of ending long-term division, the Sui and Tang dynasties constructed a political and cultural pattern of "no separation between Hua and Yi" through multiple means such as Jimi prefectures and counties, marriage alliances, and open official selection. The connotation of "great unification" thus evolved from mere territorial integration to psychological identity at the ethnic level, exerting a profound and lasting impact on the formation of the community of the Chinese nation.

## 4. The consolidation and completion of the "great unification" pattern in the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties

During the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, the ancient Chinese "great unification" pattern experienced a key leap from maturity to perfection. The Yuan Dynasty, as a northern nomadic ethnic group, entered the Central Plains and ended the centuries-long division since the late Tang and Five Dynasties in one fell swoop; the Ming Dynasty inherited the territorial legacy of the Yuan Dynasty and strived to reshape Huaxia orthodoxy; the Qing Dynasty pushed "great unification" to the historical peak, and the territorial outline of modern China was basically established. This progressive historical process has profoundly shaped the overall appearance of the community of the Chinese nation.

### 4.1. The Yuan dynasty: the new development of a unified multi-ethnic country

The Yuan Dynasty established by the Mongolians was the first nationwide unified regime founded by a northern nomadic ethnic group in Chinese history. Its territory was unprecedentedly vast and its unification was thorough, which effectively promoted the further integration of the multi-ethnic country.

The rulers of the Yuan Dynasty represented by Kublai Khan had long been immersed in Han culture. While pursuing political unification, they also strived to construct an integrated order at the ideological and cultural level. In 1260, as soon as Kublai Khan ascended the throne, he issued an imperial edict to announce to the world, clearly stating that he would refer to the existing systems of the Central Plains dynasties to govern the country, so as to make up for the lack of "cultural governance" in the past. The next month, he cited Han systems to create the reign title "Zhongtong" (Unified in the Middle), and in the imperial edict, he quoted the meaning of "rectifying the beginning" from the Spring and Autumn Annals and the principle of "Qianyuan" (primordial heaven) from the I Ching, expounding the political significance of "recording time and honoring the king" [9] which implies "the whole world being one family". In 1271, Kublai Khan went further, taking the phrase "Great is Qianyuan" from the I Ching to change the dynastic title to "Yuan" (Great Yuan), thereby declaring to the world that this regime was no longer a mere Mongol Khanate but the legitimate inheritor of the legal system of successive Central Plains dynasties.

The Yuan Dynasty not only modeled its laws and regulations on Han systems but also made remarkable achievements in border governance. The establishment of the provincial system significantly enhanced the central government's control over remote areas, and Tibet, Yunnan, and other places were incorporated into the direct jurisdiction of the central administrative system for the first time. This unprecedented large-scale

territorial integration laid the foundation for the border management of the Ming and Qing dynasties and made the concept of "China as one" more deeply rooted in the hearts of the people.

#### 4.2. The Ming dynasty: the transition from "distinction between Hua and Yi" to "all ethnic groups within China form an integrated community"

At the beginning of his uprising, Emperor Taizu of Ming Zhu Yuanzhang held high the banner of "expelling the Mongol barbarians and restoring Huaxia" [10], taking "distinction between Hua and Yi" as an ideological weapon to mobilize the people to resist the rule of the Yuan Dynasty. However, after the Ming Dynasty replaced the Yuan Dynasty as the new ruler of the world, its ethnic policy underwent a fundamental transformation. The Ming emperors turned to emphasize the orthodox status of their dynasty, advocated the concept of "All ethnic groups within China form an integrated community", and publicly declared the political stance that "the world is unified, all ethnic groups within China form an integrated community, and there is no difference between them" [11].

This transformation was by no means an expedient measure but had profound historical accumulation. After hundreds of years of ethnic interaction and cultural exchange during the Liao, Song, Western Xia, and Jin dynasties, and further tempered by the nearly 100-year "great unification" pattern of the Yuan Dynasty, the bonds between various ethnic groups became increasingly strong, and the concept of "the whole of China" had been widely spread and deeply rooted among all social strata. The rulers of the Ming Dynasty complied with this historical trend, and while inheriting the territorial legacy of the Yuan Dynasty, they also continued the governance tradition of the multi-ethnic country.

The Ming court set up guards and battalions in border areas, implemented the Jimi policy, and adopted the strategy of "governing barbarians with barbarians" towards the chieftains in the southwest. These measures not only maintained national unity and integrity but also took into account the customs and traditions of various ethnic groups. All these measures indicate that the concept of "great unification" has transcended mere ethnic boundaries and evolved into an inclusive political and cultural identity.

#### 4.3. The Qing dynasty: the historical peak of the "great unification" pattern

After entering the pass and establishing its rule, the Qing Dynasty regarded itself as the suzerain of the world and established "all people within the territory are my people" [12] as its governing principle. The Qing emperors clearly stated that whether in the Central Plains hinterland or "remote border areas", all people under their rule should receive equal care, so as to ensure that "everyone lives in peace and contentment" [12]. This governance concept transcending regional and ethnic boundaries provided ideological support for the large-scale development of border areas by the Qing Dynasty.

To establish the image of an orthodox dynasty and consolidate its rule over the whole country, the Qing court carried out a creative transformation and interpretation of the traditional "great unification" theory. Its core essence was to eliminate the original connotation of "distinction between Hua and Yi" and reinterpret it as a centralized theory of "all within the four seas respecting one monarch". According to this new type of orthodoxy theory, the legitimacy of a regime no longer depended on the ethnic origin of the ruler but on its ability to achieve territorial unification and world peace. The Qing court implemented this theory in the compilation of official history, belittling separatist regimes in history and praising unified dynasties, thereby strengthening the people's identification with the country at the ideological level.

With the support of this theory, the emperors of the Qing Dynasty firmly opposed any form of separatism and invested tremendous efforts in developing border areas. The Kangxi Emperor pacified the Three Feudatories, recovered Taiwan, and personally campaigned against Galdan; the Yongzheng Emperor followed

by establishing the Amban in Tibet and promoting the replacement of chieftains with appointed officials; the Qianlong Emperor pacified the Junggar and unified the northern and southern parts of the Tianshan Mountains—through the continuous efforts of several generations of emperors, the Qing Dynasty created a great empire with an unprecedentedly vast territory and an unprecedentedly stable unification, and the territorial outline of modern China was basically finalized.

The gradual evolution of the "great unification" pattern during the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties constituted a key chain in the formation and development of the community of the Chinese nation. During this period, various ethnic groups gradually condensed into an inseparable organic whole through long-term political interaction and cultural exchange. By modern times, facing the crisis of foreign powers surrounding China, all ethnic groups of China moved from spontaneous unity to conscious unity in the struggle against foreign aggression, and the concept of "great unification" thus rose from a political ideal to a national spirit, becoming a powerful force for uniting people's hearts, safeguarding unification, and preserving territory.

## 5. Conclusion

"Great unification" can be called the pivotal concept of ancient Chinese political civilization. Since its foundation in the Qin and Han dynasties, deepening in the Sui and Tang dynasties, and reaching perfection in the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, this concept has gone through three successive stages and gradually evolved into a systematic theory encompassing institutional construction, ideological unification, and ethnic governance. Looking at this long historical process, the connotation of "great unification" has always been in a dynamic process of enrichment and expansion: its starting point focused on the geographical integration of territory and the establishment of monarchial centralization, then expanded into the political identity of "All ethnic groups within China form an integrated community", and finally rose to the sense of community of the Chinese nation transcending ethnic boundaries. The historical function of this concept is multiple—it not only provided a lasting institutional guarantee for the unification and stability of the multi-ethnic country but also condensed common historical memories and cultural belonging through the long-term practice of mutual interaction and integration among all ethnic groups. Up to now, the value pursuit of national integrity and ethnic harmony carried by "great unification" is still a precious spiritual wealth for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

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