

Research Article

# Reassessing the Historical Significance of *Chung-kuk/Chung-kuo*(*Zhongguo*) 中國 in East Asian Historiography – Featuring an Analysis of *Hunmin chǒng'ŭm* 訓民正音

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## Abstract

The term *chung-kuk/chung-kuo* (*zhongguo*) 中國 was made corresponding to ‘China’ only in the (mid-)twentieth century. It was not until after the People’s Republic of China was set up in 1949 that *zhongguo* began to be used as a shorthand of the former, and the historicity of *chung-kuk* has yet to be clarified. One surviving record with its unequivocal reference to the term is *Hunmin chǒng'ŭm ōn-hae* 訓民正音諺解 (Vernacular Annotation of Correct Sounds for Instructing the People) of 1459, published thirteen years after King Sejong’s 世宗 promulgation of *Hunmin chǒng'ŭm*. According to the Annotation, *chung-kuk*, as the “seat of government of the Emperor” [中庭國·귀·인 皇皇帝·뎡·겨신나·라히·니], “has been referred to in our daily expressions as “south of the River”” [우·리나·랏常쌍談뎡·애江강남남·이·라·ᄃᆞ·ᄃᆞ·니·라]. The new phonetic system, *Chǒng'ŭm* 正音, was necessary for nationwide efficiency because the speech sounds of local dialects had all been different from those of the central district [國之語音異乎中國]. Thus *chung-kuk*, during King Sejong’s reign, must mean the seat of central government of the Chosŏn 朝鮮 dynasty. Furthermore, the royal palaces reputedly ascribed to those of Chosŏn are north of the Han River (漢江) in the capital city of southern Korea, whereas the historical Western Capital (西京) and Eastern Capital (東京) are located south of the Yellow River (黃河) and the *Wi/Wei* River (渭水). Down into the early twentieth century, *chung-kuk* was still spoken of by Chosŏn independence activists against Japanese colonialism: in April 1932, Yun Bong Kil 尹奉吉, as a member of Han Patriotic Corps (韓人愛國團), mentioned “enemy forces invading *chung-kuk*” [中國을侵略하는敵]. Considering the context, *chung-kuk* herein referred to cannot be found anywhere in the present-day Korean peninsula, nor was it the same one as in Liang Ch’i-ch’ao’s 梁啟超 works. These issues have to be further examined to illuminate the authenticity of *chung-kuk*.

## Keywords

*Chung-kuk/Chung-kuo* (*Zhongguo*) 中國, Seat of Government of the Emperor, *Hunmin chǒng'ŭm* 訓民正音, 江강남남 (South of the River), Standardization of Language Sounds, Central District, Local Dialects, Historicity

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## 1. Introduction

Many scholars, both of the East and the West, have posited their hypotheses for the meaning of *chung-kuk/ chung-kuo/zhongguo* 中國<sup>1</sup>, and some have criticized the inappropriateness of the usage of the term in historiography, along with its usage in connection with the word 'China'. But there seems to be no definite consensus as for how the term *chung-kuk* 中國 has to be construed or qualified in different contexts, particularly in those of historical narratives. Peter K. Bol, in his paper "Reflections on the Zhong Guo and the Yi Di with Reference to the Middle Period," poses the question of whether it was ever contended that "the *zhong guo* as a cultural entity belonged to or was defined by the entire population rather than the national cultural and political elite" and yet he mixes the alleged "possession of a high culture that set the *zhong guo* apart," with the claim "that China possesses a unique and moral culture that sets it apart from all others and places it beyond external criticism."<sup>2</sup> [1] This is but one recent example of how so many authors are still mired, inadvertently or not, in ahistorical correspondence between 中國 and 'China', disregarding the fact that it was not until after the People's Republic of China was set up in 1949 that *zhongguo* began to be used as a shorthand for the former. Early editorial pieces by Liang Ch'i-ch'ao 梁啟超 admitted that "one most embarrassing thing for us is that our polity has no name" [吾人所最慚愧者莫如我國無國名之一事] before he talked of *chung-kuo* or *chung-hua/zhonghua* 中華 in an anticipation of a broader collectivity with a new governing order in some of his early editorial pieces. [2] Admittedly, the state *chung-hua min-kuo* 中華民國, which was set up in 1912, was called by its people in short *min-kuo* 民國, not *chung-kuo* 中國. The independence declaration of March 1, 1919, by Chosŏn 朝鮮 intellectuals and activists against Japanese rule, spoke of *chi-na/shina/zhina* ("Sina" in Latin) 支那, not /'tʃʌInə/ or *chung-kuk* 中國.

Historically, the polities that perched on the East Asian continent, the land of which has been occupied by the People's Republic of China only since 1949, had not been called *Chi-na/Shina/Sina* 支那 nor as *chung-kuk* 中國 by the people thereof. Instead, it had been called by the name of the ruling dynasty that held domestic hegemony over the polity and people under it. Liang Ch'i-ch'ao said that such names as *che-ha/chu-hsia* 諸夏, *han-in/han-jen(hanren)* 漢人, *tang-in/t'ang-jen(tangren)* 唐人 are all from the dynasties concerned, and other names like *chin-tan/chen-tan* 震旦, and *chi-na/chih-na* 支那 were not ones by which his compatriots would call themselves. [2] Galeote Pereira found out

that the people he encountered in the southern part of the continent during the mid-sixteenth century had not heard of the names 'China' or 'Chins' but would call themselves *Tamenjins – Ta Ming Jen* 大明人, 'Great Ming person (or people)' – as subjects of the ruling dynasty *Tamen (Ta Ming)* 大明, 'Great Ming') in an admission that they had not identified themselves with a piece of territory or as belonging to an ethnic group. [3] An official of the late Ch'ing 清, named Chang Te-i 張德彝, complained that Westerners insisted to call *chung-kuk* 中國 by the names *Zhaina/Qina* (China), *Shiyin* (La Chine), *Zhina* (Shina), knowing that *chung-kuk* was called *Ta Ch'ing Kuo* 大清國 (Great Ch'ing State) or *Chung-hua* 中華 (Central Efflorescence).<sup>3</sup> [4]

Numerous commentators so far described *chung-kuk* 中國 as 'Middle Kingdom' [5], 'Central Kingdoms' [6], 'central states' [5, 7] or even 'central country' [8] but all these phrases are off the mark at least for the period since the fourteenth century until the nineteenth century, while 'central states' might be a valid description as an earlier usage for the collection of states during the Spring and Autumn (春秋) period. [9] *Chung-kuk* 中國 had always connoted "the primacy of a culturally distinct core area," being often applied to "the area directly administered by the imperial state."<sup>4</sup> [7] But *chung-kuk* 中國 did not exist as any territorial entity per se or a country in any modern sense. If the character 國 is to be construed as dynastic government, given the example *kuk-mal/kuo-mo* 國末 – which may be translated as "the final period of the dynastic government's rule" – used by Ch'oe Nam-sŏn 崔南善<sup>5</sup> [10], it would be appropriate to render 中國 as the *Central Dynasty* or *Central Government*, with the capital letters to emphasize its contemporary uniqueness and hegemony. [11]

This study, as a revisionist re-examination of the meaning of *chung-kuk* 中國 that defies any presentism, seeks to contribute both to rectifying an East Asian historiography and a historiography in general that tend to, knowingly or not, conflate *chung-kuk* and 'China' into a single construct, and to more accurately contextualizing the concept of *chung-kuk*. Challenging

3 Chang Te-i's statement that *Ta Ch'ing Kuo* 大清國, the dynastic state established by the Manchus, did take the status of *chung-kuk* can help refute 'culturalism' put forward by Joseph Levenson that may be appropriated to argue for 'China' being an exception to the invention of nation states, regardless of Levenson's view on it.

4 The term came to be used more flexibly in the Ch'ing dynasty, with the entire empire sometimes referred to as the "Great Ch'ing state" (*Ta Ch'ing Kuo* 大清國) and apparently sometimes as *chung-kuk* 中國. [7] Nonetheless, even when the Great Ch'ing state was seemingly replaced by *chung-kuk* in addressing it, these two terms indicated central and overarching political authority rather than geographical jurisdiction.

5 The character *kuk* 國, in *kuk-mal* 國末, cannot be of a "country" with its geographical signification, for the character *mal* 末 means here "at the end of a period." Apart from 'dynastic government', it might also intimate territories under the dynastic polity's jurisdiction, but could not be deemed as originally denoting a territorially-defined entity.

1 This term is mostly to be written as *chung-kuk* 中國 or just *chung-kuk* in short, hereinafter.

2 This claim is not of Peter Bol, but in his article the word 'China' is still used anachronistically.







called *Chǒng'üm* 正音, was to be achieved.

### 3. A Brief Tracing of the Meaning of *Chung-kuk/Chung-kuo*(*Zhongguo*) 中國

It would now be in order to consider some usages of the term *chung-kuk*, apart from the one in *Hunmin chǒng'üm òn-hae*, that appeared before the twentieth century, together with a few instances in the early twentieth century, to put in perspective the historical references of the term.

#### 3.1. Some Notable Pre-twentieth Century Uses of the Term in Its Evolution over Time

In *Maengcha/Meng-tzu*(*Mengzi*) 《孟子》(Mencius), the supreme ambition of King *Sǒn/Hsüan* of *Che/Ch'i* 齊宣王 is said to be "extending his territory, getting the states of *Chin/Ch'in* 秦 and *Ch'o/Ch'u* 楚 to pay homage to him, and ruling over "the Central Kingdoms and to bring peace" [6] to the outlying tribes on the four quarters" [然則王之所大欲可知已欲辟土地朝秦楚莅中國而撫四夷也]. Here the 'Central Kingdoms', in D. C. Lau's translation of *chung-kuk*, may also be described as the "chief States of the Centre" which felt themselves connected by "a certain community of civilization." [9] In Mencius' words, on the other hand, the character *kuk/kuo* 國, without *chung/zhong* 中 in front, denotes the rulership of a feudal lord, juxtaposed with the term for feudal lords, 諸侯: 諸侯失國而後託於諸侯禮也 ("According to the rites, only a feudal lord who has lost his state places himself under the protection of another"<sup>11</sup> [6]). An annotation by Yang Bo-jun 楊伯峻 puts in proper perspective this association between a lesser lord whose status is lower than that of a King or an Emperor and the character *kuk* 國. He explained that *chung-kuk* 中國 in the phrase 我欲中國而授孟子室 ("I wish to give Mencius a house in the most central part of my capital" [6] indicates "in the middle of the capital" [在國都之中], where *kuk* 國 refers to the capital of the state of *Che/Ch'i* 齊 – the castle of *Lim-ch'i/Lin-tzu* (臨淄城). [26] In other words, during the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States (戰國) period, *kuk* 國 would signify either the rulership or the capital corresponding to such a rulership of the feudal lords, and *chung-kuk* would indicate the central states/governments bound in a common conception of civilization. Neither meant any territorial entity with clearly delimited borders.

In biographies of Mencius and *Sun-kyǒng/Hsün*

*ch'ing*(荀卿) (*Sun-cha/Hsün-tzu*(荀子)) [孟子荀卿列傳] of *Sa-ki/Shih-chi* 史記 (Records of the Scribe), it says that "*chung-kuk* may be called *chǒk-hyǒn-shin-chu/ch'ih-hsien-shen-chou*" (中國名曰赤縣神州). [27] The term *chǒk-hyǒn/ch'ih-hsien* 赤縣, literally meaning 'district adorned in red', is said to represent the district Flame Emperor (炎帝) directly ruled over, and can be said to have come from the custom of attributing highness to the color of red. *Shin-chu/Shen-chou* 神州, 'sacred prefecture', stands for the district that was directly ruled by Yellow Emperor (黃帝), and can be taken to mean the region where the King or Son of Heaven (天子) is located. [28]

Looking at a dictionary on the Records of the Scribe (史記辭典), we again see that *chung-kuk* does not denote a totalized territory. Rather, the term's first meaning is given as *kyǒng-sa/ching-shih* 京師. *Kyǒng-sa* 京師 refers to the capital district in which "the court" (朝廷) or "the central government" (中央政府) of the polity in question is located. The explanation of the term in the dictionary draws from the phrase in the Annals of the Five Emperors (五帝本紀) which says "the place which the Emperor and/or the King designates as the capital is given its centrality, *chung* 中, and hence it is called *chung-kuk* 中國" [帝王所都為中故曰中國]: the capital where the supreme ruler resides is at the center, either in an abstract sense or geographically or both, of the polity and thus to be called *chung-kuk*. It also denotes the regions along the Yellow River valley in the provinces of *Sǒm-sǒ/Shan-hsi* 陝西 and *Ha-nam/Ho-nan* 河南 which the polities in antiquity would tend to gravitate toward, and was sometimes written also as *chung-t'o/chung-t'u* 中土, *chung-wǒn/chung-yüan* 中原, *chung-chu/chung-chou* 中州, *chung-hwa/chung-hua* 中華, or *chung-pang* 中邦. [29] Beyond a mere geographical signifier, these terms would connote political centrality and attendant cultural superiority.

According to Wang Er-min, in a total of 178 instances in twenty-five books of the pre-Ch'in (先秦) era in which *chung-kuk* 中國 appears, the overwhelmingly predominant usage of the term (145 instances) is with the sense of the sphere (jurisdiction) of various polities that together constituted *Ha/Hsia* 夏, thus called *Che-ha/Chu-hsia* 諸夏, while the usage in the sense of the capital district, *kyǒng-sa/ching-shih* 京師, takes a much smaller percentage. [30] Wang speaks of *Chu-hsia-chih-lieh-pang* 諸夏之列邦, several polities that together formed *Chu-hsia*, but *hsia* 夏 herein signifies *civilized*, not a territorial entity. *Chung-kuk* 中國 in this context may be dubbed as the "central overlordships" [9] or 'central kingdoms', but still not in the sense of a territorial country with clearly delimited borders or a nation state occupying the vast land of the continent. Among the other categories, in Wang's analysis, were *kuk-chung/kuo-chung* 國中, which does not need much additional explanation because *chung* 中 functions as

11 James Legge translates this sentence as "When a prince loses his State, and then accepts a stated support from another prince, this is in accordance with propriety." [25] In both James Legge's and D. C. Lau's translations, the character *kuk/kuo* 國 is associated with a ruler whose status is subordinate to that of a King or an Emperor (Son of Heaven).

a prepositional particle herein, and *kyōng-sa/ching-shih* 京師 as mentioned above.

The connotation of *chung-kuk* expanded in later periods. A couple of entries, one in the Annals of the Chosŏn dynasty and the other in the Records of Daily Reflections (日省錄), would help elucidate how the term should be contextualized in later usages. An entry in the Annals of King Sejong (世宗實錄) dated close to the creation/compilation of *Hun-min chōng'ŭm* in late 1443 could be particularly revealing. Just a few months after the compilation, some conservative officials petitioned against the use of the new script based on the Correct Sounds, somewhat disparagingly labelled *Ōnmun* 諺文, writing that "since ancient times, within the Nine Provinces, although the customs are different, no separate script has been formulated because of regional dialects, and only the Mongols (蒙古), Western *Ha/Hsia* (西夏), Jurchens (女真), Japan (日本), and some western tribes (西蕃) had scripts of their own, but there is not much to say about it because they were all outlying/uncivilized peoples" [自古九州之內風土雖異未有因方言而別爲文字者唯蒙古西夏女真日本西蕃之類各有其字是皆夷狄事耳無足道者]. They went on to say, "Introducing this new script would now amount to renouncing *chung-kuk* and voluntarily assimilating with the outlying tribes... Would not it be a great detraction from Civilization" [今別作諺文捨中國而自同於夷狄...豈非文明之大累哉]? [31] *Chung-kuk* in this utterance is attributed with a sense of sacrosanctity as the locus of civilization with the original written language system.

In 1778, more than three thousand Confucian scholars in several provinces of Chosŏn, through a joint petition recorded in the Records of Daily Reflections, deplored the discrimination against "sons of concubines" (庶類) in appointment to government positions as well as in social treatment. "Such discrimination had not been legalized, in terms of *chung-kuk*, during the dynasties of *Yo/Yao* 堯, *Sun/Shun* 舜, *Han* 漢, *Tang/T'ang* 唐, *Song/Sung* 宋, *Myōng/Ming* 明, and it had not been a law, in terms of *Tongbang* 東方 (The Eastern), during the times of *Tan'gun* 檀君 and *Ki-Sōng* 箕聖 (Sage *Ki*) or in the early period of our (dynastic) government, either" [以中國言之 則既非漢唐虞宋明之法也 以東方言之 則亦非檀君箕聖我國初之法]. [32] Here *chung-kuk* is an overarching symbol of legitimate political authority presumably ascribed to the dynasties.

### 3.2. An Ambitious Overhaul and What Might Be Retained of the Term *Chung-kuk* in the Early Twentieth Century

Around the turn of the twentieth century, reformist intellectuals in the Ch'ing dynasty (清朝) attempted new forms of national identification, and *chung-kuk* now started to be used as a signifier in their nationalistic conception. Liang

Ch'i-ch'ao, while in exile in Japan away from the Ch'ing court's persecution, would at first mix *Chi-na/Shina/Sina* 支那 and *chung-kuk* referring to a place with the people and a history to bind them together. [33] This parallel usage of *Chi-na* 支那 and *chung-kuk* 中國 can be an indirect evidence that *chung-kuk* did not refer to and was not equal to a nation state or a territorial country because when he spoke of *chung-kuk*, it was due to the lack of proper terms by which to name the polity he belonged to, as he himself confessed in embarrassment later. In an introductory essay on new historiography published in 1901, accompanied by such a confession, he proposed using *chung-kuk/chung-kuo* (*zhongguo*) 中國 to represent a social totality, dismissing *Chi-na/Shina* 支那 as a foreign borrowing (as a Japanese term [34]) and therefore unfit for the political community he would write of. [2] This may be called a moment of "the birth of the imagined community of the nation" [35] with *chung-kuk* serving as a totalizing signifier to connote the polity as a whole with its people, territory, and history, in order for it to ostensibly qualify as a modern nation-state. It was not Liang describing an already existing nation, but him "actually creating one writing its history" [36] with his prime motivation being to justify the Ch'ing state's territorial realm as the blueprint for the new nation-state's territory [37], in contrast to Chang Ping-lin's 章炳麟 to limit the new polity's domain to the counties and prefectures of the Han 漢 dynasty. [7]

Joseph Levenson pointed out a radical discontinuity between earlier forms of collective identity and a nationalistic identity that came to the Ch'ing-dynasty intellectuals and activists who were reformists or revolutionaries at the turn of the last century. Prasenjit Duara considers this observation of Levenson as mistaken "in distinguishing culturalism as a radically different mode of identification from ethnic or national identification." [38] However, what Levenson apparently emphasized is not a collective conviction of cultural superiority putatively attributable to the previous periods, as Liang Ch'i-ch'ao sought to conjure up for a narrative of continuity with the Han 漢 people centered at the nationalist history which would include other significant ethnicities along with their territories, but the chasm between the Confucian Empire – dubbed as *ch'ōn-halt'ien-hsia* 天下 – of old, on the one side, and the *kuk/kuo* 國 which was to be completely refurbished from its old status as subordinate to *ch'ōn-halt'ien-hsia* to become raised as the object of loyalty by the "nation" – rendered by Liang as *kukmin/kuomin* 國民 – as the proper unit of comparison to achieve the equivalence with the West, on the other. If "culture stood with *t'ien-hsia*," that same "culture changed in *kuo*," as nationalism took precedence. [39] But in the process of transformation, there were numerous inconsistencies in claiming historical continuity and cultural superiority of the Han and in downplaying the differences among the ethnicities. Accordingly, as an ingenious remedy to it, Liang went on to totally overhaul the meaning of the traditional term *chung-kuk* as for the name of the new nation-state.



Figure 2. Yun Bong Kil taking his oath (Source: National Institute of Korean History, [https://db.history.go.kr/modern/level.do?levelId=ij\\_044\\_0060\\_00070](https://db.history.go.kr/modern/level.do?levelId=ij_044_0060_00070))

During the Republican period between 1912 and 1949, the newly instated polity in the East Asian continent was dubbed as *minkuk/min-kuo* 民國. Although *chung-kuo* 中國 was promoted by Liang Ch'i-chao for the name of the new nation-state in his scheme, it did not take root to the same extent among the population. In a seemingly surprising turn of events, the term *chung-kuk* appears in an oath made by Chosŏn/Korean independence activist in April 1932. Three days before throwing the bomb at Hongkew Park (虹口公園), Shanghai, towards the Japanese who gathered for the birthday celebration of the Emperor of Japan, Yun Bong Kil 尹奉吉 (1908-1932), then as a member of *Han-in ae-kuk-tan* 韓人愛國團 (Han Patriotic Corps), vowed in earnest that, in order to restore the independence and freedom of the homeland, he would go on to kill the enemy officers invading *chung-kuk* 中國 (Figures 2, 3, 4).<sup>12</sup>

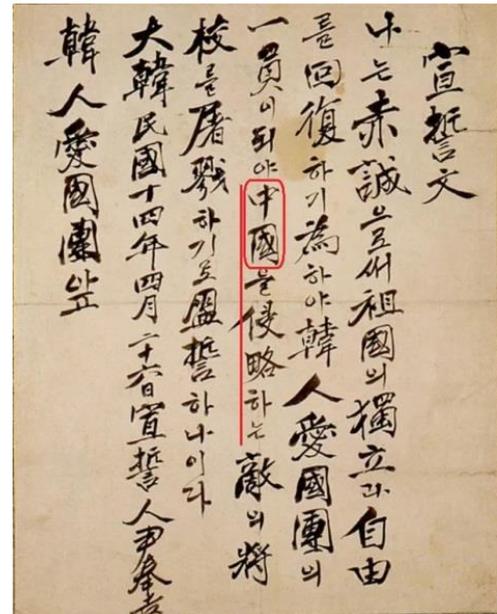
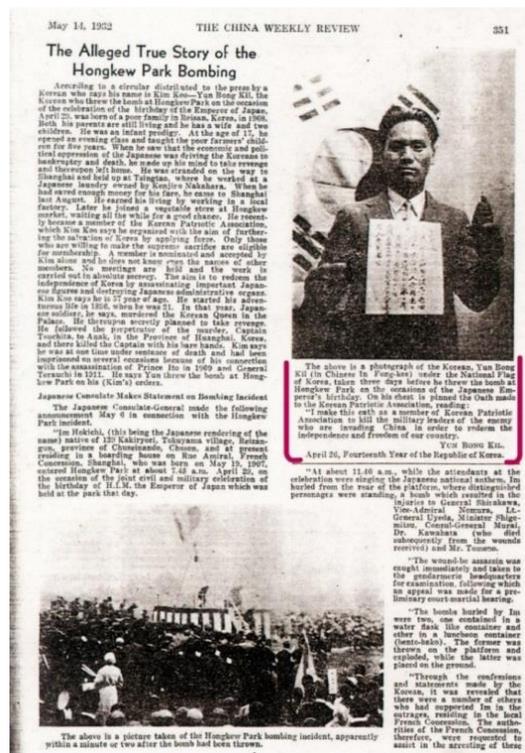


Figure 3. Oath by Yun Bong Kil (April 26, 1932) [highlighting by the author] (Source: National Museum of Korea, <https://www.museum.go.kr/site/main/relic/treasure/view?relicId=2090>)



12 宣誓文 - “나는赤誠으로써祖國의獨立과自由를回復하기爲하야韓人愛國團の一員이되야中國을侵略하는敵의將校를屠戮하기로盟誓 하나이다” 大韓民國十四年四月二十六日 宣誓人尹奉吉 韓人愛國團 앞 (April 26, 1932), National Museum of Korea (국립중앙박물관)



**Figure 4.** Yun Bong Kil. "The Alleged True Story of the Hongkew Park Bombing" [highlighting by the author] (Source: *The China Weekly Review* (1923-1950), Shanghai: Millard Publishing Co., May 14, 1932, pp. 351-352. <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/alleged-true-story-hongkew-park-bombing/docview/1324895738/se-2>).

The entry on Yun in *The China Weekly Review* of May 14, 1932, translates *chung-kuk* as 'China' (Figure 4) but this should be an incorrect rendition. If we think of the current territorial state named in English as 'China' (as short for the "People's Republic of China") for the phrase "the enemy officers invading *chung-kuk* 中國" (中國을侵略하는敵의將校), it would be an unintelligible explanation if *chung-kuk* were a stand-alone nation-state called 'China' because there would be no reason why Yun, fully expecting arrest and execution, would want to remove such Japanese officers invading 'China' which he, as a *Han-in* 韓人 (or a 'Korean'), did not belong to. If he meant that *chung-kuk* was a nation state and that his home country and such a *chung-kuk* shared the common fate against the (Japanese) enemy, it might make sense. But the latter scenario seems unlikely.

*Chung-kuk* in Yun Bong Kil's oath would have to be construed in a similar context in which the term was used in Ch'oe Che-u's 崔濟愚 (1824-1864) vernacular-language text of *Tonghak* 東學.<sup>13</sup> In a part of exhortative verse writ-

ten by Ch'oe, it speaks of "treacherous enemy of the West encroaching upon *chung-kuk* 中國 as had been said of them in 1860" [하 월갑경신년의전하오논 세삼말이요망흔 셔양적이등국을침범하 셔]. [40] The year 1860 was when the British-French forces defeated the Ch'ing army in their joint expedition into Peking. Then *chung-kuk* in Ch'oe's wording should be taken to represent the central government authority of the Ch'ing dynasty as "the protector of the Confucian civilization" [41] in the East Asian world. Seventy-two years later, with the Ch'ing dynasty long gone, Confucian civilizational identity or perspectives may have been weakened, but *chung-kuk* might still signify the authority of Central Government in the East Asian world by which Chosŏn, though now under Japanese colonial control, should be entitled to maintain its autonomous political existence.

#### 4. Putting It All in Perspective

Since the pre-Ch'in era, *chung-kuk* had signified the combined sphere of various polities that constituted *Ha/Hsia* 夏, the capital district of the imperial court, or the location of the central government of the polity in question. The term underwent an expansion in its connotation over time. In mid-fifteenth century Chosŏn, just a few months after the new script *Chŏng'ŭm* 正音 was devised, a group of officials opposed its possible widespread use supposedly because that would be like renouncing *chung-kuk* and assimilating with uncivilized outlying tribes. Here *chung-kuk* meant the locus of civilization in which the original written language, *mun(cha)* 文(字), as the common written language system of the East Asian world, had been used as it is, without any phonetic characters with which to pronounce it, as in the case of Chosŏn *Chŏng'ŭm*, or any subsidiary phonetic symbols taken from parts of *hancha* 漢字 characters as ideograms, as in the case of Japanese *kana* (仮名). Furthermore, King Sejong speaking of *muncha* 文字 in the phrase 與: 文 字 之 不 相 流 通 之 理 (language sounds of each *kuk* 國 are not congruent with the written language, *muncha* 文字), which refers to the characters (*cha* 字) of the original written language (*mun* 文) [42], does not specify the source of *muncha*. If the king did not feel the need to specify the source of the prototypical written language, *muncha* 文字, because it was inherently endogenous to Chosŏn and its predecessor dynasties, then this may suggest that the ancient ancestors of the Chosŏn people had created the primordial script that later came to be called *hancha* 漢字, which are now often erroneously called 'Chinese characters'. The fact that spoken language sounds in each

13 *Tonghak* 東學, literally *Eastern Learning*, as often compared to Western Learning (西學) or Catholicism/Christianity, was founded by the unorthodox scholar Ch'oe Che-u, and developed as an intellectual, religious, socio-political movement calling for a return to the "Way of Heaven" (天道) as to "open up a

new beginning" (開闢) and a reform in government in late nineteenth-century Chosŏn as a popular response to the official corruption and the threatening influence of Japan and the West.

locality, labelled as *kuk* 國, were neither unified nor compatible with those in *chung-kuk* (to the degree that it would hurt the administrative efficiency in Chosŏn) was the rationale why the king and like-minded scholar-officials came up with *Chŏng'ŭm*. The Vernacular Annotation of Correct Sounds tells us that *chung-kuk* denotes the seat of government of the Emperor (“中·國····· 皇·帝····· 定····· 居····· 新····· 國·····”). This in turn implies that *chung-kuk*, at least at the time of King Sejong and during immediately preceding period to which such reference applies, was the region where Chosŏn emperors would reside and their courts would be located.

After the Chosŏn court was subjugated in 1637 by the Jurchen Chin 女真金 forces led by the Ch'ing founding emperor Huang T'ai-chi 皇太極, *chung-kuk* would no longer be designated as the seat of Chosŏn rulers' authority. The status of *chung-kuk*, Central Government authority over the East Asian world, would now be assumed by the Imperial Ch'ing (皇清) court. Meanwhile, as seen in the petition to King Chŏngjo 正祖 in 1778 demanding the abolishment of a strict separation between legitimate and illegitimate lines of descent, *chung-kuk* was still used as an encompassing representation of the imperial governments' jurisdictional overreach, taking on a more culturally-charged connotation than *Ta Ch'ing Kuo* 大清國 – which was sometimes referred to by *chung-kuk* 中國 in nineteenth-century official documents – would do. Through the ascent and fall of the Ch'ing dynasty, *chung-kuk* seems to have somehow retained, until the early twentieth century, the implication of the Central Government that would guarantee the political autonomy of Chosŏn against any hostile foreign powers. Yun Bong Kil's oath with *chung-kuk* marked as an entity, either tangible or intangible, to be safeguarded in the face of Japanese invasion can be one such example unless this is a defective interpretation to be refuted by counterarguments.

The prominent intellectual in exile, Liang Ch'i-ch'ao, in his perceived need to evoke continuity over discontinuity in the public's conception of history, prescribed the name *Chung-kuo* 中國, not as recycling an existing concept but as taking a frequent signifier of the premodern dynastic state's political hegemony and redefining it into an unprecedented modern nation-state – thus an intentional invention in his nationalist historiography. Although Liang's ideas about the nation, *kuomin* 國民, and the new state that would have to belong to the “new people” would go on to greatly influence his successors, his feat cannot gloss over the historical fact that *chung-kuk* 中國 before and except his redefinition had been employed in totally different ways – to signify the location where the Chosŏn emperors would have their courts, as shown in *Hunmin chŏng'ŭm ōn-hae*, among other meanings.

## 5. Conclusion

Highlighting the evolution of the usage of *chung-kuk* from its political-cultural symbolism for the civilizational core in the traditional East Asian world to contemporary reinterpretations centered around the new nation-state imagined in the early twentieth century, this article provides a nuanced exploration of the term's significantly different shades in meaning in order for it not to be misappropriated or misconstrued in historiographical interpretations and other accounts. In so doing, this study calls for and facilitates both a broadening of perspective in critically re-examining the historically conditioned macro-political configurations in East Asia and enhanced sensitivity to the historicity of the term and related ones such as *ch'ŏn-halt'ien-hsia* 天下, *kuk/kuo* 國, and *kukka/kuo-chia* 國家, the roots of the latter “stretched back to the Confucian classics” to refer to “the dynastic government, even to the monarchy itself.” [43] This can inform relevant debates on nationalism as present-day East Asian countries try to manipulate their past to suit their current agendas.

John K. Fairbank, in his article “A Preliminary Framework,” observed that “in strategic terms” in “the great continental ‘Empire of East Asia,’ stretching from the Pamirs to Pusan,” the “tribesmen of Inner Asia came more and more to supply the striking force that constituted the decisive military component of government.” [5] This may apply to the Ch'ing imperial state as well, in terms of Chosŏn's relations to *chung-kuk*, whose status was transferred to the Ch'ing court in the first half of the seventeenth century. Before it happened, the supreme rulers of the Chosŏn dynasty seem to have been associated with *chung-kuk*, as made clear in the Vernacular Annotation of Correct Sounds for Instructing the People.

Before the twentieth century, *chung-kuk* had mostly indicated a central civilizational/cultural realm, and in cases where it had a geographical connotation it was of secondary meaning stemming from the cultural signification and not of a primary or original one. From the early years of the twentieth century, reformist/revolutionary thinkers like Liang Ch'i-ch'ao and Chang Ping-lin put forward *chung-kuo* as if it were a unique name befitting a nation-state potentially embracing different ethnicities, with the amorphous Han 漢 people at the center, in their fervently nationalist orientation when it is not. On the other hand, such exogenous terms as *Sina*, *Chine*, or *China* had not been used by the rulers or subjects in the East Asian world. As a result, the English word ‘China’ has no precise endogenous counterpart at all. [44] For the ‘modern China’, the semantic correspondence between it and *chung-kuo* seems uneasy, at best. Yet, many historians and commentators, no matter where they are from, still end up relying on the term ‘China’ discussing it as if it were a single continuous entity with some thousand years of history, for the sake of expediency or whatever, resulting in various ahistorical interpretations. This leads not just to slipping into the nationalistic teleology, but also to letting the authors



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## Research Field

**Jihoon Chun:** East Asian History, *Hunmin chŏng'üm* 訓民正音, Fifteenth-century Korean language, Early twentieth-century historiography, Premodern East Asian interpolity relations, East Asian philology