From Early States to Modern States in China:
The Changing Concept and Connotation of "State"

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The substantive characteristics of the connotation of "State" include two parts: (I) the relatively perpetual and impersonalized political system; (II) the ductility of organization forms within the space and politics. And the later part is the absolute attribute of this connotation while the former part tends to show with different forms. Therefore, it is more suitable for the former one to be the objective for study on the evolution process of the connotation of "State" at different stages. Based on this understanding, the author discusses the specific political system at different stages and the relatively perpetual and impersonalized methods for the realization of the system, then tries to define the connotation of the early state, ancient state and modern state in Chinese history.

Keywords: state, concept, connotation, China

Concept Establishment and Definition

As an abstract concept, "State", on one hand, has the connotation of objective existence, i.e. one kind of social organizational form with specific pattern. On the other hand, the concept itself exists relaying on subjective consciousness. The logic deduction can help us understand the specific connotation of the state at a specific period while it can not prove the existence of concept of "State" during this time. Therefore, when trying to define "State", we should make it clear that the object to be interpreted is the social organizational form represented by "State" or just the concept itself.

Specifically, the establishment and definition of the concept of "State" is also an self-cognition process of human society. Just like Mr. Mingke Wang (1997) once said, "when we draw a circle on a paper, actually it is its 'edge' makes it look like a circle." The author takes the "edge" here as the reference object. To realize self-cognition, a social organization needs reference object as well, that is, other individuals within the same social organization category. What should be noted is that, considering the form, the subject can only take the object as a reference when the object is situated at the same level with the subject. Taking the Figure 1 below as an example, A represents the grade 4 social organizational form and B shows the grade 3 social organizational form. When comparing A and B, B has cleared its "edge", so B can take A as a reference, while A does not obtain a reference effect. Comparing with the state, the highest form of human social organization, only the social

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organizations in state form have the same level with itself. Therefore, only if the states are taken as reference mutually, the self-cognition of this social organization can be realized and the establishment of the concept of "State" could be continued.

Annotation: each "circle" represents one social organization and the circular tiers in "circle" represent the specific level of social organization. Tier 1 refers to level 1.

Figure 1. Schematic of cross-references between social organizations.

On the other hand, compared with the clearness of "edge", the scientific definition relies more on constant deepening of the understanding of connotation of "State". In the aspect of consciousness, the combination of letters "State", as a language sign, does not have any abstract implications except from meanings related to linguistics. In the early stage of human society, the state may be called as "State", may also possibly be called as others. Therefore, the establishment and definition of the concept of "State" should not take this symbol and its use as the basis. The concept of "State" comes into shape only after people fully comprehend it and take the basic morphological characteristic of its social organization as connotation and endow it with an abstract symbol. After that, the concept will be constantly used in the process of social production and the established understandings of the connotation of "State" mentioned above will be deepened gradually. Concretely speaking, with the promotion of complication of human society and the gradual improvement of social organizational form of state, its organizational connotation will become clearer and clearer and it will reduce the difficulty in defining the concept of "State" scientifically and objectively. On the other hand, in the repetitive observation and re-understanding of the concept of "State" in social re-production process, the concept of "State" will be scientifically defined finally through the comparison and revision of existing concept connotation with the current organization form. It should be pointed out that the use frequency of the concept depends on the degree of importance of concept connotation during social production activities and the high use frequency is an important condition for the realization of scientific defining.

Taking the hysteresis quality within the cognitive process of "State" in China as an example, the expansive land and relatively closed geographical environment of China ensures sufficient independent space for its development, but it also reduces the opportunity of China to have communication with foreign countries with an identity of "State" and realize self-cognition objectively. In ancient China, the economic and political activities beyond the range of local interests are rarely supported, thus state politics can hardly obtain sufficient economic and spiritual resources to move forward to more centralized organization structure. As a result, the scientific defining of "State" concept was lagged. Up to modern times, the political pattern of human society had been

rapidly expanded to worldwide and the state had become the most basic and core political unit for international affairs. Since then, the state had been realized increasingly prominent status. To be proactive or not, people become to rely on the existence of "State" more and more during social production activities and the social organizational form also gradually moves to maturity and improvement in the process of re-production. Since then, establishing an accurate and refined definition of "State" becomes urgent and necessary.

Connotation Comprehension and Grasp

Generally speaking, concepts all have some lags during its establishment and definition. As shown in the Figure 2 below, the establishment of "State" concept lagged behind the formation of its connotation and the scientific definition lagged behind the generation of "State". What should be pointed out is that the "State" over here is different from a solidified concept, it unceasingly undergoes changes and development since its birth. Therefore, the concrete connotation of the state at point A, B and C (hereinafter referred to as Point A, B and C) is different, which improves the difficulty in defining the concept of "State" imperceptibly. Specifically speaking, due to the convenience of observation, the academic circles always put the emphasis of study on Point C and have mastered the main characteristics of social organizational form at this stage accurately.[1] However, as the social organizational form at Point C has becomes clearer and clearer, people's understanding of generalized concept of state has been unconsciously affected by this Point and it could cause chaos of state's historical connotation.
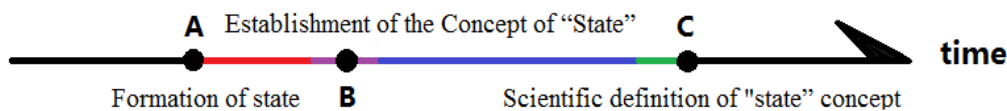
Note: the red line refers to the stage of early states, the blue line shows the stage of ancient states and the green line means the stage of modern states; As the stage that Point B is located is unclear, the purple line is used to show the part that may be extended by both red line and blue line.

Figure 2. Schematic of the evolution of the "State".

Therefore, in order to show the specific connotation of "State" at different time stages, the author agrees to divide the society complication process into three main stages with early states, ancient states and modern states while divide the "State" concept into three corresponding second-concepts, "early states", "ancient states" and "modern states". Of course, if further division is required, we could break the "State" concept up into more parts with this method as well. After then, conducting researches on each stage is necessary, furthermore, we could make definitions based on these study, finally, establish a conceptual system integrated with sub-concepts.

On this basis, how to divide the "early stage", "ancient stage" and "modern stage" becomes an important issue. The author thinks that, not considering the definition, we should establish a common dimensionality that gets through the whole evolution of state form based on one generality during the complication process of human society and divide the evolution process above through comparative analysis on specific parameters variations within the dimensionality and finally establish a form sequence composed by early states, ancient states and

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[1] Sociologists have been generally concerned with the formation of the nation-state in the seventeenth century in Europe, which is an entirely different organizational unit that the early city-states in Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, the Indus Valley, Mesoamerica, and Peru—Seth Abrutyn, Kirk Lawrence, *From Chiefdom To State*.

modern states. What should be noted is that if "one generality" mentioned above is the substantive characteristic of connotation of state can reflect the specific form of state at the most extent.

To realize the effects, we should first make the substantive characteristic of connotation of state clear. On this question, the author thinks that we could talk it from two aspects: authoritarian structure and organization form. As to the former, Joseph R. Strayer (2010) once concluded the basic conditions for formation of state as:

> One group can only become one state when it exists continually in both space and time.
> The formation of relatively perpetual and impersonalized political system.
> Obtaining moral authority from family, local group, religious organization and establishing absolute authority to support its institutional structure and laws. (pp. 3-56)

Among which, the continual existence in space and time is the objective premise for the existence of social organization; the moral authority is the guarantee for the realization of relatively perpetual and impersonalized political system; and the relatively perpetual and impersonalized political system is just the substantive characteristic of state connotation for the meaning of authoritarian structure. With regard to organization form, no matter what breadth or depth of the authoritarian structure is, the state shows a political relationship of affiliation beyond the range of geographic restrictions in essence. Its organization form shall maintain its ductility in space and politics for long term, i.e. the ability of absorbing external territory and population. This is also the basic requirement of state organization form on its own authoritarian structure. Specifically, the ductility of organization form depends on its organizational cohesion basically, while the organizational cohesion mainly comes from two aspects. First, the organization core, the specific authority shared by individuals within the organization range, could offer its organization form a wider radiation scope if it has higher prestige. Second, with the deepening of authoritarian structure, the social organization has greater and greater capacity to absorb territory and population.

To sum up, the substantive characteristics of the connotation of state mainly include two following parts: the relatively perpetual and impersonalized political system and the ductility of organization form in space and politics. What should be pointed out is that the later one is the absolute attribute of connotation of state while the former one often shows in different forms. Therefore, the later part is more suitable to be the study object for the evolution of connotation of state at different stages. Therefore, the author discusses the specific political system at different stages and the relatively perpetual and impersonalized methods for the realization of that system, then tries to define the connotation of the early state, ancient state and modern state in Chinese history so as to present the complex process of Chinese society.

"State" Concept and Connotation of China

Stage of Modern States

From the aspect of political system of modern China, the author agrees the point of *Origins of Modern Chinese Sate* written by Mr. Lifei Kong. Observing Chinese politics' breakdown to establishment since modern times, the organic combination between political participation and state power, political competition and public interests comes to the front, hence the coordination of above relations is regarded as an important mark for modern state's formation in China. To be specific, governors in the late Qing Dynasty tried to rule an enormous and complicated society through a relatively narrow bureaucratic administrative mechanism, causing the central

government gradually to loose control over local politics, especially for continuously declining capacity of ruling the huge and complicated rural society in China. To overcome above issue, on one hand, modern China gradually formulated the "根本性议程" (fundamental agenda) of expanding political participation and enhancing state power with its legality, striving to expand and consolidate the foundation of their ruling. On the other hand, modern China gradually realized the issue of whether public interest could be coordinated with political competition in the expanding process of its political participation. Specifically, the more people getting involved in politics, the more opinions there will be. As a result, political competition will become fiercer and more complicated. Thus, modern China adopted the attitude of acceptance, guidance and standardization, then gradually transformed political competition into positive patterns of political participation, making it coordinated for conflict of personal interest and public interest. With the current pattern as an example, the system of People's Congress is the fundamental political system of China. This system realized the unification of political participation, state power and public interest by means of democratic centralism.

Thus, it can be seen that modern state politics is mainly characterized with the system of wide political participation expansion to a democratic range. However, it needs to be pointed out that democratic political participation is not unique to modern society. Political activity and community life with extremely high public participation also exist in primitive tribe and democratic city-state. Different from modern states, these social organizations are usually unable to break through the limitations from existing land and population. Their social economy and spiritual resource cannot afford the political territory exceed the local scale. In other words, the characteristic above are only applicable under the premise of social organization in state form.

From another aspect, innovation of the political participation system is a great break through of modern states when compared with the political system in ancient times. Therefore, it could be deemed as an outstanding feature of the stage of modern states. However, modern states also inherited some parts of administrative means from ancient times. To be specific, modern China is ruled by law. For the system of People's Congress, it is necessary for constitutional law to guard its legal status of fundamental political system. This is also the basic mode for ancient China to define its political system and implement its public administration. It is reasonable to deem the national legislation as so-called relative permanency and impersonalized political system at this stage. Therefore, the author thinks that highly complete legal system is also an important feature of the political system in modern states.

Stage of Ancient States

According to the author, China should include two specific phases at the stage of ancient states, i.e. slave society and feudal society. Regardless of different political forms, the author classifies the two societies into one category. The reason is that both of them are basically the same with the form of state social organization. Different from the democratic system of political participation in modern China, the form of political organization in ancient China represents extremely strong class nature. State power was successively controlled by the slave-owner class and the feudal landlord class. Its scope of political participation is also limited by above ruling classes.

In terms of the slave society, its governance could be understood as extremely cruel violence dictatorship—slave owners occupied slaves as the producers and the means of production, although the status of

freemen is slightly higher than that of slaves, they were also exploited by slave owners. Take Xia and Shang Dynasties as an example, Lv Kui was debauched, "筑倾宫、饰瑶台、作琼室、立玉门" (building various palaces with luxurious ornaments), while Di Xin was brutal, "暴殄天物，害虐丞民，为天下逋逃主，萃渊薮" (tyrannizing his assistant officers and people). In the feudal society, land, as basic means of production in agricultural economy, gradually became the core of social wealth and contradiction. The camp of social organization was also synchronically differentiated. Finally, it formed two opposite classes: landlord and peasant. As the saying goes, "普天之下莫非王土，率土之滨莫非王臣" (All this territory belongs to the king, and all officers who control the land within the territory of the state also take orders from the king). The feudal landlord class realized their ruling of peasant through land occupation and distribution, and thus mastered and executed the state power.

By the way, it needs to be pointed out that governors in ancient states frequently elected some useful people from the ruled class to participate into political affairs for political need or management need. However, it doesn't mean the expanding of political participation range. With the obtainment of political resources, those electors also obtained the qualification and capability of occupying relevant means of production. As a result, their class attribute changed at the same time. In fact, above process eventually gives expression to a selective absorption of the lower class by the upper class. Thus the class attribute of state power was not shaken. With the Constitutional Movement in the late Qing Dynasty as an example, the cabinet of imperial families and *The Outline of Imperial Constitution* showed that the governor could not break through its class limitations after all, even though the political power was about to overturn, or the nation was about to become extinct.

In terms of relative permanency and impersonalization of the class ruling system, the government of ancient China mainly realized it through the following two channels: firstly, as stated in above paragraphs, the government established its authoritarian structure (i.e. political system) by making laws, and executed its public administration on this basis. From *Yu Punishment* and *Tom Punishment* to *Codes of Qing Dynasty*, formulation and modification of law, as the main source of legality of the class governance in ancient China, are always an indispensable part of state political life, no matter for dynasties changing or throne succession. Secondly, parallel to secularized politics, governors in ancient China integrated the patriarchal system with the thought of "敬天保民" (showing respect to the heaven, protecting the people), and established a set of universal codes of conduct and criteria, namely "礼制" (the ritual system). According to the record, "夏造殷因", the ritual system was initially formed in Xia and Shang Dynasties. "民共由之", relying on the natural worship for religious authority and clan authority, it rapidly received the universal social cognition. In the period of feudal ruling, the political status of the ritual system was further increased. It gradually formed the ruling mode of "为政先礼，礼为政本" (place propriety prior to administration and treat propriety as the foundation of politics). Viewed from the angle of serving to politics, the ritual system in that time included more concepts and contents supporting the "legality" of class ruling. Represented by "君权神授" (divine right of kings), it stressed that the right of class ruling was granted from the "God", and the "God's law" was placed above the "monarchical power", including the "monarchical power", operation of all things must be compatible with that. On one hand, above concepts provided theoretical support for class oppression by the governors. On the other hand, the clever design of that the "monarchical power" should have to obey the "God's law" also created a consensus foundation for the relative permanency and impersonalization of ritual system to some extent.

Stage of Early States

The stage of early states, as the initial form of state social organization, enjoyed a long history, and lacked means of being observation. Therefore, it was not clear for the connotation of its social organization. It is very difficult for us to accurately master in which time the social organization of tribe established the political system of relative permanency and impersonalization, or which tribe or tribes took the lead to finish this transformation. Considering above circumstances, the author recommends applying the margin theory of Mr. Mingke Wang in another way (deeming the early states as the intermediate state between Chiefdom and ancient state), then limiting and defining its specific connotation by mastering its form edges. So it is of great importance for us to master the political system in Chiefdom on the premise of knowing substitutive characteristics of the political system in ancient states, so as to accurately unscramble the connotation of social formation under early sates.

To a great extent, the construction of the concept of "Chiefdom" is relatively spoken to "state". It refers to the stage prior to "state" in the complicated course of human society. Therefore, its form of social organization has not the spatial and political extensive capability yet. On one hand, the organization structure of Chiefdom is relatively loose. So it usually needs to make response to internal crisis of heterogenization. On the other hand, relative shortage of material, spiritual and human resources resulted in frequent wars among various Chiefdom. Under such domestic strife and foreign aggression, Chiefdom gradually established a set of organization patterns with flexible response to emergencies as the primary principle, so as to realize time and spatial continuity. Simply speaking, some people in the Chiefdom relied on their special status (e.g. witch doctor and Shaman) in religious meaning to get temporary commanding rights of political affairs and temporary ownership of wartime arms under urgency according to traditional coping mechanism. To continue such authority, some witch doctors and Shamans established the primitive official employment system based on religious codes with administrative color in the peacetime by the reason of war preparation, expanding the status of temporary commanders into leaders in conventional significance. As chief of a tribe, personal rights were consolidated by distributing above public office. Therefore, the mode of administrative organization in Chiefdom is a kind of oligarchy based on response to urgencies. Relatively speaking, the permanency and impersonalization degree of Chiefdom oligarchy is lower and its system basis is mainly sourced from relevant codes of traditional wartime coping mechanism and primitive religion (see Table 1).

Table 1

Evolution of Political Systems in the Complicated Socialization Process of China

	Chiefdom	Early sates	Ancient states	Modern states
Political form	Oligarchy	?	Class ruling	Democratic political participation
Institutional basis	Wartime tradition, Religious specification	? ?	Legal system, Ritual system	Legal system

Upon above specific analysis on political systems in ancient states, we could find that: The political form of early states should be in the intermediate transitional state from oligarchy to class ruling. The scope of political participation should be gradually expanded from individual to specific clansman with the blood relationship as the boundary. The author understands it as kinship politics. In terms of relative permanency and impersonalization of political system, we can summarize it as ruling by rite and punishment. On one hand,

standards of behavior with more universal standard significance evolved from traditional wartime coping mechanism should exist in the political life of China in the early stage. Its constraining force and systematicness are inferior to the legal system. However, its compelling force is superior to traditional codes. The author comprehends it as the punishment system. On the other hand, firstly, combining the patriarchal clan idea, based on ancestor worship of primitive religion, early state in China formed a system of "人伦" (human relation) with ethics as the core. The author comprehends it as the predecessor of the patriarchal clan system in the later stage. Secondly, combining relevant ideas of law and rite disciplines, based on nature worship of primitive religion, the early state formed a theory of "天道" (God's law) with the harmony between man and nature as the main purpose. The author comprehends it as the predecessor of the thought of "敬天保民". It needs to be emphasized that the etiquette education above is different from primitive religion by higher degree of institutionalization. To sum up, China took kinship politics as the ruling mode in the stage of early states. Relative permanency and impersonalization of this mode are mainly reflected in institutional punishment and relatively standard etiquette education (combination of the system of "人伦" and the theory of "天道").

Conclusion

To sum up, the concept and connotation of "state" has been basically presented clearly—By grasping the elementary characteristics of this type of social organization, restoring its process of forming, being recognized and developing, it could be roughly divided into three historical stages, early state, ancient state and modern state. And on this basis, we outlined the specific existing and operating ways of the relatively perpetual and impersonalized political system within the states from the points of political form and institutional basis.

It's important to note that giving an accurate definition of "state" is not the principal purpose of this paper, the author is also trying to establish a unified dimension for the discussing of "state" and its related problems (the relatively perpetual and impersonalized political system and the ductility of organization form in space and politics), which could connect those propositions and results in a large span as much as possible and restore the organizational changing process of state dialectically and completely.

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