

Importance of center in ancient Chinese capital city planning

By LIU QINGZHU

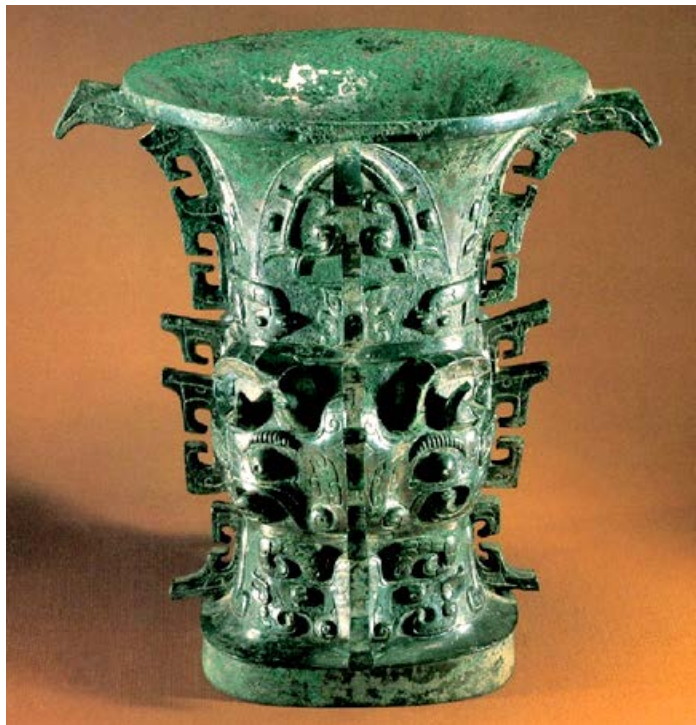
The Chinese people highly value the position of the center. For example, the seat of honor, reserved for the host or eldest person, is usually the seat in the center of the area where people are within a group taking a photo. When did the Chinese people start to consider the area of the center so important?

Archaeological discoveries

It has been claimed that the tradition of valuing the center dates back to the Warring States Period (475–221 BCE). At that time, Fan Li (536–448 BCE), a famous businessman known as the founding father of Chinese commercial business, once said that people should do business in populous areas. The area he chose was called Tao, where present-day Dingtao District of Heze, Shandong Province, is located. Fan was thereby known as Tao Zhu Gong. The *Shi Ji (Records of the Historian)* by Sima Qian named the area of Tao “the center of the world.”

However, archaeological discoveries show that the belief in the importance of the center may have appeared much earlier than in the Warring States Period. In 1987, archaeologists found a tomb built about 6,400 years ago in Puyang, Henan Province. Inside the tomb, there were some shells arranged into the images of a dragon and a tiger around the tomb’s human remains. These designs represented a basic concept of Fengshui—the Azure Dragon to the left and the White Tiger to the right (In Fengshui, the cardinal directions are determined by the marker-stars of the mega-constellations known as the Four Celestial Animals: the Azure Dragon, the Vermilion Bird, the White Tiger and the Black Tortoise). Another pattern arranged with shells was found under the human remains, symbolizing the *Beidou* and *Zhoubi*. *Beidou* is also known as the Northern Dipper, which was considered the center of Heaven in traditional Chinese astronomy. *Zhoubi* is also known as *guibiao* (gnomon), a stationary arm that projects a shadow on a sundial to indicate time or season. People in ancient China used *guibiao* to find a central point. They believed that the place where a *guibiao* pole erected in the sunlight cast no shadow should be the center. There is a theory that the person buried in this tomb might have been a chief of an ancient tribe and that he probably had been engaged in the search for the center.

Why did the ancient Chinese pay so much attention to the search for the center? The answer may be associated with the traditional view of Heaven. In classical Chinese



The word “*Zhong Guo*” (China) first appeared as an inscription on Hezun, a bronze chalice of the Zhou Dynasty. Photo: BAOJI BRONZE MUSEUM

thought, an emperor was believed to be the “Son of Heaven,” who received the Mandate of Heaven. Heaven was thought to be in the center of the universe, the location of which was marked by the Northern Dipper. Therefore, building the national capital just beneath the Northern Dipper meant that the distance between Heaven and Earth was the shortest, which was convenient for people on Earth to communicate with and report to Heaven.

The search for the center had been used as a way to choose the location of national capitals. During the Xia (c. 21st–16th century BCE) and Shang (c. 16th–11th century BCE) dynasties, people divined that the center of China was located in the area where Songshan, Henan Province, was located. Then the center was reconsidered and relocated to the Heji area (present-day northern Henan Province and southern Hebei Province) in the late Shang period. Historical documents state that the Zhou Dynasty (1056–256 BCE) also established its capital in Songshan, Henan Province, after overthrowing the Shang Dynasty. In 1963, a piece of bronze ware named Hezun that dates back more than 3,000 years was unearthed in Northwest China’s Shaanxi Province. The Hezun (*zun* refers to a wine vessel) has a 122-word inscription on its base, detailing how King Cheng of Zhou ordered to move the capital city to Luoyi (present-day Luoyang, Henan Province). Among the incised characters are the words “*zhai zi zhong huo*” (*huo* is the ancient form of *guo*, which refers to a country). These words mean “to live in the central area of the world” (*Zhong Guo*, the official name of China, appeared for the first time). This is evidence that Chi-

nese people tended to build capitals in the central area of *tianxia* (an ancient concept that denoted either the entire geographical world or the metaphysical realm of mortals and that later became associated with political sovereignty). Furthermore, because different parts of a country vary in their geographical conditions, economy and culture, ancient politicians believed that building the capital in the center of a country reflected an attitude of treating all parts of the country equally. Another reason for situating the capital city in the center was for the convenience of tax collection. Anyhow, locating the capital city in the central area of a country was often the most efficient way to govern and control the whole country, and this practice gradually became a tradition.

From the Qin (221–207 BCE) to the Song Dynasty (960–1279), capitals were mostly located on the Central Plain. The Jurchen-led Jin Dynasty (1115–1234) moved its capital to Yanjing (present-day Beijing) out of the belief that Yanjing occupied the center of the land, thereby changing the name of Yanjing into Zhongdu (the central capital). The succeeding dynasties, including the Ming (1368–1644) and the Qing (1644–1911), adopted the Jin’s choice and constructed new capitals on the foundation of the Jin’s capital.

Palace in the center

Imperial palaces were usually built in the center of the capital. Beijing is a comprehensive expression of capital cities in imperial China and also the capital of the last imperial Chinese dynasty. The Forbidden City, a complex that once served as the imperial palace during the Ming and Qing dynasties, lies at the city

center of old Beijing.

As the ceremonial center of imperial power, the Hall of Supreme Harmony is at the heart of the immense Forbidden City palace complex with the Imperial Ancestral Temple and the Altar of Land and Grain (land and grain symbolize the state in traditional culture) to its southeast and southwest. Archaeological discoveries show that the temple where the emperor venerated the spirits of his ancestors and the hall where the emperor held court used to be arranged in parallel positions during early periods. When it came to the Qin Dynasty, Qin Shi Huang (259–210 BCE), the creator of the first unified Chinese empire, stressed the superiority of a unified empire over hereditary rights. Under the impact of this idea, the temple for honoring ancestors was moved out of the palace complex and the hall that symbolized imperial power was left inside and became the heart of the palace complex.

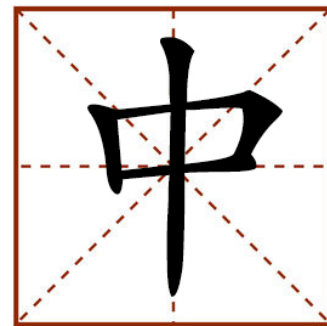
This transformation in layout indicates the social change from the “Period of Kingdom” to the “Period of Empire.” To some extent, it is the increasing consciousness of a unified nation that has enabled the Chinese civilization to survive throughout the five thousand years of its history.

“Center” in the capital city

Kao Gong Ji (Manual of Crafts), a classic work on science and technology in Ancient China, codified some rules for the design and layout of capital cities in imperial China. According to *Kao Gong Ji*, a capital city should have a square plan. Three gates on each side of the perimeter lead into the nine main streets that crisscross the city and define its grid-pattern. Until now, archaeologists have found this design of three gates nowhere except for in the ruins of capital cities in imperial China. Moreover, only the gates of capital cities had three entrances each, leading into three streets. This design was called “A Gate With Three Entrances.” At every gate, the middle entrance was formerly reserved for the emperor or no one at all, because it symbolized the supreme power of a country. In recent years, archaeologists have excavated the ruins of three entrances from a gate of Chang’an dating back to the Han Dynasty. Because the gate was well preserved, ruts were found on the ground of the two side entrances of the gate. However, there were no traces of ruts on the ground of the central entrance. Archaeologists also found that the ground of the central entrance was quite different from that of the other two. It was plastered with mud and its surface was too smooth to show any signs of use. Therefore, the central entrance is considered to have been reserved for emperors only and was seldom used.

The article was edited and translated from Guangming Daily. Liu Qingzhu is a Member of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS).

CHINESE WISDOM



zhōng/zhòng

When pronounced as *zhōng*, this character is often used as a noun or an adjective, referring to the center or middle. When pronounced as *zhòng*, this character is usually used as a verb with a meaning of “attain” or “hit [the target].”

逐鹿中原

zhú lù zhōng yuán

Zhu means “chase” and *lu* refers to a stag. *Zhong yuan* refers to the Central Plain, the area on the lower reaches of the Yellow River that formed the cradle of Chinese civilization, which is also traditionally valued as the heart of China. This idiom, taken literally, means to chase a stag on the Central Plain. It indicates a fight for the throne.

This idiom originated from the *Shi Ji (Records of the Historian)*, written by Sima Qian. At the end of a story, Han Xin (c. 231–196 BCE), a famous military general who served Liu Bang (the founder of the Han Dynasty) and who contributed greatly to the founding of the Han Dynasty, was accused of participating in a rebellion and lured into a trap and executed on Empress Lü Zhi’s order. A political advisor named Kuai Tong had proposed to Han Xin to make Han independent of Liu Bang so Han could proclaim himself a king. For this, even though Han had refused, Liu Bang wanted to arrest Kuai, but Kuai argued, “Qin (the Qin Dynasty) lost its stag—the imperial power—and all the world has been chasing after it.... Many men have sharpened their weapons and took up arms, eager to do as you did. But their strength was not equal to yours. Do you intend to throw them all into the cauldron?” Finally, Liu let Kuai go.

The stag has traditionally been a symbol of imperial power in China. Why this animal is associated with power is still uncertain. It is generally believed that stags, or deer, harmless animals with little resistance to predators, originally represented the common people of a country, who were the prey of various forces. During the reign of Qin Shi Huang, the emperor used harsh methods to control the country. Those harsh methods, combined with the huge tax levies needed to pay for construction projects and wars, took their toll. After Qin Shi Huang’s death, rebellion erupted and Qin’s rule was weakened. Various clans raised armies and fought for the throne. That was why Kuai Tong used the metaphor of the stag to describe the situation at the time.