

Law, Territory, and Statehood: The Legal Conception of *Guo* in the *Tang Code*

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This article reconsiders premodern Chinese statehood through a legal-philological analysis of the term *guo* 國 in the *Tang Code*. Existing scholarship has largely centered on another term, *tianxia* 天下 (“All under Heaven”), a cosmological expression of universalist rule that has led scholars to portray premodern Chinese notions of state authority as non-territorial. By contrast, this study shows that Tang legal conceptions of *guo* articulated state authority in jurisdictional and territorial terms. The *Tang Code* defined the polity as a bounded legal domain governed by codified regulations, guarded borders, and restricted mobility. This jurisdictional and territorial conception of rulership was embedded in the dual identities of Tang monarchs, who held the titles *huangdi* 皇帝 and *tianzi* 天子 to assert, respectively, domestic rule over a territorial realm and an outward claim to universalist authority. Through this layered conception of rulership, Tang law reveals how territoriality and universality coexisted within a single political order. Using the Tang as a case study, the article argues that premodern Chinese statehood cannot be reduced to cosmological universalism and that legal texts offer a critical yet underexplored window into the intellectual foundations of imperial governance across East Asia.

Keywords: *Tang Code*, sovereignty, territoriality, *guo* 國, *tianxia* 天下

Introduction¹

Meaning “state” or “polity,” the term *guo* 國 is common in literary Sinitic. Yet what kind of political regime does the term signify? Given the fundamental transformation of China over the past century into a nation-state, the modern senses of *guo* may no longer align with its classical usages. In modern parlance, *guo*, together with *jia* 家 in *guojia* 國家, has often come to mean “nation,” a state structure that did not exist in premodern China. The dynastic polities of the country are conventionally denoted as “empires,” but as Mark Elliott has pointed out, this is a modern interpretation. There is no native Sinitic term equivalent to the English word. The term *diguo* 帝國 used to render it today is a modern creation, coined as a translation of the Western concept. Before the nineteenth century, Chinese people did not describe their polity by that

¹ I am sincerely grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful and constructive feedback, which has greatly strengthened this article.

term.² In this light, the premodern conception of *guo* offers a vital point of entry for exploring premodern Chinese statehood and deserves sustained analysis.

More than half a century ago, John K. Fairbank had already observed this disjunction between modern terminology and premodern political structures in his study of East Asian relations. He thereby urged scholars to examine the native political lexicon of the region to understand how East Asian peoples themselves conceived of their states.³ Although Fairbank's framework of "tributary system" for interpreting the region's interstate relations has since faced serious criticism for oversimplifications,⁴ his caution remains an important reminder for studying the premodern world order. Nevertheless, the primary term that he and scholars after him relied upon in studying premodern Chinese "world order" or "sovereignty" was not *guo* but *tianxia* 天下, literally "All under Heaven."⁵ Recognizing that premodern China had its own distinctive political order, scholars have typically focused on its universalist claims of authority. They mainly studied how Chinese emperors claimed to be *tianzi* 天子, Sons of Heaven, and asserted overlordship beyond Chinese borders over other states toward "All under Heaven," in contrast to the modern nation-state that claims sovereignty only within defined borders and on equal footing among other powers.⁶

Because of the focus on *tianxia*, existing scholarship often portrays premodern Chinese states as paying little heed to the territorial bounds of their authority, or even to territoriality altogether. For instance, while one political scientist observed that the notion of "All under Heaven" did not actually refer to the entire known world but

² See his Chinese article, "Chuantong Zhongguo shi yi ge diguo ma?" 传统中国是一个帝国吗? in *Dushu* 读书, 2014: 29–40.

³ John K. Fairbank, "A Preliminary Framework," in *The Chinese World Order* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968) ed. John K. Fairbank, 5–6.

⁴ See, for example, Peter C. Perdue, "The Tenacious Tributary System," *Journal of Contemporary China* 24, no. 96 (2015): 1002–14.

⁵ With its specific meaning as noted below, "sovereignty" is another modern concept with no native Sinitic equivalent, and Fairbank explicitly avoided using it. Yet for the purpose of comparing state models across different times and spaces, some scholars beyond Fairbank have broadened their use of the term, taking it more generally to mean the authority claimed by a state to rule over its subjects, in order to explore how premodern Asia or China developed its own mode of political authority. See John K. Fairbank, "A Preliminary Framework," 5–6; Timothy Brook, M. C. van Walt van Praag, and Miek Boltjes, *Sacred Mandates: Asian International Relations since Chinggis Khan* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 15–19; Pang Laikwan, *One and All: The Logic of Chinese Sovereignty* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2024), 32–46.

⁶ See, for example, Zhao Tingyang 赵汀阳, *Tianxia tixi: Shijie zhidu zhexue daolun* 天下体系: 世界制度哲学导论 (Nanjing: Jiangsu jiaoyu chubanshe, 2005); June Teufel Dreyer, "The 'Tianxia Trope': Will China Change the International System?" *Journal of Contemporary China* 24 (96): 1015–31; Prasenjit Duara, "The Chinese World Order in Historical Perspective: The Imperialism of Nation-States or Soft Power?" *China and the World (Singapore)* 2, no. 4 (2019): 1–33; David C. Kang, "International Order in Historical East Asia: Tribute and Hierarchy beyond Sinocentrism and Eurocentrism," *International Organization* 74, no. 1 (2020): 65–93; Pang Laikwan, *One and All: The Logic of Chinese Sovereignty* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2024), 32–46; Mihatsch, Moritz A., and Michael Mulligan, *Shifting Sovereignities: A Global History of a Concept in Practice* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2025), 30–33; 62, 108.

rather to China and its neighboring states, he argued that the traditional Chinese worldview lacked any conception of regions, as no spatial divisions were recognized under *tianxia*.⁷ Similarly, a more recent work on the “logic of Chinese sovereignty” noted that *tianxia* could at times denote the actual domain under Chinese control, but the work emphasized the term’s fluidity—its capacity to also signify the imagined known world in other contexts, thereby blending concrete territorial references with cosmological imagination. Therefore, the premodern Chinese state is fundamentally distinct from that of the modern nation-state, which rests on fixed borders and a defined citizenry.⁸

While the universalist claims of authority expressed through the term *tianxia* are indeed a defining feature of premodern Chinese states, the focus on *tianxia* leads existing scholarship to overlook the dimension of territoriality. As we will see below, the extensive realm of *tianxia* did not deny the existence of constituent political units signified by *guo*. The penal regulations of the Tang dynasty (618-907), the *Tang Code*, *lǜ* 律, interpret the Tang *guo* as a territorial domain with limits, as evident in the provisions on treason and border control, even as universalist claims of authority persisted through the use of certain imperial seals to issue commands abroad. With a philological analysis of the term *guo* in the *Code*, this study seeks to nuance the common understanding of premodern Chinese states. It argues that legal conceptions of political authority in the Tang period were layered and complex. Although Tang emperors, like their counterparts in other dynasties, claimed universalist rulership over other states, this universalism was nonetheless grounded in a territorial conception of *guo*.

The relationship between *tianxia* and *guo* has long been recognized as ambiguous and has already drawn some scholarly attention. Mainly based on thinkers’ treatises or court officials’ debates, Joseph R. Levenson has explored how this relationship was understood in the seventeenth century, whereas Yuri Pines and Peter K. Bol have discussed it in the pre-Qin and Song periods, respectively.⁹ This article extends the discussion to the Tang period and legal realm. Although the provisions discussed below do not involve the term *tianxia*, the relationship between *guo* and *tianzi* shown in the *Code* illustrates how *guo* was defined as a core, basic unit of the empire for the Sons of Heaven to claim authority. This hints at how the territorial conception of *guo*

⁷ Zhang Feng, “Regionalization in the Tianxia? Continuity and Change in China’s Foreign Policy,” in Emilian Kavalski, ed., *China and the Global Politics of Regionalization* (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2009), 19.

⁸ Pang Laikwan, *One and All: The Logic of Chinese Sovereignty* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2024), 32–46.

⁹ Their works will be discussed in greater detail below. See Joseph R. Levenson, “T’ien-hsia and Kuo, and the ‘Transvaluation of Values,’” in *Far Eastern Quarterly*, 11:4 (1952), 447–451; Yuri Pines, “Changing Views of ‘Tianxia’ in Pre-Imperial Discourse,” *Oriens Extremus*, vol. 43 (2002), 101–16; Peter K. Bol, “Government, Society, and State: On the Political Visions of Ssu-ma Kuang (1019–1086) and Wang An-shih (1021–1086),” in *Ordering the World: Approaches to State and Society in Sung Dynasty China*, ed. Robert P. Hymes and Conrad Schirokauer (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 139–140.

served as the foundation upon which the universalist claims of *tianxia* were constructed.

In doing so, this study also demonstrates the value of legal texts in intellectual history. With their attention focused on interstate relations, existing scholarship on premodern Chinese statehood has largely relied on diplomatic discourse in foreign correspondence and the philosophical traditions that underpinned it, such as Confucianism and Legalism.¹⁰ Legal texts, however, have rarely been examined. Although law is essentially a body of practical rules, it also deserves serious attention in intellectual inquiry as the institutional design of the empire. The territorial dimension of statehood is, in turn, revealed by the practical rules of the *Tang Code*. Moreover, much like Roman law in Europe, Tang law was the “mother law” for contemporary and subsequent dynasties in China and East Asia.¹¹ Just as Roman jurisprudence has long provided a foundation for discussions of sovereignty in the European tradition, Tang legal conceptions can similarly serve as a reference point for understanding how state authority was conceived in other Chinese and East Asian contexts. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this article, the focus remains on the legal conception of state authority articulated in the *Tang Code*; the actual application and enforcement of these laws require separate investigation and lie beyond its scope.

The *Tang Code*

Before proceeding, it is important to provide an overview of the *Tang Code* as a historical source. According to *Tang Liudian* 唐六典, the Six Corpora of the Tang, the official compendium of imperial offices compiled by the Tang court in the 720s, there were four types of “codified law,” *wenfa* 文法 under the Tang: the codes, *lü* “statutes,” *ling* 令 “decrees,” *ge* 格, and “ordinances,” *shi* 式.¹² The codes were criminal laws that stipulated punishments, while the statutes were general administrative regulations, and the ordinances provided specific rules for each state department. In cases where state affairs fell beyond the scope of the promulgated statutes or ordinances, the central court issued ad hoc commands to address them. Among these, those deemed suitable to serve as regular rules were collected as the decrees.¹³ The codes are central to this

¹⁰ See the works mentioned in n.4-8.

¹¹ Yang Honglie 楊鴻烈, *Zhongguo falü zai dong Ya zhuguo zhi yingxiang* 中國法律在東亞諸國之影響 (Shanghai: Shanghai Shangwu yinshu guan, 1937), pp.11-74; 199-278; 491-538; Brian E. McKnight, “T’ang Law and Later Law: The Roots of Continuity,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 115, no. 3 (1995): 410.

¹² Li Linfu 李林甫 et al., *Tang liudian* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992), 6:180.

¹³ This is a general understanding of the differences between the four laws, but since no complete editions of the three regulations survive as they do for the *Code*, our knowledge relies largely on Song descriptions. For this reason, Denis Twitchett and Zhao Jing 趙晶 have doubted whether the regulations can be clearly distinguished as such. See Denis Twitchett, “The Fragment of the T’ang Ordinances of the Department of Waterways Discovered at Tun-huang,” *Asia Major* n.s. 6, no. 1 (1957): 24–36; Zhao Jing, “Tang ling fuyuan suo ju shiliao jianzheng: yi lingshi fenbian wei xiansuo” 唐令復原所據史料

study because they provide the most thorough account of Tang legal conceptions, accompanied by an official sub-commentary, *shuyi* 疏議, compiled by the court. As we will see below, the sub-commentary also cites related statutes, decrees, or ordinances to clarify the application of the rules or their underlying legal principles. Much of this commentary directly contributes to our understanding of Tang notions of statehood.

The Tang court continuously reviewed and revised these different regulations until the mid-eighth century, when the An Lushan Rebellion (755-763) fundamentally disrupted the normal legislative process and the Tang legal system. Following this upheaval, the late Tang court relied mainly on ad hoc commands to create new laws, which often became fragmented in historical records, with many subsequently lost.¹⁴ Among the various editions of the different types of law, only one edition of the codes has been preserved in its entirety along with the official commentary. This is the edition examined in the following analysis. This *Code* is now believed to have been first compiled in 653 and finalized during the Kaiyuan 開元 era (713-741), more specifically between 710 and 737.¹⁵ Additionally, modern scholars have reconstructed portions of the statutes and ordinances, most of which also date to the Kaiyuan period.¹⁶ In other words, the surviving Tang law primarily reflects the legal

檢證——以令式分辨為線索, *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan Lishi yuyan yanjiusuo jikan* 中央研究院歷史語言研究所集刊 86, no. 2 (2015): 317-364.

¹⁴ Dai Jianguo 戴建國, *Tang Song biange shiqi de falü yu shehui* 唐宋變革時期的法律與社會 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2010), 35-219.

¹⁵ Library catalogues from the Qing date the extant edition of the *Code* to the mid-seventh century, since it carries a preface of 653 attributed to Zhangsun Wuji 長孫無忌 (594-659), who oversaw the commentary's compilation. In the 1930s, however, Niida Noboru 仁井田陞 and Makino Tatsumi 牧野巽 noted the presence of official titles, institutions, and naming taboos from the Kaiyuan era, and thus dated the text to that period. In the 1990s, Liu Junwen 劉俊文 further identified references to regulations of the 710s, dating the extant edition between 710 and 737. See *Siku quanshu zongmu tiyao* 四庫全書總目提要, by Yongrong 永瑤 and Ji Yun 紀昀, rpt. *Siku quanshu tiyao huibian* 文淵閣四庫全書提要匯編 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2006), shi bu 史部, 13:471; Niida Noboru and Makino Tatsumi, "Ko Tōritsu sogi seisaku nendai kō" 故唐律疏議制作年代考, *Tōhō gakuho* 東方學報, vol. 1-2 (1931), rpt. Ritsuryō Kenkyūkai 律令研究會, ed., *Yakuchū Nihon ritsuryō* 譯註日本律令 (Tōkyō: Tōkyōdō, 1975-1999), vol. 1, 366-636; Liu Junwen, *Tang lü shuyi jianjie* 唐律疏議箋解 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1996), *xulun* 序論, 66-70.

¹⁶ For example, Niida Noboru and Ikeda On 池田溫 recovered 715 articles of Tang statutes, most from the Kaiyuan period. In 1999, Dai Jianguo 戴建國 discovered the *Tiansheng ling* 天聖令, the statutes of the Song Tiansheng period (1023-1032), where certain Tang statute are also recorded as the references to the Song regulations. In addition, Huo Cunfu 霍存福 drew on these records to restore certain Tang ordinances, likely close to their Kaiyuan versions. See Niida Noboru, ed., *Tōrei shūi* 唐令拾遺 (Tōkyō: Tōhō bunka gakuin Tōkyō kenkyūjo, 1933); Niida Noboru and Ikeda On, eds., *Tōrei shūi ho* 唐令拾遺補 (Tōkyō: Tōkyō Daigaku Shuppankai, 1997); Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan lishi yanjiusuo 中國社會科學院歷史研究所, ed., *Tianyi Ge cang Ming chaoben Tiansheng ling jiaozheng* 天一閣藏明鈔天聖令校證 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2006); Huo Cunfu, *Tang shi jiyi* 唐式輯佚, in Yang Yifan 楊一凡,

conceptions of the early eighth century. It was this edition of Tang law that later spread across East Asia, becoming a model for the imperial legal systems of contemporary and subsequent dynasties.

Guo as a Legal Jurisdiction

We can now turn to the *Code* to analyze how it used the term *guo*. This first leads us to the preface of the sub-commentary, which underlines the significance of punishment in governing the *guo*:

When the three powers [—Heaven, Earth, and Humanity—] were established, all things came into distinct being. Among creatures endowed with vitality and spirit, humans are held as the foremost. There has never been [a ruler] who did not establish rulership depending on the people, nor [one who ruled] without implementing laws and penalties in accordance with governance and moral instruction. Driven by indulgence or ignorance, some [of the people] sink into transgression—greatly, they throw the ruler’s realm into chaos; slightly, they violate his statutes. That no institutions should be established—such a thing has never been heard. Thus, it is said: ‘Use punishment to end punishment; use killing to end killing.’ Penalties must not be relaxed in the state, nor should the rod of discipline be discarded in the family.¹⁷

夫三才肇位，萬象斯分。稟氣含靈，人爲稱首。莫不憑黎元而樹司宰，因政教而施刑法。其有情恣庸愚，識沈愆戾，大則亂其區宇，小則睽其品式。不立制度，則未之前聞。故曰：「以刑止刑，以殺止殺。刑罰不可弛於國，笞捶不得廢於家。」¹⁸

Situating law within the cosmic and political order, the preface interprets law and punishment as essential measures for regulating the realm. Humans, as the paramount creatures endowed with precious “vitality and spirit,” possessed the ability to establish governance and maintain order, with law and punishment playing a central role. In this light, the *guo* overseen by the ruler was a concrete jurisdiction in which the state’s laws were actively enforced—where “penalties must not be relaxed.”

Building on this jurisdictional view, the *Tang Code* recognized that there were *guo* that did not observe Tang law, as shown in the following Article 48 on the legal treatment of foreigners:

ed., *Zhongguo fazhishi kaozheng xubian* 中國法制史考證續編 (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2009), vol. 8.

¹⁷ All translations of the *Tang Code* in this article are mine, prepared with reference to Wallace Johnson’s *T’ang Code* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

¹⁸ Zhangsun Wuji et al., *Tang lü shuyi* 唐律疏議, ed. Yue Chunzhi 岳純之 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2013), 1:1.

Cases in which *huawai* people of the same kind offend against one another are ruled according to their original customs or their laws. Cases involving those of different ‘kinds’ are sentenced by the laws and codes [of our empire].

The sub-commentary states: ‘*Huawai* people’ refers to those from alien or barbarian *guo* that have instated their own rulers and leaders. They each have their own customs, and their institutions and laws are different. When those of the same kind offend against one another, [the court] must consult the institutions of their original polities and pass judgements according to their customs and laws. With cases involving those of different kinds, such as when peoples of Goguryeo and Baekje offend against one another, [our] codes are always applied to determine the penalty and sentence.

諸化外人，同類自相犯者，各依本俗法。異類相犯者，以法律論。

疏議曰：「化外人」謂蕃夷之國，別立君長者。各有風俗，制法不同。其有同類自相犯者，須問本國之制，依其俗法斷之。異類相犯者，若高麗之與百濟相犯之類，皆以國家法律，論定刑名。¹⁹

This article demonstrates a pragmatic approach to governance that acknowledged the limits of Tang legal authority in foreign contexts. *Hua* 化 basically means “to transform” and is often associated with *jiaohua* 教化, “to teach and transform.” The phrase *huawai* people is thus widely understood as an ethno-cultural concept referring to non-Han people. The mention of custom seems to further reinforce this interpretation.²⁰ However, the primary concern of the *Code* here was whether Tang law should apply to people with distinct legal traditions and practices. To address this, the *Code* allowed those who shared the same legal practices distinct from Tang law to apply their own laws or customs, while Tang law applied in cases involving people with different legal traditions. In this regard, *huawai* people mattered here not precisely because of their ethno-cultural differences but their distinct legal practices. The “customs” mentioned in the *Code* also functioned as a form of legal rule, as they were capable of working alongside formal law to “pass judgments,” much like how indigenous customs can serve as customary laws in modern legal systems. As the *huawai* people who observed distinct legal practice was described as those from “alien

¹⁹ Zhangsun Wuji et al., *Tang lü shuyi*, 6:107.

²⁰ See, for example, Marc S. Abramson, *Ethnic Identity in Tang China* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 127; and Chinese works such as Su Qin 蘇欽, “Tang Ming lü ‘huawai ren’ tiao bianxi: jianlun Zhongguo gudai ge minzu falü wenhua de chongtu yu ronghe” 唐明律「化外人」條辨析——兼論中國古代各民族法律文化的衝突和融合, *Faxue yanjiu* 法學研究 18, no. 5 (1996): 141-51; Liu Jiqing 劉吉慶, “Tang lü ‘huawai ren’ tiao——zhengzhi guishu yu falü shiyong de erfen shijiao shenshi” 唐律“化外人”條——政治歸屬與法律適用的二分視角審視, *Falüshi pinglun* 法律史評論 9 (2016): 255-63; Yen Ju-Hui 嚴茹蕙, “Shilun ‘huawai ren’ yu wenhua rentong——yi ba shiji de du Tang Riben ren weili” 試論「化外人」與文化認同——以八世紀的渡唐日本人為例, in Gao Mingshi 高明士, ed., *Tang Ri wenhua jiaoliu tansuo: renwu, lisu, fazhi zuowei shijiao* 唐日文化交流探索: 人物、禮俗、法制作為視角 (Taipei: Yuanhua wenchuang, 2019), 71-82.

or barbarian *guo*,” this *guo* should also be understood primarily as a foreign legal jurisdiction.²¹

The examples of Goguryeo and Baekje further explain this jurisdictional reading. While the Tang court understood both as belonging to the same ethnic group of Buyeo 夫餘, the *Code* regarded their subjects as two different types of *huawai* people,²² and thereby as people from two different *guo*. Tang law applied when disputes arose between them. Indeed, the two kingdoms had been independent regimes for centuries with distinct “customs and laws.” For instance, while traitors in both kingdoms were punished by decapitation, Goguryeo also burned them alive before carrying out the execution.²³ Similarly, while murderers were executed in Goguryeo, Baekje allowed them to offer slaves as compensation instead of their own lives. These differences in their legal systems were noted in Tang historical records, such as the *Bei shi* 北史 (History of the Northern Dynasties), and the compilers of the *Tang Code* would have been aware of them.²⁴

In other words, in Tang understanding, communities with shared ethno-cultural backgrounds did not necessarily observe the same law under different political regimes. This aligns with the preface of the sub-commentary, which emphasized that every ruler established their own law for governance. In this light, *guo* was, again, fundamentally a legal jurisdiction rather than an ethno-cultural realm, and the *Code* here logically assumed that people from an alien polity followed a different legal tradition.

The Territoriality of *Guo*

In addition to the jurisdictional interpretation of *guo*, the *Code* also articulated its territorial dimensions, as demonstrated in the provisions on plotting treason, *mou pan*

²¹ Given this description of the origin of the *huawai* people, early and more recent scholarship tends to regard the term as a political designation, referring to foreigners rather than ethnic others. See, for example, Nakada Kaoru 中田薫, “Tōdai hōni okeru gaikokujin no chii” 唐代法に於ける外國人の地位, in *Hōseishi ronshū* 法制史論集 (Tōkyō: Iwanami Shoten, 1936), 1361-92; Shen Shuowen 沈壽文, “Tanglǚ shuyi ‘huàwairen’ bianxi” 唐律疏議“化外人”辨析, *Yunnan daxue xuebao* 雲南大學學報 19, no. 3 (2006): 115-18; Gan Huaizhen 甘懷真, “Cong Tang lǚ huàwai ren guiding kan Tangdai de guoji zhidu” 從唐律化外人規定看唐代的國籍制度, *Zaoqi Zhongguo shi yanjiu* 早期中國史研究 3, no. 2 (2011): 1-32; Wang Yikang 王義康, “Tangdai de huàwai yu huànei” 唐代的化外與化內, *Lishi yanjiu* 歷史研究, no. 5 (2014): 4-60; Wang Bingju 王炳軍, “Tanglǚ ‘huàwairen’ tiaode falǚ jieshi” 唐律“化外人”條的法律解釋, *Falǚ fangfa* 法律方法, no. 3 (2018): 184-99; Shao-yun Yang, “Unauthorized Exchanges: Restrictions on Foreign Trade and Intermarriage in the Tang and Northern Song Empires,” *T’oung Pao* 108, no. 5-6 (2022): 603.

²² Li Yanshou 李延壽 et al., *Bei shi* 北史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 94:3120; Li Yanshou et al., *Nan shi* 南史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 79:1696; Wei Zheng 魏徵 et al., *Sui shu* 隋書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1973.), 81:1817.

²³ See Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 and Song Qi 宋祁, *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 220:6186, 6198; Zhang Chunhai 張春海, *Tang lǚ Gaoli lǚ bijiao yanjiu* 唐律高麗律比較研究 (Beijing: Falǚ chubanshe, 2016), pp.1-15.

²⁴ Li Yanshou et al., *Bei shi*, 94:3116, 3119.

謀叛. The crime was listed as the third of the Ten Abominations, *shi'e* 十惡, the ten most serious offenses in the *Tang Code*. Notably, treason was partly defined in territorial loyalty as follows:

The third is “plotting treason” (referring to plotting to betray our *guo* and join an illegitimate regime).

The sub-commentary states: This refers to someone who plots to turn against our own dynasty and intends to submit to a foreign state, or seeks to surrender a city to an illegitimate regime, or attempts to defect with territory—as when Mouyi of the Ju state defected with Moulou, or when Gongshan Furao committed treason with the city of Fei, and other such cases.

三曰謀叛（謂謀背國從偽）

疏議曰：有人謀背本朝，將投蕃國，或欲翻城從偽，或欲以地外奔，即如莒牟夷以牟婁來奔，公山弗擾以費叛之類。²⁵

This article regarded treason, *pan* 叛, as a betrayal of the state, *beiguo* 背國, by its subjects who shifted their allegiance to a rival or foreign regime, with specific reference to the potential appropriation of territory as part of their betrayal. This reveals that territorial loss was a major concern of the Tang court in cases of treason, as illustrated by early historical precedents of Mouyi 牟夷 (fl. 537 BCE) and Gongshan Furao 公山弗擾 (fl. 498 BCE), both ministers of the Lu 魯 state during the Spring and Autumn period. Mouyi defected to Lu from Ju 莒, a neighboring state of Lu, while Gongshan, dissatisfied with the Lu central court, asserted independence from Lu.²⁶ Although *pan* usually refers to rebellion in literary Sinitic, the sub-commentary suggests that the *Code* interpreted *pan* more specifically as personal or territorial detachment from the Tang state.

As Shiga Shūzō 滋賀秀三 has observed, this meaning becomes particularly clear when contrasted with *fan* 反, another term frequently used to denote rebellion. *Fan* appeared first among the Ten Abominations, as in *mou fan* 謀反, “plotting to rebel,” which particularly denoted the intent to launch a military attack and harm the ruler or the state. Therefore, although both terms denoted anti-state actions, *pan* focused on detachment from the state, while *fan* emphasized direct confrontation with or assault against the sovereign or the political center.²⁷ This distinction is further illustrated in Article 251 of the *Code*, which further included within the category of *pan* those who “absconded to mountains and marshes and refused to obey summons” 亡命山澤不從

²⁵ Ibid., 1:8.

²⁶ For the history of these events, see Liu Yijun 劉怡君, *Yuan jing ru lu: Tang lü shuyi lifa shuzhou yu quanshi jinlu* 援經入律：《唐律疏議》立法樞軸與詮釋進路 (Taipei: Wanjuanlou tushu gufen youxian gongsi, 2022), 354-358.

²⁷ See, Ritsuryō Kenkyūkai 律令研究會, ed., *Yakuchū Nihon ritsuryō* 譯注日本律令 (Tokyo: Tōkyōdō Shuppan, 1979), vol.5, 36. Shiga was responsible for the annotation of this volume.

追喚.²⁸ Such actions, again, underlined a deliberate withdrawal from the state's reach and control—both administratively, by evading registers and summons, and spatially, by retreating into uncultivated spaces beyond imperial supervision. In this light, *pan*, treason, was conceived as a spatial act. Loyalty to the *guo* was therefore not defined solely as a moral bond with the ruler or the state but also as fidelity to the territorial domain itself. State authority in the Tang legal order was spatialized: it inhered in the state's capacity to hold together a defined territorial order.

The territoriality of *guo* is further illustrated by the provisions on border control, which bring our attention to Article 89:

In cases where border garrisons have external villains entering or internal villains leaving, and the watchmen do not notice, [they] are liable to one and a half years of penal servitude, and the responsible officers to one year.

The sub-commentary states: Along all the borders of [our] *guo*, there are fortified garrisons in order to suppress bandits and prepare for unforeseen threats. “External villains entering” refers to foreigners committing evil acts or acting as spies and the like... “Internal villains leaving” refers to subjects within the *guo* committing evil acts toward where are beyond the pale, or going to remote coasts or into hidden perilous areas.

諸緣邊城戍，有外姦內入，內姦外出，而候望者不覺，徒一年半；主司，徒一年。

疏議曰：國境緣邊，皆有城戍，式遏寇盜，預備不虞。其「有外姦內入」，謂蕃人為姦，或行間諜之類... 有內姦外出者，謂國內人為姦，出向化外，或荒海之畔、幽險之中。²⁹

The sub-commentary illuminates that *guojing* 國境, the spatial domain of the *guo*, was overseen by fortified garrisons *chengshu* 城戍 for security purposes. This indicates explicitly that *guo* was understood in spatial terms that it was supposed to be physically marked off and materially defended. I therefore translate such spatial boundaries *bian* 邊 of the *guo* as “borders,” since they were officially demarcated and established, marking definable limits of Tang political space against foreign lands in the legal conception of the *Code*.

Notably, these borders did not manifest as clear-cut lines on the ground. As Yan Gengwang 嚴耕望 has shown, Tang defense fortifications were installed along natural barriers, such as mountain ranges and rivers, that defined the territorial extent of Tang rule. In the High Tang, these fortifications stretched from the Tianshan and Altai Mountains in the northwest, across the Yellow River bend in the north, and through a series of ranges in Manchuria to the Korean Peninsula in the northeast. To the west and south, they extended from the northern edge of the Tibetan Plateau to the Annamite Range in present-day northern Vietnam, which was then under Tang control.

²⁸ Zhangsun Wuji et al., *Tang lü shuyi*, 17:274-275.

²⁹ Ibid., 8.145.

These fortified garrisons oversaw their designated areas, often marked by *feng* 烽 (beacon towers), and were regularly patrolled.³⁰ The sub-commentary's reference to subjects leaving for "remote coasts" or "hidden perilous areas" also reminds us that in practice such edges could blur into spaces not neatly belonging to another polity but lying beyond effective Tang control. Yet, as John W. I. Lee and Michael North have explained, borders could be marked either by human construction or by natural features such as rivers, mountain ranges, or even trees that are employed as markers.³¹ The boundaries demarcated by such installations of defense fortifications should therefore also be regarded as borders, at least in the Tang legal conception. In this sense, the *guo* defined by such borders was a territorial concept.

It should be noted that while border demarcation usually implies fixed territorial boundaries in modern times, this was not the case at the time. As Jonathan Skaff has observed, in the absence of codified international law, premodern empires and kingdoms attacked one another at intervals, with their territories expanding and contracting in cycles. The Tang northern borderlands with Inner Asian nomads were especially fluid. Nomadic groups, possessing greater mobility than settled farmers, moved from place to place, and the lands they controlled shifted accordingly. The rise and fall of these powers had a direct impact on Tang territorial control. For example, although the dynasty once governed extensive lands across present-day Mongolia after defeating the Turks, it lost this ground in the late seventh century with the Turks' revival and reoccupation of the region. The fortified borders outlined in the *Code* were thus fluid over time. Yet, fluid though they were, territorial boundaries existed as military defense zones. Wherever these defenses stood they marked the limits of Tang territory against the outside world. Yan Gengwang's description of the northern stretch of the territory outlines the extent of Tang border control following the Turkic revival.

Above all, it should also be noted that this territorially defined *guo* applied to the Tang polity itself, but not necessarily to all *guo*, as the sub-commentary above described only the Tang situation. While the *Code* explicitly assumed that foreign *guo* possessed their own legal traditions, it gave no indication that other states were thought to have comparable borders. This asymmetry becomes clearer in the paired terms *guonei* 國內 and *huawai* mentioned in Article 89. *Guonei* clearly referred to where was within the spatial domain of the Tang polity, while regions beyond it were denoted as *huawai*, which could include unpopulated "remote coasts" or "hidden perilous areas" as well as foreign *guo* as seen in the earlier provision. Therefore, in Tang legal thought, the world outside was thus composed both of established political powers and of wilderness. Situated among these "wild lands," whether those foreign *guo* possessed comparable borders was unknown and not the *Code*'s concern.

³⁰ Yan Gengwang 嚴耕望, "Tangdai shengshi yu xi'nan linguo zhi jiangjie" 唐代盛時與西南鄰國之疆界 and "Tangdai beijiang zhijie lingxia zhi jingjie" 唐代北疆直接領轄之境界, in *Yan Gengwang shixue lunwenji* 嚴耕望史學論文集 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chebanshe, 2009), vol. 2, 670-716.

³¹ John W. I. Lee and Michael North, eds., *Globalizing Borderlands Studies in Europe and North America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 2.

In any case, with this territorially defined *guo*, the *Code* construed an opposition between “inner” and “outer” that were also interpreted in spatial terms. This is evident in its references to internal and external villains. The sub-commentary explains that “internal villains” were *guonei ren* 國內人—people within the *guo*—who moved outward to foreign lands to commit evil acts, while “external villains” were those who entered from abroad. In this regard, the law again presupposed the Tang *guo* as a spatial entity, and it was endangered by the possibility of undetected crossings for evil acts. Border garrisons and their officers, therefore, were punished for negligence. As such, state authority was conceived not only as the ruler’s personal power but also as one exercised through officials entrusted with territorial surveillance.

In addition, the territorial limits of the Tang *guo* were also designed to restrict subjects’ private movements. Article 88 of the *Code* stipulated:

Those who cross the border passes and fortresses are liable to two years of penal servitude... Those who illicitly offer restricted weapons are to be strangled to death. Those who marry [*huawai* people] are to be banished [at a distance] of two thousand *li*.

The sub-commentary states: Whoever crosses border passes or barriers and illicitly provides prohibited goods to foreigners are liable to strangulation. Those who illicitly contract marriage are liable to banishment of two thousand *li*. As for foreigners who cross into our territory and trade illicitly with those within the pale, their punishment shall be treated the same as for our subjects who cross or trade without authorization. Such cases should be reported to await imperial decree. Entering or leaving the borders of the state, if not on official diplomatic business, is unlawful... Furthermore, according to a separate decree: “Any foreigner who marries Han women as wives or concubines are not permitted to take them back to their homeland.”

諸越度緣邊關塞者，徒二年..... 私與禁兵器者，絞；共為婚姻者，流二千里。

疏議曰：越度緣邊關塞，將禁兵器私與化外人者，絞。共為婚姻者，流二千里。其化外人越度入境，與化內交易，得罪並與化內人越度、交易同，仍奏聽勅。出入國境，非公使者不合.... 又，準別格：「諸蕃人所娶得漢婦女為妻妾，並不得將還蕃內。」³²

This provision made clear that crossing the borders of the *guo* without authorization was itself a criminal act. The regulation was concerned with the illegal transfer of weapons to foreigners, as shown by the specific reference to such actions, and strangulation reserved for such cases. This may explain the rationale behind the design of the territorially defined *guo*, as the Tang court attempted to secure its imperial domain as a space that was, at least in principle, physically monitored and able to retain its people within. This is particularly obvious in the provision on unauthorized marriages between subjects and foreigners. As Shao-yun Yang has argued, the Han 漢

³² Ibid., 8.144.

in the *Code* did not refer to an ethnically Han group but to Tang subjects in general, regardless of their ethno-cultural background, since the Tang court often used the term interchangeably with “Tang” to refer to itself.³³ Therefore, the provision did not aim to retain ethnically Han people specifically, but general Tang people. This suggests that the boundaries the regulation sought to consolidate were not ethno-cultural but territorial, and the *guo* was, again, conceptualized in explicitly spatial terms—as a domain that could, at least in theory, be physically monitored to prevent the outflow of its population.

All in all, these provisions reveal that the conception of *guo* in the *Tang Code* was inseparable from territory. Treason was partly defined in terms of territorial detachment, and the spatial boundaries of the *guo* were demarcated, guarded, and legally conceptualized as a polity with physical borders that restricted cross-border activities. State authority, in this legal order, was essentially territorialized: exercised through the defense of borders, the surveillance of movement, and the state's monopoly over the legitimate circulation of people and resources across its spatial limits. As previously discussed, the Tang *guo* also functioned as a legal jurisdiction. In legal design, therefore, the Tang acted as a form of territorial polity with a distinct law and order. This, again, resonates with the sub-commentary preface, which emphasized that a ruler must employ law to regulate his realm.

Guo versus *Tianxia*

The territorial conception of Tang polity discussed above seems at odds with the prevailing view in scholarship on premodern Chinese statehood, which emphasizes its universalist, non-territorial claims of authority. How, then, should we understand this discrepancy? The key lies in the distinctive roles of the emperor, *huangdi* 皇帝, and the Son of Heaven, *tianzi*. Since Chinese monarchs, including those of the Tang, claimed both titles, their distinction has rarely been noted in existing scholarship on premodern Chinese statehood. However, as Nishijima Sadao 西嶋定生 has observed, the two titles asserted authority in different spheres. According to his study of the use of imperial seals in Han times, the *huangdi*'s seals were used for domestic matters, while those of the *tianzi* were reserved for foreign affairs. As such, after the First Emperor of the Qin 秦始皇 created the title *huangdi* and replaced the Zhou enfeoffment 封建 system with the commandery-and-county 郡縣 administration, *huangdi* became the ruler of this newly centralized domestic domain. At the same time, *tianzi*, the title inherited from the Zhou kings, claimed overlordship of foreign states, akin to Zhou kings presiding over their princely polities. In this way, the Han court effectively restored the Zhou enfeoffment system in foreign relations to assert

³³ Shao-yun Yang, “*Fan and Han*: The Origins and Uses of a Conceptual Dichotomy in Mid-Imperial China, ca. 500-1200”, in Francesca Fiaschetti and Julia Schneider, eds., *Political Strategies of Identity Building in Non-Han Empires in China* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2014), 13-17.

supremacy abroad.³⁴ Furthermore, Ogata Isamu 尾形勇 has also indicated that the two titles carried distinct ritual roles in state worship. From the Han to the Tang, monarchs addressed themselves as “your *huangdi* servant” 皇帝臣某 when worshipping their ancestors, but as “your *tianzi* servant” 天子臣某 when worshipping Heaven.³⁵ This differentiated self-designation suggests that *huangdi* and *tianzi* derived legitimacy from different sources of authority: the *huangdi* was the human ruler who inherited power from ancestral monarchs, while the *tianzi* was Heaven’s agent deriving legitimacy from the cosmos.

Recently, Sagawa Eiji 佐川英治 has argued that the deployment of these titles may have been less clear-cut in Han times than Nishijima and Ogata assumed, as the two were sometimes used interchangeably. The distinction became more sharply defined under the Tang, as Inner Asian ideas of Heaven’s mandate reinforced the Chinese notions of *tianming* and *tianzi*.³⁶ Regardless of the practices in Han times, Tang law did recognize the distinctions between *huangdi* and *tianzi*, similar to what Nishijima suggested, as shown by Article 362 of the *Code* on the forgery of imperial seals:

Those who forge any of the Eight Precious Seals of the Emperor are liable to decapitation.

The sub-commentary states: The emperor possesses the Divine Seal of the Heritage, the Mandate-Receiving Seal, three Emperor’s Seals, and three Son of Heaven’s Seals — collectively called the “Eight Seals.” According to the Ordinances on Official Formats: “The Divine Seal is revered but not used. The Mandate-Receiving Seal is used for the Feng and Shan sacrifices. The Emperor’s Executive Seal is used when corresponding with princes, dukes, or lower ranks. The Emperor’s Seal is used for letters of commendation to princes, dukes, or lower ranks. The Emperor’s Command Seal is used when summoning princes, dukes, or lower ranks. The Son of Heaven’s Executive Seal is used when corresponding with foreign *guo*. The Son of Heaven’s Seal is used for letters of commendation to foreign *guo*. The Son of Heaven’s Command Seal is used when mobilizing foreign troops. All these seals are made of white jade.” ... The forgery of even one of these eight seals is strictly liable to decapitation.

諸偽造皇帝八寶者，斬。

疏議曰：皇帝有傳國神寶、有受命寶、皇帝三寶、天子三寶，是名「八寶」。依公式令：「神寶，寶而不用；受命寶，封禪則用之；皇帝行寶，報王公以下書則用之；皇帝之寶，慰勞王公以下書則用之；皇帝信寶，徵召王公以下

³⁴ Nishijima Sadao 西嶋定生, “Kōtei shiha no seiritsu” 皇帝支配の成立, in *Chūgoku kodai kokka to Higashi Ajia sekai* 中国古代国家と東アジア世界 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1970; 1983), 51-92.

³⁵ Ogata Isamu, “Jishō keishiki yori mitaru kunshin kankei” 自称形式より見たる君臣関係, in *Chūgoku kodai no ‘ie’ to kokka: Kōtei shihaika no chitsujo kōzō* 中国古代の「家」と国家—皇帝支配下の秩序構造 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1979), 129-130.

³⁶ Sagawa Eiji 佐川英治, “Kōtei ga ‘Tenshi’ o shō suru toki—Chūka no tagenka to Tōbu Yūrashia” 皇帝が「天子」を称するとき——中華の多元化と東部ユーラシア, in Sagawa Eiji, ed., *Kunshugō to rekishi sekai* 君主号と歴史世界 (Tokyo: Yamakawa shuppansha, 2025), 5-28.

書則用之；天子行寶，報番國書則用之；天子之寶，慰勞番國書則用之；天子信寶，徵召番國兵馬則用之。皆以白玉為之。」... 八寶之中，有人偽造一者，即斬。³⁷

According to the *Code*, although *huangdi* could serve as a generic title for Tang monarchs — hence all eight seals were collectively called the seals of the *huangdi* — the term carried a more specific sense in contrast to *tianzi*. The *huangdi* was the ruler of the domestic domain, exercising authority over princes, dukes, and lower ranks through the three *huangdi* seals. The *tianzi*, by contrast, asserted authority over foreign *guo*, and the *tianzi*'s seals articulated commands in ritual and diplomatic exchanges with foreign states. In other words, while foreign *guo* denoted legal jurisdictions distinct from the Tang, the present passage shows that they were not treated as wholly independent: they could still be regarded as falling within the Son of Heaven's sphere of authority.

In this regard, the *Tang Code* reveals a layered claim of state authority. At a foundational level, it was jurisdictional and territorial, rooted in the guarded borders of the *guo*, in the surveillance of subjects, and in the regulation of crossings and exchanges under the rule of the *huangdi*. At the same time, it asserted universalist authority abroad on top of the jurisdictional and territorial conceptions. Such an authority was expressed in the monarch's identity as *tianzi* who claimed authority over foreign states, and it was materialized in the seals that validated his supremacy in ritual and foreign affairs. Seen in this light, the tension between territorial statehood and universalist claims of authority was not a contradiction but a dual identity embodied in Tang rulers — one that has rarely been recognized in existing discussions.

By extension, this layered conception of state authority reveals how the relationship between *guo* and *tianxia* can be understood in the Tang legal realm. Although the provision does not explicitly mention *tianxia*, the scope by which Tang rulers asserted authority over foreign states through the *tianzi*'s seals can be seen as the *Code*'s implicit vision of "All under Heaven." In this light, the *Code* adds another dimension to the existing discussion of the two terms. Given their close connection in political discourse, historians of premodern Chinese thought have offered different perspectives on how to understand the terms. Joseph R. Levenson has interpreted *tianxia* as a "realm of value"—the civilized world not confined to specific territory but upheld by the Chinese as an ideal to which barbarians were expected to aspire. *Guo*, by contrast, was a "regime of power," denoting the state's territory and the people within it, protected by military force.³⁸ In reassessing this formulation, Yuri Pines traced the interplay back to pre-imperial discourse, showing that the meaning of *tianxia* was not as rigid as Levenson suggested: it could designate both a moral realm of value and the actual territory of the Zhou realm, which was sometimes referred to

³⁷ Zhangsun Wuji et al., *Tang lü shuyi*, 25:387.

³⁸ Joseph R. Levenson, "T'ien-hsia and Kuo, and the 'Transvaluation of Values,'" in *Far Eastern Quarterly* 11, no. 4 (1952): 447-451.

as *zhongguo* 中國.³⁹ In the *Tang Code*, the conception of *guo* resonates with what Levenson called a “regime of power,” articulating state authority in jurisdictional and territorial terms. Yet the *tianxia* implied in Tang law was not a moral realm but a political one, embodied in the emperor’s seals that proclaimed his authority. At the same time, this political *tianxia* did not refer to the actual extent of Tang territory, as in the pre-Qin case—that meaning had passed to *guo* in the *Code*.

Peter K. Bol, in turn, observed how Song thinkers distinguished *guo* as the dynastic state from *tianxia* as society—the broader realm that the state both served and drew resources from.⁴⁰ This further highlights the fluidity of *tianxia*, which could also denote the social realm beyond the state. In both the Song case and the *Tang Code*, *guo* represented a narrower entity situated within a broader *tianxia*. What the *Tang Code* contributes, however, is to show that this relationship was not only conceived in terms of domestic power relations, but also in those of foreign relations.

Conclusion

By using the Tang as a case study, this article has argued that premodern Chinese state authority cannot be understood solely through *tianxia* and its cognate categories, notably *tianzi*. The term *guo* merits equal attention: read through the Tang Code, it discloses a more nuanced conception of statehood that scholarship has often overlooked. In Tang legal thought, *guo* was conceived in jurisdictional and territorial terms—a polity defined by its own legal order and bounded by borders that were officially demarcated and materially defended. In this sense, the traditional Chinese worldview did encompass a spatial order or regionality, intertwined with universalist claims to rule “All under Heaven.” Tang rulers held the titles *huangdi* and *tianzi* to express both domestic, territorial authority and outward, universal claims. The layered character of Tang rule invites comparative inquiry into whether similar jurisdictional and territorial notions developed in other East Asian dynasties influenced by Tang law.

The conception of *guo* articulated in Tang law represents only one facet of how premodern Chinese thinkers envisioned political order. Its counterparts in ritual, philosophical, and literary writings remain to be explored. Nor should the *Code* be read as a mirror of lived administration; the gap between law and practice calls for further study. Yet, as a legal articulation of how authority was spatialized, the legal conception of *guo* in the *Tang Code* offers a vital perspective for rethinking the structures of premodern Chinese governance and their legacy in East Asian political thought.

³⁹ Yuri Pines, “Changing Views of ‘Tianxia’ in Pre-Imperial Discourse.” *Oriens Extremus* 43 (2002): 101-16.

⁴⁰ Peter K. Bol, “Government, Society, and State: On the Political Visions of Ssu-ma Kuang (1019-1086) and Wang An-shih (1021-1086),” in Robert P. Hymes and Conrad Schirokauer eds., *Ordering the World: Approaches to State and Society in Sung Dynasty China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 139-140.

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