

The 'Middle Kingdom'

Chinese people call their country *Zhongguo* 中国. The character *zhong* 中 means middle or central, and *guo* 国 means land, kingdom or country; thus *Zhongguo* can be translated as 'middle kingdom'. This name first appeared in the 6th century BC *Classic of History* (*Shu jing* 书经) relating to the latter part of Zhou dynasty (c. 1050-221 BC) and reflects the Zhou belief that China was the centre of civilisation ruled by dynasties that had held the Mandate of Heaven since ancient times. The Chinese tended to view the rest of the world as consisting of barbarians and they looked on the people in neighbouring countries as vassals. According to ancient Chinese worldview, the Emperor of China was the ruler of 'all under heaven' (*tianxia* 天下), a phrase used to refer to the whole world. Although in practice there were areas of the known world which were not under the control of the Emperor, it was believed that the political rulers of those areas derived their power from the Emperor of China.

This traditional perspective, known as Sino-centrism, regards China as central or unique relative to other countries. Sino-centrism was evident in China's response to an early map of the world, composed by the Jesuit Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) in Zhaoqing, Guangdong province in 1584 during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). China, despite being displayed quite central on the map, was perceived as too far north and too west, and thus too much removed from what was deemed to be the centre of the world. Later in the 1620s, another Jesuit, Giulio Alenio (1582-1649), modified Ricci's earlier work and published the *Complete Map of All the Countries* (*Wanguo Quantu* 万国全图). In response to China's demands to have the Chinese Empire located at the centre of the world map, this map had a Sino-centric configuration.

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