

## *Reflections on the Zhong Guo and the Yi Di with Reference to the Middle Period*

Peter K. Bol

### *Abstract*

“Identity” for a group means both how we are the same and what makes us different from others. During the middle period, from the mid-Tang to the mid-Ming, the national identity involved a binary distinction between the “central country,” the *zhong guo*, and the surrounding tribal peoples, the *yidi*. On one hand, this was a recognition of the strategic situation, one in which tribal peoples engaged in state-building and threatened central country dynasties. On the other hand, in the post-aristocratic world, a national elite needed a justification other than family pedigree; it found it in the idea that they as literati maintained the cultural traditions of the central country. This identity was tested when the tribal peoples conquered and distributed privileges based on ethnicity. Could national unity be maintained through the distribution of rights by ethnicity? Or would it require all within the borders to adopt a common culture? These questions are with us still today.

The question of “What did/does it mean to be(come) Chinese?” involves assumptions and implications. One implication, which I willingly accept, is that there is a connection between the intellectual and the political. From a historical perspective arguments about ideas and values among elites always have political meaning, from the *Book of Songs* on. I follow the

---

**Peter K. Bol** is Charles H. Carswell Professor of East Asian Languages and Civilizations at the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, Harvard University. Correspondence should be sent to [pkbol@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:pkbol@fas.harvard.edu).