

The Tradition of Great Unity and Its Implications for Contemporary National Governance

Wangoula Du

School of Marxism, Fudan University, Shanghai, China

Abstract: The concept of Great Unity provides an important perspective on historical order and governance traditions in China, encompassing an overarching order, institutional integration, and cultural connections. Using a thematic literature review, this article brings together classical texts, historical scholarship, and public management research to examine the meaning of Great Unity, its institutional manifestations, and the conditions for its contemporary application. It compares approaches in intellectual history, institutional history, and collaborative governance. The review argues that the tradition offers insights into coordination, compatible rules, and long-term public interests, but cannot by itself establish the effectiveness of particular governance measures. Contemporary applications should balance common standards with local variation and translate shared objectives into clear responsibilities, collaborative procedures, and feedback mechanisms. Future research should strengthen comparisons across periods, incorporate local historical evidence, and evaluate governance outcomes to clarify the limits of transferring historical experience to contemporary settings.

Keywords: Great Unity; Governance Traditions; National Governance; Regional Coordination; Public Services

1. Introduction

Cross-regional mobility, the allocation of public resources, and the integration of digital services have made coordination between jurisdictions and administrative agencies an important issue in contemporary national governance. How common rules emerge, how shared objectives are implemented, and how local differences are accommodated are practical questions that can also be examined through historical experience. The tradition of Great Unity is relevant because

of its emphasis on an overarching order and enduring connections.

However, the persistence of a historical idea does not mean that its institutional forms can be applied directly to contemporary circumstances. Reducing Great Unity to organizational uniformity overlooks differences between administrative levels and local adaptations in historical practice. Conversely, emphasizing cultural continuity alone does not explain how particular institutions operated. It is therefore necessary to distinguish the formation of ideas, institutional implementation, and contemporary applications.

This review addresses three questions: How has scholarship interpreted Great Unity? What agreements and differences emerge across research approaches? Under what conditions can historical experience inform contemporary governance? The following sections explain the literature sources, present a thematic review and comparative assessment, and discuss research limitations and future directions.

2. Literature Sources and Selection

This article adopts a thematic narrative review. Searches used publicly accessible web interfaces to locate indexed records on Cambridge Core, Oxford Academic, and ScienceDirect. Relevant information was cross-checked against university academic websites, publication records, and the Chinese Text Project. Chinese-language search terms corresponded to Great Unity, the Gongyang Commentary, administrative divisions, and overall coordination. English search terms included "Great Unity," "collaborative governance," and "digital transformation."

The search scope for modern scholarship extended from 1990 to September 2026. No chronological restriction was imposed on the composition of classical texts, for which verifiable scholarly editions were used. Publications were selected if they directly addressed conceptual interpretation, institutional

integration, or governance mechanisms; were formally published books, chapters, or journal articles; provided identifiable authorship, dates, and publication details; and supported specific arguments. Unattributed online commentary, duplicate records, and sources using the concept only as a slogan were excluded.

Seven representative publications were selected for historical interpretation and comparison with contemporary governance research. Analysis drew on available original texts, abstracts, and publication information; bibliographic records were not treated as substitutes for full-text evidence. This is not an exhaustive systematic review. Its purpose is to compare explanatory approaches rather than infer the numerical distribution of scholarship across the field.

3. Thematic Review and Comparative Assessment

3.1 Conceptual Meaning and Common Norms

A classical formulation of Great Unity appears in the Gongyang Commentary's explanation of the phrase "the royal first month." Its original context concerns the calendar, temporal order, and common norms, and should not be equated directly with standardization in modern administration. The term "great" carries a sense of honoring or attaching importance to unity. Interpretation therefore requires attention to the text and its commentarial tradition rather than a literal reading in terms of increasing scale. Scholarly editions of the classical text provide a basis for this distinction [1].

Three analytical levels should be distinguished: the specific meaning of the term, the ideal of an overarching order, and its institutional manifestations. These levels are related but do not always coincide. Common norms may provide a basis for coordination, while their implementation depends on organizational capacity, transport conditions, and information transmission. This distinction helps prevent conceptual statements from replacing institutional analysis.

3.2 Intellectual History and the Formation of Shared Identification

Intellectual history examines how an orientation beyond local interests emerged through textual interpretation, semantic analysis, and historical contextualization. Pines's study of intellectuals during the Warring States period connects

activities across regional boundaries with arguments concerning the common good of a broader whole. It associates the formation of a shared conception of order with intellectual exchange, the geographical scope of activity, and normative choices [2].

This approach explains how ideas developed without treating later institutional arrangements as predetermined outcomes. However, intellectual texts primarily express the views of particular scholarly groups and cannot directly represent understandings within local communities. Shared identification can therefore be regarded as one condition of institutional integration, but its influence requires assessment against local evidence.

3.3 Institutional History and Local Adaptation

Institutional history and historical geography focus on administrative hierarchies, changes in territorial divisions, and the reach of administration. The General History of Chinese Administrative Divisions combines the reconstruction of administrative changes with spatial accounts of different periods. It documents how administrative organization varied across time and place and provides material for examining the relationship between an overarching framework and local administration [3].

Compared with intellectual history, this approach more clearly explains how an overarching order was implemented through organizational structures. It also demonstrates that institutional forms did not remain unchanged. Nevertheless, administrative boundaries and hierarchies are conditions of governance rather than independent evidence of effective implementation. Staffing, resources, and actual operation must also be examined.

Pines's discussion of the ideal of Great Unity and its practical limits in early China further indicates that aspirations to an overarching order should be distinguished from administrative capacity. The broad scope of an ideal does not imply an equivalent reach of institutions or everyday administration [4]. The central historical question is consequently not simply whether a shared objective existed, but how it was pursued, at what cost, and within what constraints.

3.4 Agreements, Differences, and Scope of

Application

These approaches share the view that an overarching order requires connections between ideas and institutional arrangements. Their differences lie mainly in explanatory emphasis. Intellectual history asks why shared objectives emerged, institutional history examines organizational operation, and historical geography identifies spatial conditions of implementation. The approaches are complementary, but their evidence and the scope of their conclusions differ.

One question requiring further clarification is whether common rules necessarily entail uniform implementation. Ostrom's research on common-pool resources demonstrates the importance of adapting rules to local conditions, participation arrangements, and monitoring [5]. Although this work does not directly examine Great Unity, it offers a comparative perspective that helps distinguish common norms from specific implementation arrangements.

The debate should therefore not be reduced to a choice between overall coordination and local flexibility. More productive questions concern which matters require common standards, which depend on local knowledge, and how information moves between administrative levels. Historical evidence is suited to explaining institutional formation and change, whereas contemporary governance research helps analyze the conditions of cooperation. Linking the two still requires an explicit account of how historical insights can be transferred.

3.5 Implications for Contemporary National Governance

First, the goals need to be operationalized as cooperation schemes. Regional transportation, watershed management, and cross-regional public services involve interlinked activities. Coordinated action requires well-defined responsibilities, division of costs, and feedback mechanisms. Ansell and Gash's work on collaborative governance provides criteria for analysis: initial conditions, institutional design, trust, and collaboration itself [6].

Second, standards can be combined with differentiation. Public services can define basic criteria and procedures, while adjusting delivery systems to account for population density, transport network characteristics, and consumer needs. As the historical experience demonstrates, connections between different elements of the

system are essential; however, particular standards will have to be defined as a result of contemporary needs and outcomes assessment.

Third, digitalization means corresponding changes in the processes. Based on interviews with experts, Mergel et al. argue that digitalization in public sector is associated with organizational and procedural changes and service delivery rather than with technological change [7]. Hence, data sharing should be accompanied by permissions, new responsibilities, and correction mechanisms, as well as the retention of some offline mechanisms. This is a list of possible applications generated using comparison with contemporary literature, not empirical results derived from the historical tradition.

4. Research Limitations and Future Directions

4.1 Current Research Limitations

First, there are problems of levels of concepts being equated. Shared identity, institutionalization, and the efficiency of governance all appear in a single analysis without specifying the mechanisms between them, making it difficult to disentangle normative expectations from their effects.

Second, there is the risk of selection bias. Texts from the classical canon and institutional sources are easier to find, while there is less material available about how things work in practice, how negotiations take place, and when institutions fail. Using enduring institutions to explain historical development will risk ignoring adjustment costs and failed arrangements.

Third, there is a lack of an analytical scale to use for comparing across different periods. Historical institutions and modern public administration are quite different in terms of technological capacities, range of services, and social requirements. Commonalities of form alone do not indicate common mechanisms, and the sources selected cannot provide a basis for causal inference across different periods.

Fourth, the historically-oriented studies selected for this review focus on a limited body of literature, while contemporary studies are geared towards comparison. Neither does the selection fully reflect specialized Chinese-language literature nor diverse perspectives in academia.

4.2 Future Research Directions

The future research can develop an analytic framework that ties together common practices, organizational coordination, local adaptations, and governance outputs. Such an approach would translate general ideas into empirical research questions. Historical analysis could make use of local gazettes, archival materials, and geographic data to contrast similar institutions in different regions and thus strengthen findings related to practical administration and adaptation.

Analyze contemporary implementations, and choose well-defined situations such as coordination of public services in regions. The focus must be made on costs, availability, and feedback efficiency of the administration. In cases where suitable data exists, longitudinal observation, matched case studies, and even quasi-experiments could uncover institutional impacts.

Moreover, it is important to consider instances of failed collaboration, resource shortages, and obstacles to using digital services. Comparative study of conditions that led to success or failure would define the scope of historical experience and move the discussion forward from general implications to causal mechanisms.

5. Conclusion

The tradition of Great Unity provides a historical perspective on an overarching order, common norms, and institutional connections. The literature indicates that the formation of ideas, organizational integration, and local operation are interrelated levels that nevertheless require separate evidence and explanation. Its implications for contemporary national governance lie principally in attention to cross-regional coordination, compatible rules, and long-term public interests, while retaining room for implementation that responds to local conditions.

The practical value of historical experience depends on the conditions of its application rather than on the concept itself. Further research should strengthen local evidence, cross-case comparison, and outcome evaluation to explain how shared objectives generate public service outcomes through specific institutions, while identifying the associated costs and limits.

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