Thinking about China in History

In the twentieth century it became common to make a distinction between “modern” China and a China that had existed before the “modern.” This before-the-modern China came to be called “traditional” China or, in Chinese Marxist historiography, “feudal society.” Traditional China was a pre-modern society that had long ago ceased to change in any fundamental way, it was said, and it did not change because traditional culture was an obstacle to progress. This distinction, between a very long “traditional” period and a very recent “modern” period, served a revolutionary end: to get rid of the legacy of the past and create a “new” China.

This made historians who worked on earlier periods nervous—did it mean that most of China’s history was a mistake (and their work irrelevant!)?—but today historians of all periods recognize that China’s past was marked by cumulative change, with the modern transformation the closest to us and most apparent. Yet outside of the circle of professional historians the idea of an unchanging China is still to be found in the popular press and the imagination, in both China and the West.

How did such an idea emerge in the first place? What essential characteristics have been associated with “traditional” China? How valid are these characterizations? These issues will concern us at various points in a course that begins in the Neolithic period and ends in the present day.

The Narrative of Failure: China’s history viewed from a “modern” present

Early in the summer of 1989, after the government had violently suppressed the great student-led demonstrations for political reform in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square, I attended a meeting at Harvard at which a widely read political commentator asked: “Why should you be shocked? After all, what has China ever known anything except tyranny, autocracy, and despotism?” He saw, and was dismayed by, a China that did not change. But then another professor asked: “What would we now be saying if the government had instead decided to accept criticism and announced reforms?” (As a number of leaders wanted to do). “Would we not be saying that this was an example of the long tradition of rulers accepting criticism from intellectuals?” So which was right? The negative or the positive account of China’s past, or both, or neither? Did both speakers assume an unchanging China?

On balance the negative view is the more common. It can be summarized like this: China was isolated from the rest of the world, its culture was dictated from the top down by the emperor and court, imperial government was autocratic and despotic, its educational system was based on the rote memorization of required texts and thwarted intellectual creativity, and it subordinated the individual to the group. It was a civilization incapable of transforming itself, yet China did not know it was on a dead-end road until the modern West confronted it and forced it to change in the nineteenth century. But some would say it had

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I thank Denise Ho, Li Bozhong, Ong Changwoei, Wang Xiangyun, John Ziemer and Lawrence Zhang for comments on various drafts.

1 Although I use “modern West” this phrase should be understood to include the Japanese adaptation of political, social, cultural, and economic institutions from Western Europe and the United States.
been on that road for many centuries already, long before the first European ships arrived at Chinese ports in the sixteenth century.²

It is possible to give a positive spin to the “unchanging China” story: China developed a unique system for holding together a large population without modern technology, it stressed family values and the ways in which individuals were connected to others through social relations, it developed a system for selecting the most talented to serve in government, and it made government responsible for teaching a shared morality. It was very successful at what it did, more successful than any other state in human history, by valuing social harmony above competition and self-interest. Unfortunately the traditional system was not appropriate for a modern nation.³

How did the idea of an unchanging China come to be so well established? In Europe it happened when historical theory met a particular historical situation. Long before Western Europe learned about China from the reports of the Jesuits in the sixteenth century, its historians had subscribed to the old Christian belief that history had its preordained course, that it was heading somewhere.⁴ In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was clear that Western Europe was developing in an extraordinary manner. Intellectuals were asking what made their times different from the past and where they were heading. One way of answering the question was to argue that a rational, systematic study of the past revealed a record of progress. However, the past was usually limited to the history of Europe. As the German theorist Georg Hegel (1770-1831) explained: it was not necessary to take Chinese history into account in formulating a theory of historical progress because “The history of China itself does not develop anything and on that account one cannot engage in the details of that history.” The great historian Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886) echoed him: “At times the conditions inherited from ancient times of one or another oriental people have been regarded as the foundation of everything. But one cannot possibly use as a starting point the peoples of eternal standstill to comprehend the inner movement of history.”⁵ The belief in a stagnating China incapable of transforming itself implied that China was irrelevant to scholarly inquiry. This was, however, a rejection of the earlier views of the seventeenth century and even eighteenth century which held that Chinese institutions (for example, the civil service examination system), Chinese ideas (Confucianism), and Chinese manufactures (porcelain) were worth learning from and even imitating.

Reading China out of history, in the sense of denying that its past had real significance for what it should become, came to be accepted in China as well as political leaders became convinced that to compete with more powerful and richer countries China had to learn the models and techniques that were thought to lead to greater wealth and power. Whether it is called globalization or modernization this has meant looking to the modern West, for the historical reality was that for at least two (and some argue for three or four) centuries a handful of countries at the western tip of the Eurasian landmass and their New World extensions had largely determined the course of the world affairs. Never before in history have so few been able to gain in wealth so quickly and so disproportionately, sustain that growth over long periods, and extend their power over so many other peoples.

² David S. Landes, The wealth and poverty of nations: why some are so rich and some so poor (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999).
For some Europeans and Americans this was reason enough to believe that they represented the only true road to the future, although less reason for the conviction for the superiority of Mediterranean civilization since antiquity. Chinese intellectuals and politicians may not have wanted to grant that the West had the only way or was in sole possession of the truth, but pragmatically speaking those who would compete for wealth and power have little choice but learn from those who have more of them.

Encouragement to adopt the ways of the West came from new generations of European and then American social theorists who proposed ways of understanding historical change which took Western society as the highest standard. Influenced by Hegel’s idea of Asiatic Society, Marx, for example, argued that a civilization should develop from primitive society, to slave society, to feudalism, to capitalism, and finally to communism, with the nature of production creating the class struggle that would drive history from one stage to the next. He too supposed that China had stagnated, that it had fallen off the course. A progressive scheme such as this made history into a kind of a race, in which a country falls behind or scoots ahead for reasons that can be explained. Historians in the People’s Republic of China were given this scheme to contend with, and since China had never been a capitalist country, the Communist Party decreed that the period from the unification of China in the third century BC to the nineteenth century was to be treated as the “feudal” stage of history. Some historians resisted making China’s history fit this scheme. Some argued that there had been “sprouts of capitalism” in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. Others argued that there had been a major transition in society, economy, and politics between the eighth and eleventh century. But the best they could do was gain acceptance for the notion that between the eighth and the eleventh there had been a transition from an “early” to “later period of feudal society.”

Marx’s historical stages are not the only way China’s history has been periodized, but it has had a broad influence and has encouraged thinking of history as a series of progressive stages. Using the past of one place to prescribe the future of all other places supposes what is obviously not true: that all people through all history were on the same track and racing toward the same end. What has been true for the last 150 years—namely that China is competing with Europe, Japan, and the United States—was not true for previous 2000 years. We tend to look at the past in terms of the present (or in terms of what we in the present believe to be true) and to judge the past in terms of what we value, but doing so misrepresents both past experience and future possibilities. This has not prevented those who want either to damn China’s past and to find value in it from making presentist arguments. Thus we find some contending that Confucianism was an obstacle to transforming East Asian countries into a Western style nation state and others insisting that Confucian values—such as the importance placed on education and respect for authority—explain why East Asia today leads the world in economic growth. The problem is that if we make winning the modernization race the issue we fail to ask important historical questions: what were those people at that time in the past trying to accomplish and how did the ways they thought and acted change?

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6 For a summary of major progressive periodization schemes in Chinese historiography see Meribeth E. Cameron, "The Periodization of Chinese History," Pacific Historical Review 15.2 (1946).
Still, we inevitably do compare and contrast. We can do this in two ways. First, we can compare periods in China's history in order to understand what changed over time. Some of the issues involved in doing this will be taken up in the next part of this essay. Second, we have can adopt a world historical perspective and ask how states and civilizations differed from each other. The problem is that large-scale comparisons between civilizations often become efforts to show why another civilization failed to become like "us" rather than to explain why it became the way it was. For example, Max Weber (1864–1920), a founding father of social science theory, made a systematic study of China and India, precisely because he wanted to discover why capitalism appeared in the West and not in the East. He concluded that Confucianism never established the degree of tension between the ideal and the actual that Christianity did because the Confucian worldview treated the empire as the ideal. Moreover, he argued, Confucianism could never find the best means to serve the common good because it kept the individual subordinate to the family, whereas Protestantism broke the bonds of kinship and made rational law the basis for all social relations.8 Since then others have located the seeds of Western superiority much farther back in time, for example in the European interest in quantification and precise measurement.9 Some have simply faulted the Chinese for becoming inward looking and unwilling to learn from others.10 There have been institutional explanations: Europeans developed a concept of property rights and others did not.11 There have been economic explanations: the Chinese failed to control population growth, thus decreasing the land available to farming families,12 or the Chinese state absorbed too much of the surplus.13 It seems to me that these examples look for what was "missing" in China that kept it from developing like the West. Perhaps if such comparisons were being made in the sixteenth-century, the process would have been reversed and we would be asking what was missing in the West that kept it from being as well organized and successful as China.

There are multiple dangers in this kind of comparison, where one side is supposed to represent the right path of historical development and the other side represents the failure to stay on track. We all too easily slip into assuming that history does in fact have a single course, something that on reflection we know cannot be true for the simple reason that different areas of the world have different histories. And we all too easily find ourselves generating a series of false dichotomies in which China is said to be part of the passive, spiritual, family-oriented, despotic, isolated East in contrast to the active, materialist, individualistic, democratic, and open West.

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10 Landes, The wealth and poverty of nations: why some are so rich and some so poor, James T. C. Liu, China turning inward: intellectual-political changes in the early twelfth century (Cambridge, Mass.: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1988).
In making comparisons we are better served by first asking what both sides have in common, rather than looking for factors that are present in one place and absent in the other. Take, for example, a marathon where the winning runner is from Kenya and loser from Boston. Even after we grant that the competitors come from different cultures and climates it would still be true that as far as racing is concerned both runners have more in common with each other than with those who cannot run. With this in mind, we might instead focus on the incremental advantages the Kenyan had over the Bostonian in exactly those things they have in common. The winner has pretty much everything the loser has, but perhaps he trains a bit harder, his heart pumps a bit faster, his lungs have just a bit more capacity, his legs are just a touch longer, his weight a few ounces less. This can be a misleading analogy (it assumes that there is a race toward the same goal and that everyone is following the same rules), but the general point is that when we are speaking of countries it may be far more useful to account for different outcomes by looking for incremental differences and opportunities rather than supposing that there were any fundamental differences in national character.14

In fact what makes China and Europe such an interesting comparison is that there were so many similarities, as we would expect with regions of large populations, extensive governmental structures, standing armies, commerce and cities, taxation, law, religion, and intellectual traditions. Recent studies of China’s socioeconomic economic history remind us that China was very successful in maintaining the largest unified political system in the world and feeding a growing population. They have also shown that into the eighteenth century the most productive regions with China were remarkably similar to the most productive regions within other countries. This turns out to be a much more illuminating means of comparison than treating whole countries (which have both advanced and backward regions) as units of economic analysis. They have shown too that comparative history does not have to begin from the premise that the choice was between a singular European path of historical development and stagnation.15 What may have made all the difference was Europe’s opportunity to exploit the New World.16 The explanation for why the West shot ahead may have little to do with long term patterns of development, the political system, or ideology.

But for much of history China was not in any sense competing with the “West.” Its competition, at least in terms of political power, came from the powerful militarized tribal confederations and states along its northern border.17 Its merchants’ participation in foreign trade was not seen as a matter of competition between states and was conducted by private investors. (It was probably not until the sixteenth century, when the modern world economy began to take shape, that large numbers of Chinese traders settled abroad. However, they were settling in already well-populated states and were not colonists creating new polities). It

16 Pomeranz, The great divergence: China, Europe, and the making of the modern world economy.
is important to trace China’s participation in the larger world, and to ask how far the world it was part of extended. At what point can we speak of an economic system that tied together all the parts of the Eurasian landmass or linked Eurasia to the new world? The study of world history must take into account China as the economic and cultural center of East Asia because it affected much of the rest of the world directly or indirectly.

Just as there is a recent tradition of historiography in the West that seeks to explain why the West gained world supremacy, there was a tradition in China of explaining why China was (or how it could be) superior to the tribal peoples on its borders, what in the West were called the “barbarians.” In the eighth century the historian Du You looked out from eastern end of the Eurasian landmass, that part of the world that he knew the most about, and asked why it was that all the peoples in the world China alone had produced sages in antiquity who had created a civilization and the surrounding peoples had not. (His answer was geographical: the north China plain was graced by a temperate climate, it was neither too cold nor too hot, neither too dry nor too wet, and thus it was natural that sages should have appeared in there to create Civilization.)

During the last two centuries the context in which the self-assessment of success changed, and once it became global China could no longer measure itself against its immediate neighbors. Nor could it continue to measure itself against its own idealized antiquity, which for centuries had served as a model of an ideal society. Instead the point of reference became the modern West and Japan. It was in this context that the sense of having “lost” a race gained appeal in China and made its history the record of a moribund society. This changed how people saw the past.

Making Comparisons within China’s History

The comparison of China’s past with the modern West led many to the conclusion that before China began to westernize it was a single and enduring social-political-cultural system. Various terms have been used to name this system: Imperial, Confucian, Feudal, Pre-modern, and Traditional. All implied that the present was something different and that progress required breaking free of the imperial, Confucian, feudal, pre-modern, and traditional past, although there has never been agreement about what the key elements of progress were: property rights, capitalism, heavy industry, bureaucratic rationality, science and technology, socialism, individualism, Christianity, the rule of law, democracy, capitalism, or human rights? In fact an extensive literature in Chinese has tried to identify the structure and values that supported the traditional system (and what was wrong with it). The

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20 Two among many examples are Jin Guantao, Zai lishi de biaoxian beihou: dui Zhongguo fengjian shehui chao wending jiegou de tansuo (Chengdu:
assumption that there was an enduring traditional system too often has led scholars to ignore the realities of historical change and search for timeless, essential characteristics of Chinese society, thus confirming the starting assumption. The historical problem of identifying change and why it mattered and accounting for it gives way to the sociological problem of trying to make all the parts fit together in a coherent whole.

Rather than dismissing essentialist accounts of traditional China I want to take up five key examples and show that in each case the opposite answer could be offered as well. But my point is not to offer a more attractive essential China (for example, that rather being despotic autocrats rulers listened to criticism from intellectuals), but to identify the questions that essential accounts are in effect answering, for these questions can help us make the kinds of comparisons we need to see change over time.

1. Did Chinese culture have a single unique origin? It is still common to argue that Chinese culture began in the Neolithic period, in the loess plateau at the bend of the Yellow River. That it began independently of outside influence, and, developing in a linear fashion through successive cultural stages, ultimately took the form of an empire that included all within it in a shared culture. The tree grew as the Neolithic twig was bent. The resulting imperial system claimed the right of universal kingship, relied on bureaucratic organization and hierarchy, controlled land and labor, and provided cultural models. The system lasted even as dynasties came and went. Support for this view was found in ancient texts, and at first archaeological finds were interpreted accordingly. But some archaeologists have been arguing for a different account of origins, one in which there were multiple cultures that over time interacted with each other. In this view civilization in China from the start accommodated significant regional diversity in social and economic practice, religion, and so on. In fact the size of the empire varied, and for long periods there were competing states some of whose rulers did not trace their origins to the Chinese past. Periods of political unity did not make regional differences disappear; there were regional economic cycles and regional systems. Thus rather than assuming that China in the past was in essence either a single cultural entity or a diverse area of regional cultures, we need to ask when the political system succeeded in accommodating regional differences and creating a shared political culture and what happened when it did not.

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Sichuan renmin chuban she, 1983), Sun Longji ___ Zhongguo wenhua de "shenceng jiegou" ______ "______ " (Hong Kong: Yishan chuban she, 1983).


22 For the multiple origin view see Kwang-chih Chang, The archaeology of ancient China (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986).

2. Was China isolated from the outside world and resistant to outside influence? In English it is common to say that the term “China” meant “Middle Kingdom” in the eyes of the Chinese. That China equated “all under heaven” with its empire and thus that it could only accept relations peoples and states beyond the borders of its administration if they joined in the fiction of a universal empire and presented themselves as tributaries who acknowledged the universal kingship of the emperor. Under these circumstances, it is said, China saw no reason to accept influence from outside, for to do so was to acknowledge that there was in fact a larger world. But consider an opposite argument. It is true that there was very little direct contact between the eastern and western ends of the Eurasian landmass before the sixteenth century, except during the empire of the Mongols of thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. But China received much from Indian civilization, it had extensive contacts with the Arab world, it traded extensively with East and Southeast Asia, and from the late sixteenth century on benefited greatly from the flow of silver and new crops from the Americas. More to the point: for long periods China was partially or fully occupied by peoples who at first saw themselves as different from China. Chinese foreign relations were pragmatic and realistic, but rarely isolationist. Rather than asserting that traditional China was isolated or open, we need to ask how relation between China and the states and peoples beyond its borders changed over time in both theory and practice.

3. Was the Chinese political system autocratic? It has often been asserted that the system in principle vested all power in the ruler. That he claimed the right of ownership of all land and labor; that he was the source of law and thus above the law; that his court was the source of cultural and ethical models; that the ruler was free to behave as an autocrat for there were no institutional checks short of usurpation or rebellion on his behavior, and Chinese rulers became increasingly autocratic and despotic over time. Against this we could cite the history of limits officials were able to place on imperial authority and the tendency of rulers to become managers and figureheads as government became less aristocratic and more bureaucratic. If there was a long-term trend beginning in the late tenth century for rulers to become increasingly autocratic there was a seemingly opposite trend: the size of the state apparatus declined relative to the population, the state gave up attempts to control land and labor, it reduced its services to the population, and the private commercial economy grew. The historical challenge is to determine how and why the relationship between the ruler and the bureaucracy and between the government apparatus and society changed over time and how conceptualizations of these relationships changed.

4. Was there an orthodoxy? It is often assumed that China was “Confucian” and that the educational system was based on the mastery of the Confucian Classics with state-approved commentaries, texts that represented the founding of civilization as an ideal age. The civil service examination system (which lasted until 1905) established a stultifying orthodoxy, it is said, which thwarted creativity and blocked the development of science.29 Once again there are counter-arguments: for several centuries the most prestigious examinations primarily tested poetic composition, the interpretation of the Classics changed fundamentally several times during the course of history, examination questions and answers did not conform in practice to the official commentaries, and what it meant to be educated went beyond the Classics to include history, belles-lettres, and schools of philosophy. The state supported the importation, translation, and eventually printing of Buddhist texts from India and Central Asia and patronized Daoist texts (sometimes as part of the examination system). The question we need to ask is when, how, and why elite education was unified – what did they learn and what values did learning impart? – and how this changed over time.

5. Was there such a thing as an individual? It is often said that in China there was no idea of the self as an autonomous and integrated entity. Rather, the self was located in a shifting web of social relationships so that the individual was merely the aggregation of social roles the person had learned. Relationships were conceived of as inherently hierarchical, making the person dependent on superiors for any sense of accomplishment and self worth. 30 Thus aside from withdrawal from participation in public life, ritualized acts of protest, and outright rebellion individuals could not challenge the system in any fundamental sense. Neither a public sphere nor a civil society could develop in China. 31 Intellectual and literary culture was oriented toward the court and dependent on it for patronage. 32 The Chinese system prevented the development of a subjective will, and thus China did not develop modern science and industry. 33 It could not conceive of human rights. Some would turn this on its head and argue that the Chinese view of self locates the person in ongoing process, that order is conceived of as harmonious equilibrium, and that there is no need for a concept of truth or of a transcendent authority. 34 However, it is possible to argue against both positions and point out that that there was a wide range of alternatives to authoritarianism in China, that intellectual traditions had a place for individual worth and rights, and that many


30 Timothy Brook and Michael B. Frolic., eds., Civil Society in China (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharp, 1997).


32 Such is the view of the influential thinker Li Zehou. Li also holds that Confucian voluntarism supported the idea of a strong ruler. See Woe Lien Chong, ”Mankind and Human Nature in Chinese Thought,” China Information 11.2-3 (1996). However, the pre-occupation with external things and total surrender to state sanctioned authority” has also been used to explain the rise of extreme subjectivism in the Ming period; see, for example, the preface by Richard Lynn in Paul Jiang, The Search for Mind: Ch’en Pai-sha, Philosopher-Poet (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1980) xii-iii.

thinkers stressed that individual worth should not be dependent on social authority.\textsuperscript{34} We need to ask how relationship of the self to the social world was conceived, how the inner life was articulated, how desires and emotions were understood, and how this changed over time. The spread of Buddhism in China suggests there was not one unified view.

The conclusion I think we should draw is that on these five rather large issues no single characterization of Chinese civilization can be historically correct. Instead of trying to define a pre-modern, traditional, Confucian or feudal Chinese system we will learn much more by asking how this China changed over time. But perhaps the reason why we have gotten caught up in trying to define the essential nature of Chinese civilization has to do with our need to define “China” in the first place.

The problem of “China” as a national history

Up to this point I have assumed that it is useful to speak of “China” as something that had an historical existence over the millennia. But, to put the question in the strongest possible terms, did “China” exist in fact? And if we think it did, how should we define it? We know it did not exist as a continuous political entity since there were many different states and empires that held territory within and beyond the boundaries of today’s People’s Republic of China. Did something called “China” exist instead as a single continuous civilization which evolved over time? We have already seen how difficult it is to find propositions about the essential character of that civilization that are valid over the course of the last two or three thousand years. In fact, the fundamental questions we need to ask—about politics, ideology, international relations, and so on—are questions that we would ask about any history. From this perspective China does not appear to be exceptional.

It goes against common sense to suggest that there was no China, either as a country with a history that included many different states or as a continuous civilization, but sometimes we see more by resisting what obviously ought to be true. One reason for thinking we ought to see a problem is the judgment by one of the greatest contemporary historians of China: “The concept of ‘national history’ in its current Western usage was wholly unfamiliar to Chinese historians before the 20\textsuperscript{th} century.”\textsuperscript{35} Of course I am pushing this further, to raise the question of whether we should speak of “Chinese” historians in the past. We can use the question of the name that people used for themselves, as a people, country, or civilization, as an indicator of cultural identity. The term we use, “China” comes from the Sanskrit _chīna_ which is a rendering of the name “Qín,” the first centralized bureaucratic empire (221-206 B.C.).\textsuperscript{36} In this case the word names a place that we know to be a political territory. Today the equivalent of “China” in modern Chinese language is _zhōng gú_, which is often wrongly translated as “Middle kingdom.”


Zhong guo is an ancient term, but what does it mean and when did it come to be used to refer to either a country or a continuous civilization? In antiquity zhong guo meant the several states (guo) located the middle (zhong) of the surrounding tribal peoples. These states were located in the north, from the North China plain in the east to the Wei River valley west of the bend of the Yellow River. It was the place where state-building began and from which states extended their territory. The great empires of Han (202 BC-A.D. 8, 25-220) and Tang (618-907) made their capitals here, near the capital of the ancient Zhou. It was the area where civilized life flowered, it was the central area of “florescence” (hua) in the midst of the tribes (yi). The dynastic terms Han and Tang entered popular parlance as ways of referring to inhabitants, and Hua served as term for those leading a sedentary and civil life versus the pastoral and nomadic peoples outside. At about the beginning of the twentieth century leading intellectuals, having seen that modern Western nation states referred to their nations by names such as France and England, argued that their own country needed a name as well and that zhong guo ought to be adopted by themselves as the equivalent of the Western term “China.” In other words the use of “China” and “Chinese” began as a Western usage and was then adopted by the people the West called “Chinese” to refer to their own country (zhongguo) and its population (zhongguo ren). When we read this modern equivalence between zhong guo and China back onto past texts and past minds, so that every occurrence of the term zhong guo appears to us to be the same as “China” we in effect create a national history that did not exist.

To illustrate the problem of terminology as it was experienced in the past, consider the situation between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries. The table of dynasties below will help clarify the situation.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>region</th>
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<th>North of the Huai River</th>
<th>Beijing and northeastern border</th>
<th>Northwestern border</th>
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<tr>
<td>dynasty</td>
<td>Great Song State (980-1279)</td>
<td>Great Song State (960-1126)</td>
<td>Great Liao State (907-1125) of the Khitans</td>
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<tr>
<td>dynasty</td>
<td>Great Song State (980-1279)</td>
<td>Great Jin State (1127-1234) of the Jurchens</td>
<td>Great Jin State (1115-1234) of the Jurchens</td>
<td>Great Xia State (1032-1227) of the Tanguts</td>
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<tr>
<td>dynasty</td>
<td>Great Song State (980-1279)</td>
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In this period the term zhong guo was used to refer to the area of the “central states” of antiquity, the historical core in the north. However, in the twelfth century and thirteenth centuries, all or part of that old core area was fought over by the Song state, which moved its capital to the south in 1127, the Liao state (907-1125) of the Khitans, the Jin state (1115-1234) of the Jurchens, the Xia state (1032-1227) of the Tanguts, and the empire of the

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37 The most important interrogation of the use of the term China and zhong guo is Liu, The Clash of Empires: The Invention of China in Modern World Making 75-81.. She notes that at least one official from the “Great State of Qing” (which was the official name for the polity from 1644 to 1911) found the Western use of “China” and “Chinese” insulting for its refusal to acknowledge in words the name of political status of his country.
Mongols (the eastern part of which was named the Yuan state from 1260 to 1368). Song government documents almost never referred to the its population as zhong guo ren (the term we translate today as “Chinese”) but when they did they meant the people who lived in the central states area versus those people outside of it. Its neighbors took a similar position, as when a Liao politician argued: “Now that we have central states, we ought to use men of the central states to govern it, we should not only use people of our state.” But for the men of both Liao and Song the “central states” referred the northern region. Thus, after Song had lost the north and moved its capital to Hangzhou in the southeast, a southeastern writer called on the court to recover the north on the grounds that the Jin had “violated the official garb and ritual and music of the central states (zhong guo) and lodged them in a peripheral place” (i.e. the southeast), but that neither heaven’s mandate nor the heart of the people would stay tied to a government if it stayed permanently outside the center.

The common way documents of the period referred to others was to use the name of the state to which they belonged: thus Liao and Jin documents refer to “people of Song” (Song ren), and Song documents speak of people of Liao and Jin. The point at which we see what appear to be ethnic terms is when different cultural groups lived together under a single political authority. Thus a few Song documents distinguish between peoples who mixed at the border by referring to their people as Han ren, “Han people”, and the tribal peoples as fan (border). In Liao, Jin, and Yuan sources there are frequent references to culture groups in the domestic population, as when a Jin edict orders that “When officials draft announcements, the Jurchens, Khitans, and Han people are each to use their own writing systems.” This fits the Jin, Liao, and Yuan practice of using different institutions and special quotas for the various culture groups in governing their states, something that was not really an issue for the Song except in some border areas.

But even these ethnocultural terms and their locations turn out to be problematic. The provinces south of the Huai River were held by the Song state after the court retreated from the north in 1127 until it was conquered by the Mongols in 1279, after they had conquered the Jin and Xia in the 1227 and 1234. But the Yuan did not refer to the people in former Song territory as “Han people,” they called them “southern people” (nan ren) and used the term Han ren for people in the north (apparently including the Jurchens and Khitans). The founder of Ming (1368-1644) was from the south; after defeating his southern rivals he pushed the Mongols out of the north China plain and the northwest. The Great Ming State, which went on to fight wars against the Mongols, Vietnamese, the Japanese in Korea and (after trying to close foreign trade for a century) traded with East and Southeast Asia, India, Arabia, Africa, Europe, and the New World. It in turn was conquered by the Great Qing State of the Manchus from the northeast in 1644. Qing continued to expand for another century, pushing into the Muslim areas of Central Asia and gaining control over Tibet. We can certainly identify regions (the northern plain, the northwest and the corridor to central Asia, the upper, middle, and lower Yangzi River region, the southeastern coast, the far south) and ask who controlled them. Politically we might better speak of successive dynasties and competing states, rather than anachronistically trying to say where China was or who the Chinese were. At times scholars in these states tried to make

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38 Liao shi p. 1252. For one of the three or so uses of zhong guo ren in the Song dynastic history see Song shi pp. 11528, 11734, 11330. It is equally rare in the Jin and Yuan dynastic histories.


40 Tuotuo ___. ed., Jin shi___ (Beijing: Zhonghua shu ju, 1975) 73.

41 Note that the Russian term for China is kitai, from the Mongolian pronunciation of “Khitans.”
sense out of the confusion by proposing that there was a single line of succession of “legitimate” dynasties extending back to antiquity in an unbroken line, irrespective of the territory held and the identity of the population, but since sometimes two states claimed this at the same time this was an assertion of continuity rather than the fact of it. Some thought that there was no such thing as a single line of legitimate succession in practice, as the great historian Sima Guang (1019-1086) argued.\cite{42}

These successive and competing states occupied parts of or all of the same physical space; the geography has a history that includes different peoples and sociopolitical organizations. They had much in common, for competition encouraged them to learn from each other. We can speak of a complex of political, social, cultural, and economic practices that were employed to varying degrees in this geographic space, despite changes in government and despite changes in the languages of the rulers. Many have seen this as evidence that “barbarians” were becoming “sinified” (i.e. adopting Chinese ways) and assume that there was a clearly defined “Chinese culture” that belonged to Song, for example, which those who invaded Song territory adopted. Yet this is also problematic, for both Liao and Song saw themselves as successors to previous Great Tang State (618-907). The evolving writing system and the accumulation of texts since ca. 1200 B.C. would seem offer some continuity, but it is in fact an example of why something like “Chinese” culture is difficult to pin down. Writing changed over time, and different styles of writing appeared. It only made sense to speak of “Chinese” literature when there were other competing “national” literatures; before that it was simply “literature” even if it was written in recognizably and intentionally different scripts. Song writers assumed that the cultural tradition they inherited extended back to antiquity but typically periodized past writings in terms of the dynasty during which they were written. Moreover, the literature and writing system came to be shared by people in the states in what we somewhat anachronistically call Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. What is interesting is that although Liao, Xia, Jin, and Yuan also learned to use the writing system of Tang and Song they also developed writing systems of their own into which they translated many classical, historical, and literary texts from Song, Tang and before. It is this process of sharing and differentiating that should hold our interest, rather than the attempt to find a presumptive owner of cultural productions on the basis of modern nationalisms. This helps explain why Neo-Confucianism, although developed by scholars who saw themselves as recovering the ideas of the ancient sages of the central states, did not treat their ideas as being the exclusive cultural legacy of a nation or people. They were valid on their own merits and, in their view, were true for all peoples in all places at all times. Indeed, their texts and ideas spread to the rest of East Asia and today are taught in the West as well.

If we do not treat the dynasties, empires, and states that rose and fell from the eighth century to the seventeenth as a single entity that endured over many centuries without undergoing fundamental change, how should we see them? It seems to me that the simplest approach is to see them as attempts in the past to tie together divergent interests, fluctuating social practices and economic processes, and received political institutions and cultural traditions so as to form an enduring order under the particular circumstances of the time. The creation of states and the effort to stabilize relations between states were the highest

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  \item \textsuperscript{42} Hok Lam Chan, \textit{Legitimation in Imperial China: Discussions Under The Jurchen Chin Dynasty (1115-1234) (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1984), Richard L. Davis, "Historiography as Politics in Yang Wei-chen's Polemic on Legitimate Succession," \textit{T'oung Pao} 69.1-3 (1983).}
  \item \textsuperscript{43} Sima Guang \textit{Zizhi tongjian} (Beijing: Guji chuban she, 1956) 69.2185-88.
\end{itemize}
levels at which the effort to create a viable order proceeded; people in daily life had to do the same thing for themselves. If we take this view then the context for politics is not only the history of politics, it must include the historical circumstances that political actors had to deal with. And the historical significance of politics lies not in the size and power of the states that resulted from these efforts but in the new configuration of institutions, interests, practices, and traditions that resulted from the attempts of political actors to forge a new order. States and empires responded to circumstances and created new circumstances.

Yet the Mongols’ conquest of Xia, Jin, and Song was unprecedented (and became a precedent for the Manchus’ Qing), the first time all territory in north and south had been incorporated into an empire based outside the Great Wall. The Mongols and the Central Asians that worked for them were able to maintain their own distinctiveness while managing an empire that descendants of Liao, Song, and Jin officials served loyally. The rise of foreign states gave new importance to the ancient distinction between sedentary society and culture (the “florescence” hua) and the pastoral tribal peoples (the yi) at the same time it made the distinction more problematic (the Mongols were yi but they were also the emperors). What then was the basis for the distinction? The founder of the Ming attempted to sort this out in announcing his reign both to his population and to foreign states. After Song, he explained, heaven’s mandate to rule had gone to men from the desert (i.e. the Mongols) who “entered the central states and became rulers of all under heaven,” but now “I am the ruler of the central states.” He was, he acknowledged, from the southeast, not the area of the “central states,” “central plain” (zhong yuan), or “central land” (zhong tu), but now he had conquered the north, driven out the “nomads” (hu ren) who had befouled the “florescent civilization” (hua xia) with the “rank odor of sheep and goats.” Throughout these announcements runs a distinction, perhaps not yet fully defined, between the political order and the civilization. The political legitimacy of the Yuan, and of the Ming, stemmed from their possession of the zhong guo. However, there was a civilization that had ancient roots and that ought to dominate the zhong guo. This civilization—the way people lived, their sense of morality, the cultural forms they employed—had an existence that was distinct from the organization of political power. He was committed to it, and to using political power to support it, but the Mongol rulers had not been. This idea, that there was (or ought to be) a civilization with a history that could be distinguished from political authority was something intellectuals during this period were increasingly drawn to. This meant that southerners could possess this civilization, even if they did not reside in the zhong guo.

Perhaps, then, we should say that what was real was not the fact of a continuous civilization but the idea that there ought to be a continuous civilization. Another way of putting this is to say that in continental East Asia, as in the Mediterranean, there was a high degree of “historical-mindedness.” That is, from early times politicians and writers frequently engaged in retrospectively creating, transmitting, and transforming the idea of a continuous civilization for which they claimed to speak. Or, as one scholar has elegantly put it, China is

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44 From his announcement on taking the throne, in Li Xiusheng __, ed., Quan Ming wen __ (Shanghai: Shanghai gu ji chu ban she, 1992) 1.2.
45 See the various announcement to rulers of Japan, Turpan, and other states in {Li Xiusheng __, 1992 #792@vol 1: 22, 3-4, 324, 339, 347}
an “artwork whose medium is history.”\footnote{Haun Saussy, The Problem of the Chinese Aesthetic (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993) 151. Prasenjit Duara writes, “[N]ational history secures for the contested and contingent nation the false unity of a self-same, national subject evolving through time. This reified history derives from the linear, teleological model of Enlightenment History.” See, Prasenjit Duara, Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) 4.} The idea of a continuous civilization was just that, an idea, and the historical narrative was an effort to create and sustain the proposition that there was something continuous, even if people could not agree on what it was. And when ideas are widely shared they can have very real consequences.

The challenge for us is to keep in mind the difference between 1) defining a shared national culture or a national character (whether to condemn it or to praise it) and persuading others to accept that definition, 2) the context in which these attempts were made (proponents of unity and continuity often live in a world of division and rupture), and 3) the historical consequences of these idea. In short, we need to ask why it was that, among all the things they could do at a certain moment, some people selected parts of their past experience to define themselves and what difference it made. It is the interplay between the ideas people have about what they should do and who they want to be and the realities of history that hold interest.

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