



# China

Introduction to the Book, *China* (Part III)

**By Hong-Yee Chiu**

*This book is divided into four major segments. While the last part deals with the main theme of this book, the purpose of the first three parts is to set the proper backdrop. Although discussions are centered on China, stress is placed on the differences with the West.*

### **III. The Origin and Development of the Chinese Civilization**

This third part discusses the origins of the Chi-nese race, the golden periods of Chinese philoso-phy, the assimilation of the invaders, the preser-vation of the integrity of the Chinese written lan-guage, and the tradition of honesty and faithful-ness of Chinese historical texts.

#### The Origin of the Chinese People.

It has been generally accepted that the human race originated in Africa<sup>1</sup>. The first humanoid fossil discovered in China was the Beijing Man, around the turn of the twentieth century. However, subsequent discoveries indicated that as far back as two million years, humanoids already showed their presence in many places, including a warm region in Yunnan Province, bordering modern day Vietnam. Their ancestors crossed the Pamir highlands, the roof of the world, through two mountain passes to reach China. These two mountain passes subsequently became parts of the Silk Road. The most recent cavemen were the 18,000-year-old Shangdingdong men (mountaintop men). The first civilization, the Yang Shao, appeared roughly 7,000 years ago and scattered over all over China, from north to south, even in remote

regions like the Yunnan Province. During this community-based civilization, agriculture was developed, and marriage was established, ending a once popular matricidal society believed to be associated with promiscuity.

This civilization had a unique reburial system. Several years after the first burial, the body was exhumed, the bones were separated, and then they were reburied in a jar. This custom is still practiced in current Taiwan. The first unification of China took place around 2700 BC, when the legendary tribal leader Huangdi defeated two other major tribes and united China into a country loosely bound between many tribes with a central authority (tribal union). Reputedly Huangdi established the tradition of *shi* (the literal meaning is *history*, defined as "the faithful recording of celestial and human events"), and placed wizardry (the forerunner of religion) in the backseat. Later *shi* evolved into scholarship, encompassing all branches of studies.

#### The Development of Philosophy During the Warring States Period c. 700-221 BC.

The general opinion has been that the Warring States Period was the golden era of Chinese philosophy. True as this statement is, it

is an over-simplification. The truth is that the motivation for the development of Chinese philosophy during that period was markedly different from that of the ancient Greek philosophers, who were more or less dedicated to the search of truths. After the death of King You of the Zhou Dynasty during a war in 771 BC, the central government lost much of its control of its fiefdoms, altogether 130 in number. These fiefdoms became *de facto* independent countries and were constantly engaged in wars of consolidation. Prior to this time, knowledge was the monopoly of the government. During the wars of consolidation, many aristocrats were deposed and forced to make their living among the common populace, thus spreading their knowledge among the general populace. Those fiefdoms, which had not been consolidated as yet, eagerly sought strategies to avoid being annihilated. Many scholars seized this opportunity to create strategies based on the philosophies they developed. They then peddled these strategies together with their philosophies to the heads of various fiefdoms. Inadvertently, this kind of commercialization of scholarship created the only golden era of Chinese philosophy. The range of philosophies rivaled those in ancient Greece, from Epicurean to Stoics (Zeno of Citium) to Zeno's paradox (Zeno of

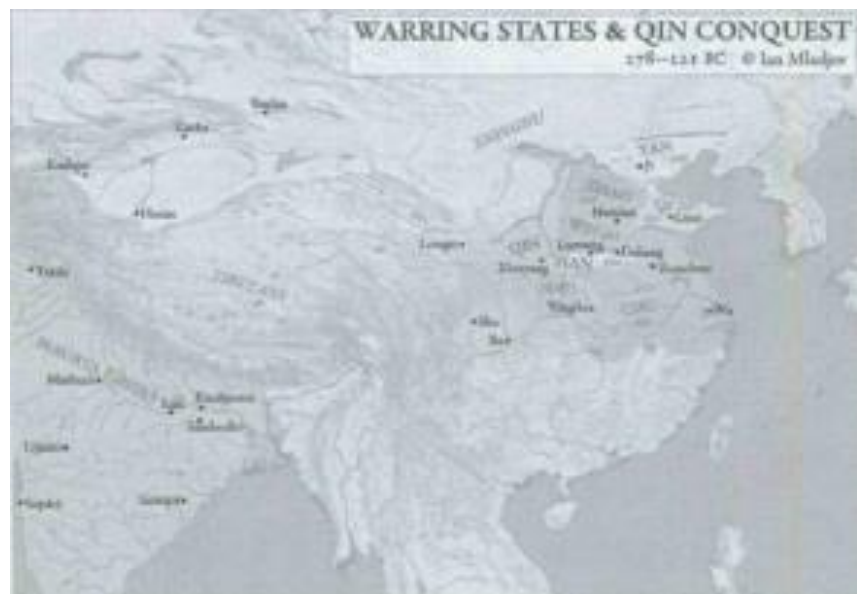
Elea), and almost everything in between.

Different philosophies impacted the culture in unique ways. The most visibly successful philosophy was legalism. In fact, adopting a very strict legalistic philosophy, the fiefdom Qin managed to unify China in 221 BC, ending a five-hundred-year period of chaotic war. The most widespread philosophy was that of Confucius. Based on his philosophy of teaching without discrimination (without regard to social standing), and on a minimum financial compensation (such as a token gift in lieu of tuition), he founded a network of followers of his philosophy in all fiefdoms. His philosophy stressed moderation and forgiveness, and was thus most palpable to the mass. The most intimately influential philosophy at that time came from Me Di, a Stoic who organized people into self-help communes, enabling the helpless to survive the tumultuous period of the Warring States. The last and the most influential of the legalists was Han Fei, whose political theory of monarchical dictatorial rule dominated China until the end of the Qing Dynasty.

It was during this period that faithfulness to historical recording was established, but not without a price. Several historians were killed for sticking to the factual truth. Their sacrifice



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established the tradition of faithfulness and honesty in the writing of history in all subsequent dynasties.

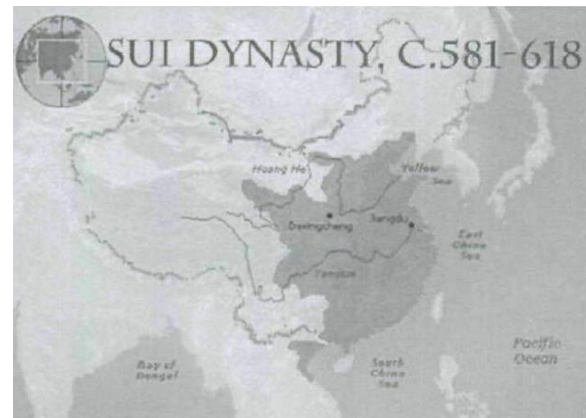
### The Voluntary Assimilation of the Invading Nomads

After the demise of the once powerful dynasty Han in 220, nomadic tribes of the north began their invasion of China. Beginning around 300, five major nomadic tribes successfully invaded various parts of China north to the Yangtze River, and they fractionalized northern China into a number of kingdoms. (A small part of northern China and the entire southern China were still ruled by ethnic Chinese dynasties.) During their invasion, northern China literally became a pandemonium, a fertile ground for the propagation and growth of Buddhism.

The chaotic situation in northern China ended when a nomadic tribe, Xian Bei, united the northern China in 386 and established the northern Wei Dynasty, which lasted until 543. Xian Bei had a rudimentary written language, while the remaining nomadic tribes had no written languages, but most writings were still conducted in Chinese. After the political situation was stabilized, a Xian Bei emperor Xiao Wen (reigned 471-499) felt it was impossible to rule a country with so many divergent tongues. He resolutely made a decision to ban nomadic spoken languages in his court, including that of his own, Xian Bei. Decades later, all nomads spoke Chinese, and their native tongues were irrevocably lost. The assimilation process was furthered through the adoption of Chinese surnames by the nomads. Emperors preceding Xiao Wen had encouraged the nomads to adopt traditional Chinese surnames. Xiao Wen and subsequent emperors made the adoption mandatory. Several generations later, through unrestricted intermarriages, nomads became essentially indistinguishable from ethnic Chinese. Nomad civilizations had since been integrated to become parts of the Chinese civilization. China was thus integrated and assimilated into a single civilization.

### Civil Service Examination and the Preservation of the Unity of the Chinese Written Language.

In 581, northern and southern China was again unified by Yang Jian, who founded the Sui Dynasty. By this time China's borders had grown to an impressive size, and there was an acute need for administrative personnel. A rudimentary civil service examination was established, put in heavy use only in the next dynasty, Tang (618-907). Empress Wu Zetian was credited to have made substantial improvements to the civil service examination. Subsequent dynasties further modified and enlarged this system. All high officials, including the prime minister, were selected through this examination system. Indeed, all dynasties after the Tang placed great emphasis on this system. As soon as a new dynasty was established and peace and order restored, the new dynasty would immediately reinstate the civil service examination system.



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One of the main reasons was possibly because once the examination system was restored, nearly all intellectuals would swear loyalty to the new dynasty. The only dynasty that did not promote the civil service examination was the short, horsemanship mentality of Yuan. During its brief existence of 100 odd years, no examination took place for as long as 70 years.

There were two important outcomes of this system. First, it preserved the integrity of the Chinese written language, which was the official language used in the examinations. The topics of examination were derived from various classics, with an emphasis on Confucianism. As a result, those seeking positions in government - a lucrative lure since there were few other prestigious professions during those times - must compete in their proficiencies in the use of the Chinese written language as well as their knowledge of the sanctioned classics. The second outcome was that each dynasty established a well maintained affirmative action policy in the examination system in terms of guaranteed slots for minority tribes and races, especially the inhabitants in the territories most recently annexed to become a part of China (such as the inner Mongolia where the defeated Mongolians lived), as well as other minority tribes scattered throughout China. Under the lure of lucrative government positions, minorities eagerly and voluntarily assimilated into ethnic Chinese.

By comparison, education in early and medieval Europe was monopolized by the Church, and only a few could become educated. Common people then developed their own languages out of their dialects and Latin. The decline of Latin was further exacerbated when prominent writers such as the fourteenth century Dante and Petrarch used the newly created local languages (in this case, Italian) to compose widely read literatures. European languages began to diversify.

The Chinese civil service examination system had its shortcomings, but from the point of view of the maintenance of the integrity of the

Chinese language, this examination was instrumental. It provided a rudimentary form of democracy where all high officials up to the level of the prime minister were selected from the general populace via the examination system.

#### **IV. (A) Decline, Awakening, and Renaissance of China.**

##### The Decline of China.

Since the Song Dynasty (960-1278), the world situation in regions neighboring China had changed. China had lost the leadership status in the Middle East. However, the real stagnation of the Chinese civilization occurred during the Ming Dynasty. The founding emperor of the Ming Dynasty, Zu Yuanzhang, was so impressed by a neo-Confucianism called Li Theory<sup>2</sup>, developed by Song scholars, that he formed the opinion that everything elucidated from Confucianism had been accomplished by these great masters, especially by one among them, Zhu Xi, so there was no need for posteriors to make further elucidations or modifications. He therefore issued an order to make the elucidations by these Song masters the standard by which the civil service examinations would be graded. A style of composition based on an eight-component format, called *ba gu wen*, was created for this purpose. Under first glance, this format appeared well organized and impressive, but most compositions were without meaningful contents. This restriction transformed Chinese scholarship into one similar to Scholasticism in medieval Europe-narrow adherence to the established doctrines of the Song scholars without any creative inputs. This trend continued into the next dynasty, Qing.

Around the same time, Europe had freed itself from the bondage of the Church, and Renaissance had begun. Science and technology were vigorously pursued and developed, and progressive thinking began to spread. By comparison, China became more and more backward. While European countries applied science and technology to warfare, the Chinese scholars were sweating to compete on the composition of *ba gu wen* on topics irrelevant to

the governance of the country. Thus, when enemies rose up against them, the Chinese military lacked the technology and training to defend the country, while the Qing court was too proud to admit its inaptness, as well as too stubborn to carry out reforms. Step by step, China declined. By the time Dr. Sun Yat-sen launched his revolution, the situation was beyond hopeless. After nine failed attempts, he launched his tenth campaign on October 10, 1911, against a strategic city Wuhan situated on the banks of midstream Yangtze River. Miraculously, his numerically inferior revolutionary force overpowered the defense and took this city. The entire country was shocked, and many provinces declared independence in support of Dr. Sun Yat-sen's revolution. By February 12 of the next year, Dowager Queen Longyu, on behalf of the six-year-old emperor in reign, Xuan Tong, was forced to abdicate the throne and the Republic of China was founded.

Towards the end of the Qing Dynasty, reforms in education had already taken place and droves of students had been sent abroad to study. Intellectuals soon became aware of the international environment. The success of Dr. Sun Yat-sen's revolution campaign-largely led by intellectuals-further strengthened the belief that



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they, the new generation of intellectuals, could success-fully modernize China.

### May Fourth Movement - A Cultural Renewal Movement Launched by Intellectuals.

Although Dr. Sun Yat-sen successfully toppled the Qing Dynasty, his military strength was weak and after a mere three months, a junta known as the Bei Yang Government, composed of ex-generals of the Qing Dynasty, seized the political power. These ex-generals had ambitions of their own, and in order to finance these ambitions, they secretly negotiated with Japan the Treaty of Twenty-One Terms, relinquishing much of the ruling power of China to Japan. By this time WWI had ended and in the coming year, 1919, a peace treaty would be signed in Paris, France. Although China was a member of the winning coalition, in this treaty the Western Powers-in particular Britain, France, and the United States-agreed to relinquish all German rights in Shangdong Province (seized during a series of aggressive acts in the nineteenth century) to Japan, and not to restore Chinese sovereignty in this province. This military junta, eager to appease Japan, was ready to sign this treaty. When this news leaked out, May 4, 1919, found over ten thousand students gathered in the Tian

An Men Square in Beijing as they marched to the homes of three representatives assigned by the Bei Yang Government to negotiate with Japan. The students burned down one of their houses to the ground. Massive arrests took place, but students did not yield. The entire country raged at the Bei Yang Government. Strikes broke out everywhere and even markets and stores were closed in support of the students. Protesters marched in almost every city. The president's palace was surrounded by tens of thousands of students. Under these intense pressures, Bei Yang Government had to refuse to sign the Paris Peace Treaty. This event has since been known as the May Fourth Movement, which marked a turning point in modern Chinese history.

The consciousness of the nation was awakened. A movement of cultural renewal took place during which a large number of Western social theories, principles, and doctrines were introduced into China, such as communism and anarchism. Dr. Sun Yat-sen even came up with one of his own, called Three People's Principles, based on a statement in the Gettysburg Speech of Abraham Lincoln, a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. (However, religion, especially Christianity, was despised, largely because it had been used by the Western power as a tool of aggression.) Some extremists even proposed to



replace the Chinese language by one of the Western languages. Now, nearly a century later, it seems that these well-intentioned intellectuals' hasty actions did little to augment the change China sought. They wished and hoped China could carry out her needed reform over-night, an impossibility under any circumstances. It was also during this time that Marxism received tremendous support, partly due to the early success of the Soviet-style communism.

Although the May Fourth Movement never made the grade of European Renaissance and Enlightenment in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it forced China to reexamine her traditional civilization and established an awareness that there was much to be learned from Western civilization. Science and technology quickly took root in China.

#### The Era of Real Reform in China.

With the Japanese invasion, which began in the 1930s, the May Fourth Movement came to a standstill. After WWII, China was bound by internal strife. Peace and stability momentarily came into being after the establishment of the current government, the People's Republic in 1950. However, social stability was temporary, because soon Mao Zedong began a series of movements with the intention of eliminating opposition against him and



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consolidating the ruler power personally to him. These movements culminated in the Cultural Revolution, which was actually a movement to destroy the Chinese civilization. Mao died in 1976, ending the Cultural Movement once for all. Soon afterwards, political control shifted to reformists, which was headed by Deng Xiaping. After he paid a visit to the United States, he realized the urgency of real reform and the error to commit national policies to rigid Marxism-Lenin-Stalin-Mao ideologies. He did not formally declare the abandonment of communism, but he used a metaphor to express his intent: "As long a cat can catch mouse, it make no difference whether its color is white or black." What he implied was, national policies should be formulated to suit the circumstances and not to be based on any ideologies; i.e., the policies should be formulated on the basis of pragmatism. He promoted and instituted collective leadership, which has been followed to this very day. In addition, he used a metaphor to express yet another principle: "Find the right stepping stone to cross a river," meaning that all changes must be gradual; i.e., evolutionary and revolutionary.

Since the 1980s, China has seen much change, yet none overnight. Even so, there were difficulties, because economic reforms are different from other areas. The effects of changes in one facet often have resounding consequences in other aspects. For some areas, a certain change might appear too slow, but for some others, too fast. This has produced a vicious cycle of rapid variations of the growth rate, sometimes accompanied by double-digit inflations. However, China seemed to have sailed safely through this stormy era. During the past thirty years, the average growth was 10 percent per year. The total grown was a hefty forty-fold. Even after adjustments for inflation, the real growth was close to fifteen-fold. Prosperity is now evident almost everywhere.

Russia and China abandoned the ideology of Marxism at about the same time, but the outcomes of these two countries were completely different. In the case of China,



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calamities like those faced between 1842 and 1980 were nothing new. However, given ten years of peace and stability, historically China would rebound and prosperity would return. Two factors seem to play vital roles in China's rapid recovery. First, China had the long tradition of almost uninterrupted commercial activities since the time of the Warring States (c. 700 BC), which Russia did not have. Second, throughout history, the Chinese seemed to have developed an optimistic outlook towards the future, couple with a sense of forgiveness towards past enemies (such as the nomads around the fourth century, the Mongols in the fourteenth century, and the Manchurians between the seventeenth to twentieth centuries); this kind of for-giveness facilitates assimilation and cooperation. With no grudges, China moves swiftly forward.

Currently, China still faces two major social problems. The first is the rampant corruption, which the government tried to solve through severe punishments, including the death sentence, and through reeducation. The second one is, according to China's own estimate, despite the economic growth in China, there are still at least two hundred million people (out of twelve hundred million) living on the borderline of poverty. However, this gargantuan social problem has yet another outlook. This vast poor population can be regarded as an "asset" for the next twenty or thirty years, in the sense that they will continue to provide the kind of "comparative advantage" that China has so far enjoyed; i.e., a source of cheap labor force that can continue to propel China into further economic prosperity. Future growth will certainly improve the lives of this vast poor population. On this basis, it seems that China will probably be able to continue her rapid growth, at least for some time in the future.

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#### *Footnotes*

<sup>1</sup> There: have been some disputes on this conclusion. Many early humanoids had been discovered in various parts of China and some

Chinese anthropologists thus think the human race might have originated in more than one location.

<sup>2</sup> In the Li Theory (the literal meaning of Li is rationality), elements of Taoism and Buddhism were incorporated to the traditional Confucianism, stressing the connection between Tian, human nature, and the reasons for the existence of humans. However, this neo-Confucianism still distanced itself from the belief of an afterlife.

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*He established the theoretical foundation of the formation of neutron stars and the crucial neutrino processes in supernova explosions (1964). He coined the word "quasar" (1963).*