

FEATURE

The Michael Wood Interview

Why China Is Embracing Its Glorious Past in PBS documentary *The Story of China*

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The *Story of China*, the latest documentary written and hosted by Michael Wood, unfolds 4,000 years of tumultuous history in six episodes that took the globetrotting British historian to virtually every corner of the vast Middle Kingdom.

Watching this PBS series is mandatory for anyone considering a trip to China, or wanting an armchair view. It's a dynamic, visually beguiling primer that chronicles—dynasty by dynasty—the advances that forged Chinese civilization and the cataclysms, natural and man-made, that destabilized it during different epochs.

One of the most engaging and informed tour guides in television, Wood is on exceptional form here. Skillfully contextualizing modern China in terms of the past as it evolved, he investigates the lives of its long-gone movers and shakers, from Confucius through Mao Zedong.

Crucially, too, he allows conversations and encounters with dozens of ordinary Chinese to show how time-honored rituals and the rhythms of quotidian life have shaped the national character. *The Story of China* will shake anyone who walks around with a Western-centric view of the world.

In this exclusive interview, the 68-year-old Wood elaborates further on China's radical differences from the West and examines some of its current political and social realities.



Michael Wood with Korean scholars at Confucius's tomb in Qufu, "The Story of China" | © PBS

Culture Trip: Three themes reverberate throughout *The Story of China*: the Mandate of Heaven, the Chinese people's embrace of their ancestors, and Confucianism. How would you define the Mandate of Heaven as it relates to Chinese history and culture?

Michael Wood: For the Chinese, it was a means of endowing a new dynasty that might have come to power by violent or illegal means with legitimacy, as if it were given by heaven. It's given on condition that the rulers are virtuous and attempt to maintain the harmony between humanity and the cosmos.

It's a complex idea that started a long time before Confucianism. In fact, Confucianism is a kind of distillation of the ideas that you can't rule except by virtue. Of course, when you see the collapse of a dynasty like the Ming (1368—1644)



Michael Wood and imams at the Wangjia hutong (or alley) mosque in Kaifeng, "The Story of China" | © PBS

system based on Roman law during the Dark Ages.

CT: Confucianism is secular, isn't it?

MW: Yes, you would essentially define it as political rather than theological.

CT: Do you think it has survived in China?

MW: Yes, it probably has. The tenets of Chinese civilization, having been devastated under Mao [1893—1976], are now being strongly emphasized again. That's why that scene of Confucius' tomb being rebuilt is so fantastic. Yet government repression of writers, lawyers, and freedom of speech has become harsher since we finished filming there. Confucianism is all about respect for authority and conformity, but, as I said, Confucius said rulers must be virtuous and if they're not the

or the Qing (1644—1912), you see how enormous is the gap between the ideal and the reality.

It's even hard to maintain such ideals at a grass roots level. There's a scene in episode five where I talk about how the Kangxi Qing emperor, who ruled for 61 years between 1661 and 1722, issued his Sacred Edit of 16 maxims to be read out in the towns and villages—" behave generously toward your family," "cultivate peace within the neighborhood," and so on—and these are the foundations of civic virtue now.

Somebody told me there were villages where it was still read in the last 10 years of the empire [1902—1912]. It's the idea of ethical rulership. It's a different story in the West, where culture is theologically based and where Christian kings created a legal



Buddhist statues of the Longmen Grottoes in Luoyang, "The Story of China" | ©

people have a right to contest their rulings and intellectuals have a duty to contest them.



Commemorating Confucius in Qufu, "The Story of China" | © PBS

CT: Confucianism wasn't very friendly to women.

MW: Well, most societies weren't. Women have always had a voice in China. There were 4,000 women poets during the Qing dynasty and the radicals of the 16th century were women. But it's really the 20th century which changed everything—the People's Republic post-1949 achieved a hell of a lot with women's liberation.

CT: What are your thoughts about Graham Allison's outlook essay about the possibility America and China could stumble into war?

MW: He calls it the Thucydides Trap. Thucydides [the Athenian historian and general] wrote about the Athenian empire rising up and encountering Sparta. Allison compares it to the likelihood of China rising up and going to war with the United States. But if you view it from a Chinese perspective, they don't see themselves as a rising power. They see themselves as coming back to what they once were. The Chinese have been the greatest power and the greatest civilization through most

of the last 2,000 years. There were times when Byzantium was greater, but China has always had the biggest populations and had the greatest achievements.

CT: John Pilger made a film about how a flashpoint is approaching because of the build-up under President Obama of US military bases around China.

MW: The issue about international sea lanes in the South China Sea is unfortunate. The Chinese government doesn't have any right to those atolls which are within the ambit of Vietnam or the Philippines. It's a spurious claim, and I think everybody needs to proceed very carefully. It's important to understand that it's America that's got bases within striking distance of China.

It's also important to know that the members of the Chinese government are all princelings of the revolutionary era. Most of them are very well educated, highly judicious



Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests, the largest building in the Temple of Heaven, Beijing, "The Story of China" | © PBS,

technocrats. Their policy is not to go to war; that's not what the Chinese do.

We know China invaded Tibet in 1950, but they saw it as restoring what had been a part of the Manchu Empire. Never in their history have they gone and invaded Australia or India.

The danger, I think, is more to do with misunderstandings and hasty actions by ignorant leadership: that's the scariest thing to me. Trump was making remarks on Twitter before he even became President. Were there to be a flashpoint over the South China Sea or Taiwan, it would be a no-win situation and very damaging. We need to become friends with China.

CT: What do you think has made China so willing to embrace foreign ideas and religions and yet has made it politically insular, and not as imperialistic as Western nations or Japan?

MW: The idea that keeps being reiterated by people in this series is that China, the Middle Kingdom, is somehow the center of civilization.

CT: Why did the Ming dynasty suspend its voyages after the seventh one in 1433?



Bridge over the Jiyin stream in the ancient village of Hongcun, Anhui, "The Story of China" | © PBS

MW: They were not quite sure what the voyages were really for, and I suspect they were too expensive in terms of manpower and equipment. In the end, they were encountering

the East African cultures and the Near Eastern and southern Indian civilizations, but they weren't encountering anything that was on a par with them. So they thought, "Well, why do this?"

Matteo Ricci [the Italian Jesuit missionary] lived in China for nearly thirty years in the late 16th and early 17th centuries and understood it very well. He said in his diary that the Chinese don't go out to dominate people, whereas Western powers have an inexorable need to dominate.

The elites wanted to learn from the West and the mandarins were interested in Western science—Ricci's astronomical instruments, for example—but the Chinese ignorance of the rest of the world was so thorough they thought they were the world almost. It was still a Confucian-driven ancient empire until around the time of the First Opium War (1839—42) when China was forced to accommodate Western ideas. A lot of trajectories were opened up then.

CT: Given how deeply ingrained Confucianism is in Chinese life, the attempt of the 20th-century revolutionaries to supplant it with communism was possibly naive.

MW: We filmed a sequence, which we didn't end up using, on Liang Shuming, who was born in 1893. He met with Mao in Yan'an in 1938. Mao ended up blacklisting him, and he lived in internal exile from the 1950s to the late 1980s. His sons are both in their late eighties but they can tell the stories.

As a young philosopher, Liang wrote a book [*Eastern and Western Cultures and their Philosophy*] saying communism went completely against the grain of Chinese society and civilization: that was his analysis in 1921. But he also thought that Western capitalism would destroy the soul of China. He said, "The thing we must hold onto is the essential core, the ethical

core of our culture. A modernized Confucianism is the way forward.”

A lot of people disagreed with him, but that’s one of the strands that’s still being debated. The headlong rush to materialism in China has been so enormous that there’s no going back. A lot of Chinese people are worried about the destruction of the spiritual dimension in life, which I’m sure is why there is such a huge upsurge in religion now. Ian Johnson addressed this in his recent book, *The Souls of China: The Return of Religion After Mao*.

CT: At the beginning of The Story of China, you show the Qin family reunion of 300 relatives gathering to commemorate their ancestors on Tomb-Sweeping Day (Qingming Festival, April 4th or 5th). Do you think festivals like that is also a foil to materialism?

MW: It’s part of it, I’m sure. The Chinese love sociability and they love eating, and these great festivals are important. The Chinese New Year Festival [between January 21st and February 20th] involves by far the biggest human migration on the planet.

The Chinese people are asking, “Who are we? What makes me Chinese? If all I am is somebody who goes to Starbucks and shops at



The Qin family reunites in Wuxa to celebrate its ancestor the poet Qin Guan, who lived 1,000 years ago, “The Story of China” | © PBS

malls in Nanjing, who am I?” The distinctiveness and originality of Chinese civilization is huge.

They don’t, for example, use a writing script borrowed from somebody else. They use a writing script which comes from the Bronze Age, from prehistory, and every one of its symbols carries whole sets of layers and meanings that are only meaningful to Chinese people. If you try to abandon all that— and Mao canvassed the idea of replacing the Chinese script with the Western script—you risk losing your identity.

You could say all identities are a construct. I’ve heard people argue, “Oh, this current return to roots in China is a sort of modern confection.” But I’ve traveled in the deep countryside and seen farmers turn up for celebrations that are clearly not being driven by the government.

The people are deeply in touch with auspiciousness, which is a cornerstone of Chinese civilization, and they are very strong on divination and telling the future. Yes, it’s being manipulated and pushed by the government from the top down, but the people themselves are trying to access it again. It’s not enough to live a material life. We all know it. The same quandary is hitting America.



Women actors at the Civic Hall in Huizhou, “The Story of China” | © PBS

CT: Of all the places you visited for the series, which do you feel embodied the ideals of Chinese civilization at its zenith?

MW: I don't know the answer to that exactly. After Kaifeng, the capital during the Northern Song period (960—1126) fell to [Jurchen] barbarians, the Song court moved the capital to Hangzhou in what's known as the Southern Song. Marco Polo said it was the most magnificent city in the world. It was an amazing period of urban history, much more open than it would have been previously and then it would have been under the Ming dynasty later.

The Song's achievements across the board were extraordinary. Their science was the



Kaifeng's Daxiangguo Monastery was often visited by the great Song poet Li Qingzhao and her husband, "The Story of China" | © PBS

old age that was published in 1085 and is still in print.

The Southern Song knew what they'd achieved was great. Their neo-Confucian ethos was one of the big things they worked at disseminating in their society through the 1100s and 1200s. Zhu Xi, who's mentioned in the film, wrote an incredible book called *Family Rituals*, a user-friendly family guide on how to worship the ancestors, how to cook food, everything. The scholars say it's the most important book after Confucius in Chinese history. A British missionary wrote that you'd find a copy of it in every household in the 19th century.

But then under the Ming, there was a reaction to the Mongol invasions and the Yuan dynasty (1271—1368). The Ming represents a kind of closing down, a ratcheting-up of authoritarianism. The message to the people was, "Know your place. We're an agrarian



Kaifeng's Iron Pagoda, built of brick during the Song dynasty in 1049, was named for its metallic color, "

science of the good life. It's staggering to see a book about how to live a happy, healthy life in

society. This is how it's going to be done." The Manchus' of the Qing dynasty were great rulers, but you could see they were foreigners who wanted to maintain the basic order and transmit it. That became difficult after they collided with the West.

CT: The 19th century was disastrous for China with the Opium Wars and the Taiping Rebellion (1850—64). Then there was the slap in the face after World War I when the Allies ratified the concession of the Shandong Peninsula, formerly held by Germany, to Japan. It's understandable that the nationalist reaction to these upheavals would lead to the rise of a brutal unifier like Mao. Do you think that the mass slaughter that occurred during the Cultural Revolution (1966—76) means Mao should be regarded in the same light as Stalin, or were there positive aspects to Maoism?

MW: It's an interesting question and, of course, there's a lot of debate about it. There were achievements in health, social services, and education under Mao. The rise of the status of women was major.

But Mao certainly had Russian advisors and the Chinese communists thought they could transform society and do away with the old. What led to the Cultural Revolution was Mao's frustration that the old had not gone away. Jung Chang, the author of *Wild Swans* (1991), wrote [with her husband Jon Halliday] another best-seller, *Mao: The Untold Story* (2005), that viewed Mao as irredeemably evil from his childhood. That book was very critically received by leading scholars.

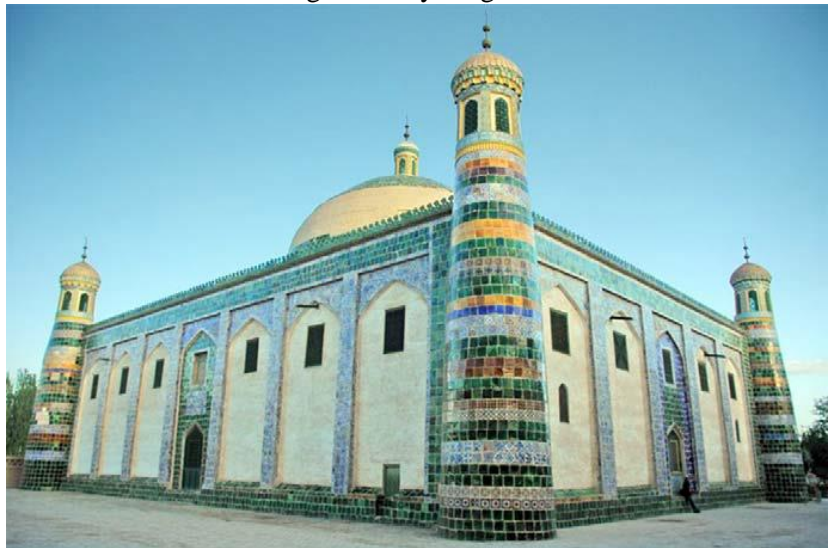
There is actually an anthology [*Was Mao Really a Monster?* 2009] of 14 reviews of the book, most of which were very damning about Chang's use of sources. Leaving aside that

tendentious issue, I think there is room for a more balanced view of Mao.

China's rural areas were the problem during the time of the Republic (1912—1949). There were the fantastic treaty ports and amazing Europeanizing societies in places like Shanghai, but in the deep countryside conditions were desperate. People were starving at different times in the 1920s and 1940s and there was cannibalism. The Republic didn't solve those issues. You see why communism arose then. They didn't know then that it was a dead-end system, that all communist societies went the same way.

CT: Would you attribute the Communist Revolution (1945—49) to any single event?

MW: The Japanese invasion in 1937 changed everything. I think most historians



The Id Kar Mosque in the western Chinese city of Kashgar, "The Story of China" | © PBS

agreed that the Red Army, which was in Yan'an after the Long March (1934—35), might not have got any further if the Japanese invasion hadn't happened.

There's a famous story that a Japanese ambassador apologized to Mao when he met him in the 1960s. Mao said, "You don't need to



City walls, Xian, starting point of the Silk Road and capital of four Chinese dynasties, "The Story of China" | © PBS

Communist Party has delivered in terms of bringing up the standards of living and getting people out of poverty.

The big issues that people are bugged by are the environment, pollution, and the food chain.

apologize—I wouldn't be here now if it wasn't for you." It was the Japanese invasion that started the liberation movement, which gave Mao the credibility that crackpot dictators like [Nicolae] Ceau escu never had.

MW: Because he's still the great leader. The communist party rules China. Although it's not a communist state, it's a one-party state. Their validation comes from Mao and the liberation war. The Chinese now don't like you to talk about the historic failures of the communist party, the Great Famine, the Great Leap Forward (1958—62), or the Cultural Revolution. To say that Mao's leadership was catastrophic would be to undermine the Communist Party's Mandate of Heaven. So he's still there.

CT: You mentioned earlier that repression is growing again in China, but do you feel, by and large, that ordinary Chinese people are hopeful?

MW: I was referring to "smart repression," i.e., of intellectuals, journalists, and human rights lawyers—not mass repression. When you travel to China, you're less aware of the presence of the military or the police than you are in England. And most people feel that the

Everybody's up in arms about those issues and the Party's got to do something about them. People are also concerned about government corruption and crony capitalism, which is one of the seven things you're not allowed to talk about as a journalist in China.

They loathe the idea of corruption in the Party and members lining their own pockets. When it got out that even some of [President] Xi Jinping's family had made a fortune, the



Temple of the sea goddess Mazu in Nanjing, "The Story of China" | © PBS

government was absolutely incensed. Xi Jinping has conducted a massive campaign against corruption. But whether he's just rubbing rivals out, or targeting what the people are fed up with, is unclear.

But, yes, I think the Chinese people are optimistic, without a shadow of doubt. They're



Guard and portrait of Mao in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, "The Story of China" | © PBS

The Story of China continues on PBS on June 27th. Check local listings or watch episodes online.

pleased to see China great again, they're pleased to see China on the world stage. They're proud of China's achievements and history. They loved it when Xi Jinping and Queen Elizabeth were going down the Mall [in London] in the golden state coach, and when Xi Jinping had a pint of beer in a pub in Buckinghamshire with David Cameron. I can't remember what beer it was—Greene King IPA or something— but every place in China stocked bottles of it that sold out.

CT: Your enthusiasm for China in the series is contagious.

MW: When you make a series like this, you don't want it to be a didactic exercise. You want it to be friendly, fun, and illuminating. Not so simple that the audience feels cheated, but not so complicated that they don't know where they are.

CT: Did you learn Chinese?

MW: [laughs] No, just bits and pieces. I got my Chinese friends to teach me a couple of poems by my favorite Tang poet so I can recite them when I've had a drink or two!



The temple fair at Zhoukou in North China, "The Story of China" | © PBS



The Grand Canal made Wuxi one of China's most prosperous cities during the early Tang dynasty (618—907) | © PBS

‘The Story of China’ is a six-part series that, like the country’s history, has its ups and downs

<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/tv/la-et-st-the-story-of-china-review-20170620-story.html>

China has had its ups and downs, says historian and PBS series host Michael Wood. And now that the world’s oldest nation is on its way back up, it’s time to take another look at its history in “The Story of China.”

The six-part documentary, which will air over three consecutive Tuesdays, is part of the network’s Summer of Adventure series. The summer series includes multipart documentaries on Havana, Alaska, Ireland and Yellowstone.

Covering China’s history, however, is a herculean task given that it dates 4,000 years. Wood attempts to look at the country from ancient civilization to modern boon, and does so through varied themes that include historical texts, interviews and his own on-the-ground perspective.

The one-hour episodes “Ancestors” and “Silk Roads & China Ships” open the series Tuesday. They’ll be followed in the coming weeks by episodes devoted to the “Golden Age,” “The Ming,” “The Last Empire” and “The Age of Revolution.”

If you happen to be knowledgeable or passionate about the history of China, this PBS series will likely light up several parts of your brain. It’s a vast collection of fascinating factoids, breathtaking scenery and thorough research.

For the rest of us who simply enjoy discovering other regions, cultures and eras via well-made PBS docs, “The Story of China” is not as compelling. Though “The Story of China” runs in a loose chronological order, it can feel jumbled and bit disorganized in its attempt to harness so much history. Let’s just say the series is highly variable, just like the place it features.

Wood takes us through the narrative arc of China via his own travels across the country, interviews with everyday citizens and historians and gorgeous footage of monuments contrasted against the modern infrastructure built up around them.

“China has been in a headlong rush into the future,” says Wood at the outset of Episode 1. But it’s doing so by looking at the past.

Several of the series episodes employ the idea of using modern scenarios to explain the past. For instance, in the debut show, Chinese are shown honoring their ancient ancestors in a Festival of Light ceremony. It’s an interesting bit of culture and history on its own but doesn’t quite help string together a larger story.

Instead moments like these can pull the viewer out of the bigger story arc and make the pacing feel bumpy and irregular. That's not to say that moving through the dynasties — Xia, Shang, Zhou, Qin, Han — isn't fascinating. It is. But the folksy first-hand experiences of Wood can take away from the grandeur.

“The Story of China” does however provide the back story to the place we see today — the most populous and perhaps soon-to-be most powerful nation on the planet.

Thank you, PBS!