CHAPTER

2 The Chinese Tradition

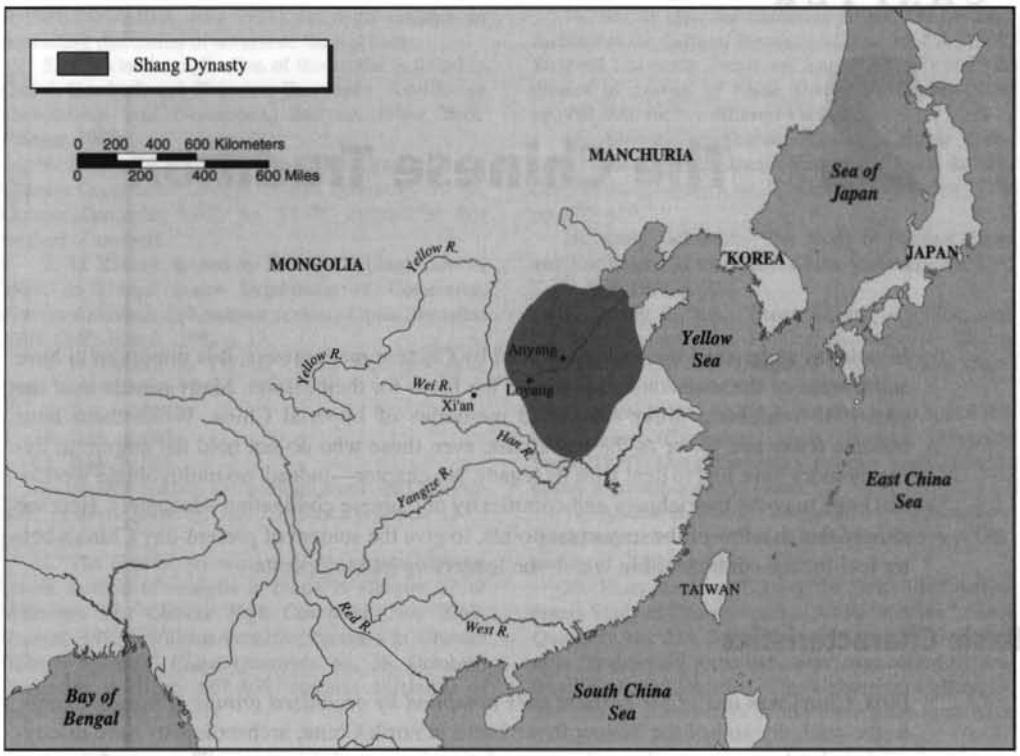
In order to understand the problems faced by Chinese modernizers, it is important to have some sense of the tradition that provides the focus for their efforts. Many members of the post-1949 leadership group had vivid memories of imperial China. While these have become fewer and fewer as the years pass, even those who do not hold the empire in living memory have had to deal with its legacy. No chapter—indeed, no multivolume work—can hope to cover the richness and complexity of Chinese civilization adequately. Here we simply sketch a few of the important points, to give the student of present-day China a better feel for the context within which the leadership had to operate.

Basic Characteristics

First, China was *one of the earliest sites inhabited by organized groups of human beings.* In the cold, dry soil of the Yellow River basin in north China, archaeologists have discovered skeletal remains, tools, and pottery dating from neolithic times. The rest of the area now referred to as China was inhabited by what would later be referred to as barbarians. This small core group gradually spread out to take control of an area whose contours are roughly similar to those of present-day China. Migration generally occurred in a southerly direction, along cultivable river banks, rather than toward the less hospitable north, with the original inhabitants either being absorbed or pushed into less fertile areas.

This raises the question of what characteristics set the Chinese or, as they normally refer to themselves, the Han, apart from their neighbors of other ethnic groups. These were possession of the sophisticated agricultural techniques necessary for *wet rice cultivation* and *silk production.* Ironically, due to marked climatic changes, neither can now be carried out in the areas in which they were originally developed. The Han also developed a sophisticated written language at an early date. Indeed, Chinese may be the *world's oldest continuously used script.* Egyptian hieroglyphics were developed considerably earlier, about 3000 B.C., but fell out of general use in the third century A.D. and disappeared entirely in the sixth century.

The records of Chinese civilization are quite good. *An early and sustained interest in history and chronology* is another characteristic that sets Han China off from its neighbors. India, for example, also developed a highly sophisticated civilization, but one that was relatively little concerned with chronology. Originally, some of the earlier parts of traditional Chinese history were thought to be legendary. An essentially accidental discovery

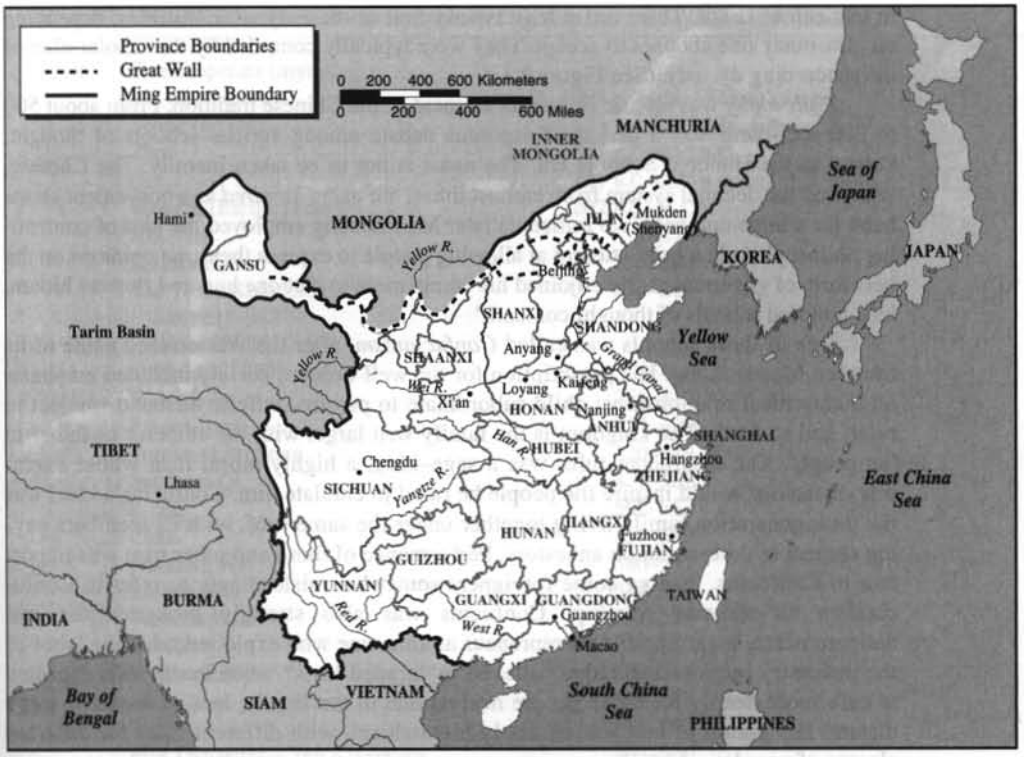


MAP 2.1A Bronze Age China during the Shang Dynasty (ca. 1523 B.C.–ca. 1028 B.C.)

indicated that at least one of these supposedly mythical dynasties, the Shang, actually existed. In the 1920s, some Westerners noticed that a traditional medicine shop in north China was selling bones incised with Chinese characters. Though oddly rendered, the characters were still recognizable as their modern-day counterparts. Curious, the Westerners purchased the bones and began to study them. Extensive research and testing confirmed that the inscriptions dated from Shang times, about 1500 B.C. It seems unlikely that the existence of a still earlier dynasty, the Xia, will be confirmed.

Chinese chronologies have proved amazingly precise. They have been verified, for example, by checking the eclipses and sightings of comets mentioned in Chinese records against when mathematical calculations say they must have occurred. Halley's comet was observed regularly in China from 240 B.C. on, and may have been the comet recorded in 611 and 467 B.C. By 444 B.C., Chinese astronomers had calculated the length of a year to be 365¼ days, a remarkable achievement given the technology of the times.[1]

Not simply accurate record-keepers, the Chinese also had a well-developed *theory of history: the dynastic cycle*. According to it, although a golden age of perfection existed in the distant past, history was now cyclical. A dynasty was set up by a moral man in order



MAP 2.1B Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). Note the tremendous expansion of territory.

to rectify existing evils. The ruler rules basically through presenting an example of virtue to be emulated by his people, and the man who is best qualified to rule is he who is most moral. The first few emperors will fit this example, working very hard. After that, decline will begin to occur: emperors will become more pleasure-loving and less virtuous.

A restoration, or midcourse correction, is possible. But eventually the moral quality of the rulers will decline again, and the dynasty will deteriorate still further. Portents are one indicator of the onset of decay: the appearance of comets and/or instances of plagues of insects, drought, floods, and barbarian invasions. Those who are unjustly ruled will raise rebellions and, when the quality of the emperor is poor enough, one of them—presumably the rebellion led by the most moral man—will succeed. Its leader will found a new dynasty.

Unfortunately, in China as elsewhere, the existence of a theory influences one's perception of reality. In this case, the theory of history provided a mold for the writing of history: The last emperor of a dynasty is always portrayed as bad. There is also a belief that a short, brutal, and efficient dynasty will be succeeded by a longer, benevolent one. The dynasty became the unit of history, and most dynasties had a separate official volume devoted to them, with administrative organization, major personalities, and events recorded

in meticulous detail. There are at least twenty-four of these dynastic histories, depending on how many one chooses to accept. They were typically compiled by the scholar-elite of the succeeding dynasty. (See Figure 2.1.)

Philosophy was also an important element of the Chinese tradition. From about 500 to 300 B.C. there was a period of vigorous debate among various schools of thought, known as the Hundred Schools era. The name is not to be taken literally: The Chinese, who used the decimal system from earliest times, are using *hundred* as a convenient shorthand for a large number. Two millennia later Mao Zedong employed the idea of contending philosophies in a brief attempt at allowing people to express their true opinions on the best form of government. He enjoined his compatriots to "let one hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend."

One of these schools was called *Confucianism*, after the Westernized name of its founder, Master Kong. His prescription for the well-ordered society included emphasis on hierarchical relationships: child subordinate to parents, wife to husband, subject to ruler, and so forth. The kingdom is the family writ large, with the emperor as father to his people. The Confucian ruler was a sage–king, a highly moral man whose exemplary behavior would inspire the people he ruled to emulate him. Confucius's ideal was the multigeneration family living together under the same roof, with its members paying respect to their common ancestors. Performance of these and other rites was important to Confucius, leading some foreigners somewhat misleadingly to refer to Confucianism as ancestor worship. Confucius was also strongly proagriculture and anticommerce, regarding the entrepreneur as someone who exploited what the labor of the peasantry produced. He also believed in "graded love," wherein one was expected to care more deeply for those people nearest one in the family, less so for those more distant. His notion of law was similarly hierarchical, with different rules for different classes of people.

Another school was *Mohism*, named for its founder, Mo Zi. The Mohists were more egalitarian in outlook, sounding much like modern-day advocates of democracy on many issues. They envisioned a state organization that measured everything in terms of its utility to all people. Mohists vehemently objected to aggressive war, though they produced skilled warriors and impressive tactics for defensive conflicts. They called for simplicity and frugality on the part of all people. Universal love, by which was meant equal regard for all other human beings, was also a central tenet of Mohism and contrasted sharply with the Confucian outlook. Laws were to apply equally to all people. Mohists wanted the responsibility for power placed in the hands of the most able people, whom they expected would act according to the desires of the masses. However, they did not specify the mechanisms through which this might be done. Mo Zi was greatly honored in his day, and his teachings were no less influential than those of Confucius. Nonetheless, the school seems to have died out by the first century A.D.

A third school, the *Daoists*, believed (and still do believe, since the school has a number of adherents even today) that a well-ordered society must be in harmony with The Way (*dao*). They hold that nature dictates all and that the way to order life is to do nothing contrary to nature. Striving for power and material goods is to be eschewed, as

FIGURE 2.1 The Chinese Dynasties

Five Emperors (mythical)	
Xia (mythical)	ca. 1994 B.C.–ca. 1523 B.C.
Shang (or Yin)	ca. 1523 B.C.–ca. 1028. B.C.
Zhou	ca. 1027 B.C.–256 B.C.
Qin	221 B.C.–207 B.C.
Western (Earlier) Han	202 B.C.–9 A.D.
Xin	9–23
Eastern (Later)	25–220
The Three Kingdoms	220–265
Shu, 221–263	
Wei, 220–265	
Wu, 222–280	
Western Jin	265–317
Eastern Jin	317–420
Former (Liu) Song	420–479
Southern Qi	479–502
Liang	502–557
Chen	557–589
Northern Wei	386–535
Eastern Wei	534–550
Western Wei	535–556
Northern Qi	550–577
Northern Zhou	557–581
Sui	590–618
Tang	618–907
Five Dynasties + Ten Kingdoms	907–960
Later Liang, 907–923	
Later Tang, 923–936	
Later Jin, 936–947	
Later Han, 947–950	
Later Zhou, 951–960	
Liao	907–1125
Northern Song	960–1126
Xixia	990–1227
Southern Song	1127–1279
Jin	1115–1234
Yuan	1260–1368
Ming	1368–1644
Qing	1644–1911

is travel: The key to understanding The Way is within oneself. According to one Daoist sage, the ideal situation is to sit in one's own village, listening to the barking of the dogs in the next village but never to visit that neighboring village. Intensely quietistic, Daoists meditate in order to search for The Way. An often-quoted Daoist slogan is that "the best form of action is inaction"; a Daoist ruler would accomplish everything by doing nothing.

Legalists, with the eminent Lord Shang as their principal spokesperson, insisted that the well-ordered state depends on a clearly enunciated rule of law which the state must enforce regardless of who might commit a crime. They advocated posting the laws of a city outside its gates, so that all who entered would be aware of proper standards of behavior. In distinct contrast to Confucius's image of the sage–king eliciting proper behavior from his subjects by providing them a role model, the Legalists did not expect the people to do good by themselves. Rather, the ruler would, through the use of rewards and punishments, make sure that they could do no wrong. Legalist philosophy provided the guiding principles for the Qin dynasty (221–207 B.C.). Although the Qin is not fondly remembered by Chinese tradition, the system of governmental organization and criminal law of the next two thousand years are basically of Legalist derivation.

The *Logicians*, or School of Names, vigorously debated the meaning of absolute versus relative terms. Despite an intense and ongoing interest in philosophy, China never developed a system of logic. In fact, the very name in use today, *loji*, is borrowed from the West. But the logicians seemed to be groping toward a system of logic, as exemplified the "Discourse on the White Horse" by its leading practitioner, Gongsun Long. Its main proposition is the assertion that "a white horse is not a horse," indicating the realization that adding the adjective *white* qualified the universal concept *horse*. The Logicians believed that only when names had been properly defined could any proper system of government and laws be set forth.

Yin–yang theory provided China with a cosmology. *Yang*, originally meaning sunshine, came to represent masculinity, activity, heat, brightness, dryness, and hardness, while *yin* was associated with femininity, passivity, cold, darkness, wetness, and softness. The interaction of these two primary principles was believed to produce all of the phenomena of the universe. Yin and yang are complementary, so that when one extreme is reached the other principle begins to assert itself. The greatest of successes contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction, just as the sun at midday is on the verge of giving way to night. The diagrammatic representation of the yin–yang interaction is depicted on the present-day South Korean flag. Yin–yang theorists were concerned with divining the future through interpreting the configurations of the so-called eight trigrams, each one made up of combinations of three divided or undivided lines. They also devised prescriptions for good health through eating certain foods, some classified as hot and others as cold. Yin–yang principles had a startling, if brief, popular revival in the United States during the 1960s.

Various folk religions incorporating other forms of geomancy also flourished during this time. One popular belief was that the *feng–shui*, or spirits of the winds (*feng*) and water (*shui*), had to be placated or disaster would ensue. A shaman would be brought in to determine the best site for a building or a grave, in order to make sure that ill fortune would not befall those who commissioned the structure.

Buddhism is not properly a part of the Hundred Schools, since it arrived in China somewhat later, in the second century A.D. But, in the sense that it did contend for power with the others, it is appropriate to consider Buddhism with them. Unlike the other schools, which are indigenous to China, Buddhism had its origins in India. Although there are many different sects of Buddhism, there is general agreement among them that human suffering arises from the individual's ignorance of the nature of things. From this ignorance comes the craving for and cleaving to life, which binds the individual to the eternal Wheel of Life and Death, from which he can never escape. Through enlightenment comes emancipation, or *nirvana*. This search for *nirvana* is essential to Buddhism.[2]

Eventually, Confucianism won out over its rivals and became accepted as the state philosophy. However, in the process it was fundamentally influenced by the other schools. For example, yin–yang symbolism was absorbed by Confucianism. Elements of Buddhism and Daoism figure prominently in the neo-Confucianism that emerged during the Song dynasty (A.D. 960–1279), and feng–shui was incorporated as well. In addition to borrowing elements from other philosophies, Confucianism was not exclusivist. One could be a Confucian scholar, take time out for Daoist contemplation, and also be a practicing Buddhist. This basic tolerance did not hold true for all faiths, as will be seen later. It is important to remember that Confucianism is not a religion in the usual sense of the word. Its concerns are with statecraft and with the proper relationships among human beings. Heaven is mentioned only once, when one of Master Kong's disciples states that heaven hears as the people hear and heaven sees as the people see. As a philosophy, it is unconcerned with the supernatural or with life after death. Confucius is revered as a great teacher rather than worshiped as a god. (See Figure 2.1.)

The Governmental Structure of Traditional China

The governmental structure that arose out of these debates over statecraft and ethics was impressive in its degree of centralization and attention to a variety of the problems of administration. At the top was the emperor, who theoretically reigned supreme. In fact, his decision-making powers were constrained by a number of factors, including the force of tradition, his own Confucian education, and the rest of the court structure.

The court structure included the empress and her family, who sought to have their members appointed to important and lucrative positions and might even try to seize the throne. There were also a large number of concubines, who similarly tried to advance themselves and their families through using their charms on the emperor. Providing the emperor with an heir was an excellent way to enhance one's status in court, although it often caused problems for one's relationships with the empress and with other concubines. There was also typically a large eunuch population within the palace compound. In order to make sure that the imperial sons and heirs were really the children of the emperor, only eunuchs were permitted in the parts of the palace where women lived. Since eunuchs were allowed substantial freedom of movement, which the palace ladies were not, a eunuch and a woman might ally for mutual benefit. The eunuch would provide a palace lady with information crucial to the advancement of her career in return for material and status

benefits if she succeeded. Eunuchs could and did lead the imperial heir into a life of dissolution, opening the way for another woman's son to be named heir apparent. They might also administer poison to their lady's rival or to the rival's son.

The imperial bureaucracy was an elaborate hierarchy staffed by those who had passed the civil service examinations. From the fourteenth century onward, the pinnacle of the bureaucracy was the so-called Six Boards, corresponding to ministries in contemporary bureaucracies. Their respective administrative purviews also sound contemporary: The Board of Personnel made civil service appointments to those who passed the examination system; the Board of Revenue collected taxes; the Board of Rites supervised the examination system, state festivals, and government-sponsored schools; the Board of War appointed military officers from those who had passed the separate military examination system; the Board of Punishment provided the court system, and the Board of Works was in charge of building, irrigation, and "the produce of mines and marshes"—mostly salt, a government monopoly.

A seventh entity, the Censorate, was a uniquely Chinese institution. It existed to criticize the other organs of government, including the emperor. Censors had to be extremely courageous; they received no immunity by virtue of their position. Some were flogged to death by order of the ruler who was angered by their complaints. Others might receive the gift of a silken cord or a lump of raw opium from the emperor, thus conveying the imperial desire that they commit suicide. That so many censors were willing to take these risks speaks highly both for them as individuals and for the system that produced them.

Local government also had a well-articulated structure. Below the central government were the provinces. By the eighteenth century there were eighteen provinces in China proper. Since then, more have been carved out of border districts that originally had other forms of administration. Provinces were divided into prefectures, which were in turn divided into counties, townships, and villages or hamlets. The county level was normally the farthest down that the imperial bureaucracy reached. By the time of the Qing dynasty, a typical county might be composed of several hundred thousand people. Supervising so many people, spread over a wide area, with roads that were typically few in number and poor in quality, and without modern communications, was exceedingly difficult. The county magistrate had a staff of assistants, but they were far too few to actually administer the area under their jurisdiction. The county magistrate therefore had to seek the help of prominent local people and organizations.

In effect, then, the magistrate governed by supervising the local power structure, which was not part of the imperial bureaucracy. There was a tendency to preside passively, intervening only when it seemed absolutely necessary. Should the magistrate deem the situation important enough to do so, there were a number of measures at his disposal. These ranged from dispensing informal advice to calling in military forces to maintain order or gain compliance with imperial orders. The local worthies on whom the magistrate relied were typically members of a class known as the gentry. These were people of some wealth and social cultivation. They might be wealthy and therefore able to provide a son or sons with an education so that they might succeed at the examination system, or an originally poor family who had a bright son who had managed to pass the examinations, become an official, and make his family wealthy. Other people in whose good graces it was necessary for the magistrate to keep were the informal hierarchy of elders that every village had.

Yet another organization that might help the administration at local-government level was the *baojia*. In good Confucian fashion, the head of every household was responsible for the conduct of his family members. Since families tended to be large and multigenerational, this was often quite a responsibility. Every hundred households formed a *jia*, with one head of household as its head, and every ten *jia* a *bao*, again with a designated head. Each of these was responsible to those above him in the hierarchy for the conduct of those below him. Although the incumbents could be punished for breach of responsibility, none was paid for his efforts. This informal mutual security system did not always work: If one can be punished for something one's subordinates do, there are essentially two choices. First, one can try hard to keep potential troublemakers in line. Second, one can try to conceal what the troublemaker does. Often the second choice proved easier than the first.

Concealment was also the hallmark of the secret societies. These groups had fanciful names like the Triads, the Yellow Turbans, the White Lotus, or the Fists of Righteous Harmony. Members were initiated in an elaborate ceremony that included such mystic rites as chanting, dancing, and animal sacrifice. They claimed a Robin Hood role but tended to finance it by running Mafia-like protection operations. Secret societies were adept at resisting whatever aspects of central authority they did not like, such as tax increases. Not confined to particular local areas, they often had branches in other counties and provinces. When angered at imperial actions or mismanagement, they might stage large rebellions. Secret societies were influential in toppling several dynasties.

Bandit groups operated in similar fashion, preying on travelers or demanding protection money from merchants and peasants. The larger their numbers, the more noticeable they became, of course, and sometimes the magistrate was compelled to use force to deal with them. Imperial officials had no doctrine of hot pursuit, nor did they have any real incentive to resort to it: Bandits chased out of a magistrate's bailiwick became someone else's problem. Bandits thus preferred to operate from border areas, which had several advantages. They were far from the county seat and the magistrate's dwelling. Roads in border areas tended to range from sparse to nonexistent, and the bandits had the advantage of knowing the terrain. Also, should the pursuing force get too close, the bandits could quickly flee into another administrative area. Members of secret societies and bandit groups led lives of high adventure and as a result became a favorite topic of vernacular novelists. The young Mao Zedong, an avid reader of such novels, employed some of the bandits' techniques in overthrowing the Chinese government of his day.

Faced with the enormous task of governing a large area with limited resources, the county magistrate tried to accommodate the informal power structure so that it would look to his superiors as if his district were peaceful and prosperous. In accordance with Confucian philosophy, lack of peace and prosperity would indicate that the magistrate was not setting a virtuous example and hence he might be removed. The upper levels of the bureaucracy were not completely unaware of these factors but had their own superiors to answer to. Various devices were tried to reduce the collusion between the magistrate and the local power structure. One method was fairly frequent transfers. Another was the "law of avoidance," whereby a magistrate was never posted to the area from which he came, so that his judgment would not be compromised by Confucian obligations to take care of his family members properly. This did not prevent the local power structure from being able to

circumvent or modify central government directives with reasonable frequency: The empire was too large, and the bureaucracy too small, to expect a high degree of compliance. In the words of a popular Chinese saying, "Heaven is high, and the emperor is far away."

The resulting system of local-level government, though very informal, was surely not democratic, since the power structure was governed by rigid norms of authority and status. It was not even true decentralization, since all local power was conditional on the approval of higher levels. Nor was it really local autonomy, since a higher level of government could intervene if it decided to. It would probably be most accurate to say that basic-level traditional Chinese government was an operating arrangement, undertaken largely for reasons of administrative efficiency and conservatism, in which local authorities were encouraged to control their own areas, provided they did so effectively and without violation of imperial requirements. Gentry and other wealthy individuals, large clan groups, merchant and crafts guilds, and even secret societies could thus exercise great power over their subordinates and members. Possibly they could even influence the magistrate. But their power could go only so far as a direct challenge to the magistrate's power. At this point, a higher level would have to be brought in to deal with that challenge.

Although the bureaucracy could be almost nonexistent at the local level, it was quite top-heavy. There were many officials in the capital city, few of them with intimate knowledge of conditions in the countryside. For this reason, the bureaucracy tended to be out of touch with the people, a problem that the Chinese communists would later take considerable pains to rectify. In common with bureaucracies everywhere, it also had a tendency toward rigidity, with consequent stultifying effects on society. In the Chinese case, a major contributing factor to this rigidity was the imperial examination system.

The Examination System

From the time of the Tang dynasty (A.D. 618–906) onward, Chinese officials were selected on the basis of a competitive civil service examination. Candidates were tested on how well they had memorized the Confucian classics and internalized the code of ethics embodied therein. The tests were given on several levels, with special examination halls consisting of a series of individual cubicles constructed in many larger cities. The applicant brought his own food—he might be there for three days—and was provided with a standard writing brush and ink and a passage from the classics. Then the cubicle was sealed, leaving the candidate to write an essay on the passage in his best literary style, under eight headings referred to as legs. Every effort was made to prevent cheating, with monitors supervising the cells. The applicants' papers were copied over before being presented to the examiners, lest the examiners be unduly influenced by the candidates' calligraphy. Those few who passed, less than one percent of the Chinese population, gained enormous prestige.

The examination system had a number of advantages. First, it produced intelligent officials who had thoroughly internalized the Confucian ethic. Second, it provided the people, including those who did not pass, with an orthodox belief system that was important for the management of the empire. Third, the system rewarded merit, providing a channel of social mobility for the ambitious, even commoners, that was based on widely accepted moral principles rather than wealth, birth, brute force, or royal whim.

There were disadvantages as well, many of them recognized by high-ranking officials who had succeeded within the system. One Song dynasty (960–1279) statesman strongly urged that the principles of astronomy, ancient and modern laws, and political economy be included in the examinations. He and others criticized the excessive emphasis on memorization and the writing of couplets. In later times the term *eight-legged essay* became a synonym for rigid, banal, stereotyped, and irrelevant. The degree of equality the examination system provided was less than perfect: Despite the existence of a number of ways in which a poor child could gain access to education, the children of the wealthy were more likely to have better teachers and better environments for learning. And women were completely excluded from the competition. Nonetheless, the creation of the examination system was a remarkable achievement, especially when one considers how the various political entities of Europe were being governed during the Tang dynasty. Despite its imperfections, the examination system served China well for many years.

Literature and Art

China produced art of great variety and subtlety that was prized throughout the known world. Examples have been recovered from the ruins of Pompeii and elsewhere in the Roman Empire. Somewhat later, Chinese pottery began to be exported to Indonesia. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a vogue for chinoiserie swept Europe and the United States. Traditional China also produced a number of fine novels, on topics ranging from the ribald to the introspective.

Interestingly, there is no tradition of literary and artistic protest. China produced no equivalent of *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, with its biting critique of status differentiations, or Hieronymous Bosch, whose paintings satirized corruption within the established church. Aesthetics were nearly monopolized by the scholar-official class, who painted and wrote poetry essentially as hobbies.

Society held those who painted for a living in low esteem; culture was the triumph of the amateur ideal over that of professionalism. According to the *Analects,* Confucius said "the accomplished scholar is not a utensil."[3] It is worth noting that the great flowering of vernacular drama in China occurred during the Yuan dynasty, when the Mongols suspended civil service examinations for 78 years; the theater became a way for the literati to compensate for their waning social prestige and wounded pride.[4] To be sure, one can find examples of literature being used for protest purposes.[5] For the most part, however, the elite protested through the established political channels—oral and written protests to the emperor—while the lower classes expressed their grievances by rebelling.

The Role of Law in Traditional China

Confucian teachings also suffuse the legal system of traditional China. As noted above, Confucius did not believe in a uniform code of justice for all. A gentleman was assumed to be guided in his conduct by knowledge of the correct moral principles (*li*), while only the

uneducated needed punishments (*fa*). Note that education, and not birth, is the basis of gentility. Since differences were believed to be inherent in the nature of things, only through the harmonious operation of these differences could a fair social order be achieved.

The idea of law as relative to one's status rather than as an absolute standard produced some rules that sound strange to Western ears. For example, how many bearers a person could have for his sedan chair was regulated by law, as was how much jewelry could be worn, and with what designs. It was never possible to enforce these laws completely. Nor was punishment ever completely done away with, even for high-ranking officials. There are instances of ministers being put to death, possibly on the reasoning that if their conduct was too outrageous, they could not be treated as gentlemen anymore. More commonly, however, officials who fell from favor were dismissed and sent to posts on the periphery of the empire, which presumably minimized the harm they could do. As mentioned previously, there were also ways to suggest that an official commit suicide—which he generally did.

The influence of Confucian views on the importance of family was also reflected in the legal system. Crimes against family members were punished more heavily than those against outsiders, with patricide regarded as the ultimate horror. While the notion of the imperial system as a family writ large, with the emperor as the father of his people, is in most respects a reasonable and workable one, it did cause certain problems. Confucius never made clear what should happen when loyalty to one's family conflicted with loyalty to the emperor. The situation was not supposed to arise, since one's parents' desires were not supposed to conflict with one's official duties. Unfortunately, such situations did arise, and with some regularity. The system tried to minimize these conflicts by various techniques. The law of avoidance, whereby officials were not to be posted to their family seats, has already been mentioned. Also, the law provided that officials be granted leave for the observance of the elaborate mourning rites demanded by Confucianism (a year in the case of a deceased father), which involved wearing special clothing, eating only certain foods, and the preparation of an elaborate funeral ceremony.

These codes notwithstanding, most matters were never brought to law courts at all. There was no concept of what the Western world knows as torts; in order to bring a legal action, one had to accuse someone of a crime. The system recognized parents' authority to control and punish their children; disputes between family members were settled in accordance with an individual's status within the kin group.

In addition to the notion that disputes ought to be settled within the family rather than consigned to strangers, there was another important reason that most disputes were not brought to the courts: To do so was an expensive and risky venture. Bribery was the accepted way to influence one's case. Frequently, the county magistrate served as judge, and even were he scrupulously honest, his various subordinates would have to be paid in order to persuade them to present the case, the magistrate having many other matters to attend to. This practice of payments, known as "squeeze," existed at all levels of government. Everyone seems to have taken for granted that squeeze would have to be paid, and the practice was not considered corruption until the fee grew exorbitant. It was understood that the bureaucrats involved had inadequate salaries and had obligations to their own families.

As to law in the higher sense, there were no guarantees against the exercise of imperial power. Government could initiate, regulate, adjudicate, and repress as it saw fit. Elites

did assume a *moral* obligation to provide just and responsive government, but there were no constitutional or legal safeguards to back up the obligation. Enforcement depended upon, first, the bureaucratic recruitment process, which was supposed to ensure that only men of superior virtue would be chosen, and second, the bureaucracy's own supervisory system. The latter was really a case of self-regulation, since bureaucrats would have to agree to remove one of their number whom they believed was not exercising his responsibilities properly.

The traditional political system was essentially free to accumulate and exercise total power, although, to its great credit, it never made the fullest use of this right. An elaborate system of checks and balances was developed despite the absence of a constitutional framework. It aimed not at safeguarding human rights but at preventing one faction or group of bureaucrats at the imperial court from annihilating the other. This informal check-and-balance system was sanctioned by custom, not law. It did not preclude one individual from seizing power, but it greatly increased the difficulty of anyone actually doing so.

Although people at the highest levels of leadership were expected to conform to a rigid moral code, they seemed relatively indifferent to what went on at the lower levels so long as there was peace. Efforts were made to indoctrinate the population at large with the Confucian ethic through such means as sponsoring public lectures, ceremonies, and schools to teach filial piety, respect for elders and superiors, peaceful and industrious conduct, and observance of the law. However, neither the efforts made nor the results achieved were especially impressive. In the vast countryside, people were generally neither positively loyal to the existing government nor actively opposed to it, but simply concerned with the problems of their own daily lives.

The Military

By 500 B.C. China had produced one of the world's greatest military strategists, Sun Zi, whose *Art of War* is required reading in modern military academies. However, with a few salient exceptions, most notably the Yuan (Mongol) dynasty, the military was not held in high regard during imperial China. A popular saying was "As one does not use good iron to make nails, one does not use good men as soldiers." If the ruler were virtuous, the people would be prosperous and content, and there would be no need for a strong military. If the people were not prosperous and content, then the ruler must be at fault, and it might be necessary to make changes at the top.

Hence the army tended to be strong at the beginning of a dynasty, having been used to overthrow the previous incumbents. Then it would be allowed to decay because it was no longer needed. There was no navy to speak of, since China was attacked from the sea only by occasional pirates. Even then, the strategy adopted was often simply to move the coastal population inland. Some military presence was considered necessary at all times because of the need to deal with barbarian incursions.

Scholar-officials tended to usurp military command functions, especially in periods of dynastic decline, and always did their best to undercut military officers, who were usually not literate. This also can be seen as motivated by a belief in the supremacy of amateurism over professionalism. It was, however, more than this. There was a tendency for

the official class to want to wrest control of all areas that might rival their dominant influence. This same tendency is noticeable in the campaign the scholar-officials waged against the impressive sea voyages of the early Ming dynasty. These were run by eunuchs, who gained a great deal of imperial favor through the voyages. Ultimately, the scholar-officials succeeded in stopping them completely.

The Barbarian Problem

The term *barbarian* is used here to mean any non-Han Chinese group that interacted with the Han. Some of these groups were quite cultivated, although most were not. The Han referred to them by a variety of terms, many of which had pejorative connotations. Unlike the Han, a number of these groups had great respect for the military, and produced some formidable fighting forces. This was particularly true of the northern groups such as the Uygurs, Kazakhs, and Mongols. Since members of these groups did not accept Confucian precepts, the Han could not expect that the presence of a virtuous ruler on their own throne would deter the barbarians' depredations. A military force had to be maintained in order to deal with them.

Various techniques were devised to deal with the barbarians in order to minimize the need for battle. One was to buy them off through such devices as giving them official titles, with salaries, and making them responsible for peacekeeping in their areas. Another was to play one militant group off against another, a stratagem known as "using barbarians to control barbarians." Of course, the barbarians were also able to make alliances with each other against the Chinese.

On occasion, barbarians conquered all or part of Han China and set up their own dynasties. This was accepted to the degree that the conquerors accepted Chinese cultural norms and assimilated themselves to Confucian precepts. The Yuan dynasty, founded by Mongols who strenuously resisted adapting to the existing system, was short-lived and most Chinese regard it as unsuccessful. In contrast, the Manchus' Qing dynasty, whose leaders displayed considerable ingenuity in functioning as Confucian rulers while avoiding assimilation, lasted more than twice as long and was, until its last half-century, far better regarded.

Foreigners could even command Chinese armies in battle, as did An Lushan, a Sogdian, during the Tang dynasty, and Frederick Townsend Ward, an American, in the nineteenth century. Culturalism rather than nationalism characterized the Chinese empire: What mattered was not birth or race, but rather one's willingness and ability to conform to accepted standards of ethics, behavior, and dress.

Interpretations of Chinese History

The question arises how to characterize this impressive and complex society. One view, that of Karl Marx, is that of China the unchanging. In his words, history went to sleep in Asia. Clearly, this is untrue. Artistic styles, technology, administrative techniques, and even Confucian philosophy were modified over time. Change may have come more slowly than in certain periods of European history, but there definitely was change.

A second view was held by Marxists, disciples of Karl Marx who revised his opinions and applied his categories for Western society to China. These involve a historical progression from primitive communism, wherein small hunter-gatherer groups share the results of their foraging, to slave society, in which some groups conquer others and use them in forced labor. Eventually, slave societies pass over into feudal societies characterized by land that is held in fiefs and serfs who are bound to the land through oath and lack of other alternatives. Industrialization then occurs, leading to the bourgeois-capitalist stage of society, in which workers are exploited by capitalists, who monopolize ownership of the means of production. The workers rebel and inaugurate socialist society, in which they collectively own the means of production. The final stage, communism, is achieved when allocation depends on "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need." At this point, the state will have become unnecessary and will simply wither away.

It is interesting to compare Marx's theory with China's reality. Unfortunately, hunter-gatherer groups cannot be expected to leave written records. Although the stage of primitive communism may well have existed, it cannot be proved. During the Shang dynasty, whence our earliest records come, slaves do seem to have existed, as indeed they did during the Han and in certain other periods. However, the presence of slaves does not characterize a society as a slave society unless a major portion of society's work was done by them. This was never the case in China.

Feudal society definitely did exist, though prior to the time the Hundred Schools of Thought contended. There was a noble class, which was responsible for raising armies from among their serfs. The nobles rode in chariots, wore armor, and had an elaborate code of ethics that has been compared to chivalry. And, just as in Western feudalism, the king was rather weak vis-à-vis a coalition of his nobles. However, feudal society was already in an advanced state of decay by the time of the Hundred Schools period, in the latter part of the Zhou dynasty. Throughout Confucius's writings, there are laments that the rules of etiquette are being ignored.

The next dynasty, the Han, began to institute bureaucracy. Nobles were paid in rice for their service to the state rather than being granted fiefs. Land began to be bought and sold. As a result of these developments, China could no longer be called feudal. Yet, if Marx's categories of development are to be applied to China, feudalism should have been succeeded by the bourgeois-capitalist stage. It was not, really, as even Marxists agree. There are a few indicators, they argue, that China might have been becoming bourgeois-capitalist. One can see the slow rise of a money economy. A protobanking system was also developed wherein money could be held on deposit in one city and drawn upon elsewhere. This enables Marxists to conclude that China went through a rather long period of being "semifeudal"—almost two thousand years. Marxists also argue that China was on the verge of entering the bourgeois-capitalist stage when Western imperialism intruded, destroying the sprouts of capitalism in order to colonize the country.

A third view is that Chinese society is an example of Oriental despotism, sometimes also referred to as hydraulic society. It is most closely associated with a German scholar, Karl Wittfogel, who argues that, of all the factors necessary for the successful cultivation of crops in a preindustrial society, only water (as opposed to temperature and surface) can be controlled through human effort.[6] The need for irrigation and flood control means that a large quantity of water must be channeled and kept within bounds. Dikes must be built and

maintained, canals must be dredged regularly, and information relevant for navigation compiled and distributed. This can be done only through the use of mass labor. Moreover, the labor force must be coordinated, disciplined, and led. Effective water management requires an organizational web that covers the whole, or at a minimum the dynamic core, of the country's population. Timekeeping and calendar making are likewise essential for the success of hydraulic economies: Crops must be planted, irrigated, and harvested within fairly narrowly defined periods of time. Systematic observation, careful calculations, and dissemination of results are needed.

In consequence, those who control this network of laborers, calculators, and disseminators are well positioned to wield supreme political power. The resulting régime will be decisively shaped by the leadership and social control required by hydraulic agriculture. The state will be stronger than the society, and those outside the ruling apparatus are essentially enslaved to it; hence China needs a strong central government. This contrasts sharply with multicentered societies such as existed in medieval Europe and Japan and with their modern democratic incarnations, where the need for water control was never so crucial. In these countries, Wittfogel argues, the state was effectively checked and restrained by other strong and competing organizations, such as the church, craft and merchant guilds, and private owners of land and industrial capital. Such political systems offer vastly greater protection to the individual and also provide a basis for adaptive and progressive social change. By contrast, the fate of hydraulic societies such as China is apt to be slow stagnation.

Critics have charged that Wittfogel's analysis overemphasizes the importance of water control. They point out that the emperor and his officials viewed the collection of taxes, the administration of justice, and the conducting of annual sacrifices to heaven and earth as matters of far higher priority.

A fourth view is that China became modern during the midpoint of the Tang dynasty, about A.D. 850. This is known as the Naito hypothesis, after Naito Konsan, the Japanese scholar who first articulated it. As previously discussed, the term *modernization* can be defined in a number of ways. Naito's major criterion is that of social mobility: In a modern society, one rises through merit, as opposed to inheriting one's status. This actually did happen in the mid-Tang dynasty, thanks to the widespread institutionalization of the examination system during that period. At about the same time one begins to find military leaders who had been common soldiers of peasant background, as opposed to the aristocratic warriors who predominated in feudal society. Vernacular literature also spread, supplementing Confucian treatises and Buddhist sutras. The position of the commoner improved.

There is no doubt that all of these phenomena took place, as Naito points out. However, one may argue that China did not necessarily become modern because of them. A bureaucracy chosen by merit does not in itself confer modernity on a state. According to Max Weber, the eminent sociologist of bureaucracies, the hallmark of modernity is functional specificity: Bureaucrats have specific tasks such as supervision of engineering projects and preparation of the state budget. The first group would have been trained in bridge-building and dam construction, the second in statistics. This ran counter to the primacy of amateurism over professionalism in the Chinese bureaucracy. The examination system trained generalists, not specialists. What it tested was one's ability to expound on the Confucian classics, not one's ability to build public works or analyze statistics. However, one

should point out that there is a consensus that nineteenth-century Great Britain was a modern state. Yet its bureaucrats were also trained as generalists: A background in Greek and Latin classics was considered excellent preparation for future leaders.

Another argument against the Naito hypothesis is that, whereas modernity includes the ability to rise through merit within a hierarchy, success in the Chinese bureaucracy was heavily dependent on whom one knew. One was also supposed to help out those who passed the examinations the same year one did and, assuming one was able to rise within the official hierarchy, their children as well. A counterargument is that the phenomenon of promotion on the basis of connections, whether one's own or one's relatives and their friends, is scarcely unknown in modern Western societies. And the perception of obligation to help members of one's peer group is the very essence of the "old school tie" in Britain and the *Burschenschaft* in Germany. The crucial element that kept China from modernity is less likely to have been the absence of a modern bureaucracy than the country's lack of industrialization.

Implications for Industrialization

The question of what factors are necessary for the industrialization of a country has been carefully examined by a number of social scientists and, not surprisingly, there is less than total agreement among them. A standard list of prerequisites for industrialization include:

1. Capital from the sale of commercially marketable agricultural surpluses that can be invested in manufacturing
2. Legal codes to protect businesses and their personnel
3. The concept of progress
4. A positive attitude toward science
5. Geographic mobility, to take advantage of manufacturing and other opportunities as they arise[7]

As we have seen, Confucianism was a rich and varied tradition. There were different interpretations of the classics over the years, and the original philosophy absorbed elements from other philosophies and religions. However, in all its phases, regardless of time or dynasty, Confucianism had a proagriculture, anticommercial bias. Peasants were considered the producers of wealth; that is, food. Merchants were regarded as nonproductive parasites on society: dishonest folk who sought to make a profit out of other people's work through such schemes as buying at a low price at one time of year or in one area and selling at higher prices at another time or place. Clearly, neither Confucius nor his disciples saw any value in the entrepreneurial function.

In those states that have succeeded in industrializing, the basis for industrialization has been the harnessing of capital derived from a commercially marketable agricultural surplus to manufacturing purposes. The Confucian attitude toward merchants and their activities made this virtually impossible. The socially sanctioned outlet for money derived from the sale of produce was investment in land. The goal was gentry status, not merely in terms of substantial landholdings but also to pass the examination system or have a son or

close relative do so. Also, in addition to being anticommerce, Confucius was not favorably disposed to the rule of law as we know it; hence no codes that could regulate business transactions grew up. Merchants did exist, the Confucian attitude toward them notwithstanding, but they could not protect themselves to a sufficient extent to compete with officialdom. Business activities were inhibited by the need to pay bribes or taxes, often to the point of unprofitability.

A third basic ingredient of industrialization, the concept of progress, was also absent in traditional China. There was no motivation to strive toward a better age. Confucius perceived the golden age as in the past, during the period that preceded the Warring States era (443–221 B.C.). History after this golden age was seen as a series of cycles, as in the dynastic cycle. The virtue of rulers and the prosperity of the country would wax and wane in the manner depicted by yin-yang symbolism. This is not to say that change did not take place, since it certainly did. But change was not regarded as a good thing in itself, and the eternal perfectibility of the society was not expected. The aim was not progress, but harmony, as represented by the Chinese character for king: three horizontal lines, representing heaven, earth, and man, joined by a vertical stroke through the middle (王). The king, through his virtue, aligns heaven, earth, and man in equilibrium.

Science, the fourth prerequisite for industrialization, was regarded as unimportant and unnecessary. As is well known, the Chinese made some remarkable discoveries, including the compass and gunpowder, many years before they were invented in the West. In medieval times, their shipbuilding techniques were far superior to those of the West. These skills made long voyages possible, of which those of the early Ming dynasty are the best known. Confucius was not against science, but viewed exploration and invention as trivial: It was more important to cultivate one's moral virtue.

Confucius's emphasis on the veneration of ancestors also inhibited geographic mobility. It was incumbent on one to keep up the ancestral graves, and the village occupied an almost mystic point of reference for its inhabitants. This did not prevent some Chinese from venturing far and wide: prosperous Chinese merchant communities grew up in such places as Cambodia, Singapore, and Indonesia many hundreds of years ago. But, generally speaking, Chinese tradition did not encourage geographic mobility. And even those who migrated great distances often set aside sums of money to ensure that their remains were sent back to the ancestral home for proper burial.

Confucianism might, of course, have adapted to industrialization. One could easily look at medieval Europe, with its religiously mandated prohibition against lending money at interest and fatalistic belief that, because human misery was divinely ordained, nothing could be changed, and conclude that Christianity must permanently prevent industrialization. In the event, however, such adaptation did take place in Europe but did not take place in China, leading a number of scholars to speculate on why.

One intriguing hypothesis for China's slow technological development is that progress was held back by a *high-level equilibrium trap* (see Figure 2.2). According to this theory, through a number of interlocking causes, the input-output relationships of the late-traditional economy had assumed a pattern that was almost incapable of change through internally generated forces. In both technological and investment terms, agricultural productivity per acre had nearly reached the limits of what was possible without industrial-scientific inputs, and the increase of the population had therefore steadily reduced the sur-

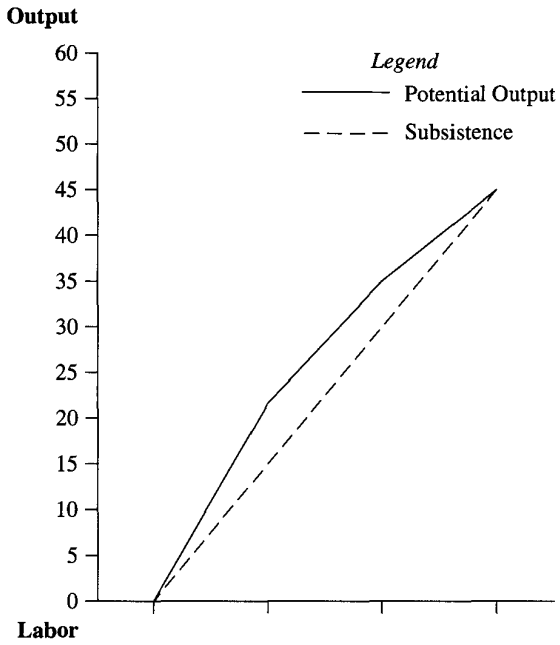


FIGURE 2.2 High-Level Equilibrium Trap

This chart illustrates the effects of a quasi-ceiling in late-traditional Chinese farm technology. The solid line shows Potential output for a given input of labor using the best Premodern methods; the dotted line shows the proportion of output needed for the subsistence of a given labor force. With land constant, potential surplus shrinks, first relatively, Then absolutely, as the labor force grows. At the farthest end of the chart, adding inputs no longer results in increased output. This trap can be broken out of only through the use of industrial-scientific inputs.

Source: Adopted from Mark Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1973), p. 313.

plus product above what was needed for subsistence. A falling surplus per head of population means a reduction in effective demand per person for goods other than those needed for bare survival (see Figure 2.2). Premodern water transport was close to a similar ceiling of efficiency, and few possibilities existed for increasing demand for goods by reducing transport costs.

For these technological reasons, the rising price of food in periods when population pressure on land was becoming severe could not induce a higher output of grain except by migration and the opening up of new land. Migration did indeed take place. It was the chief means whereby the Chinese economy grew in quantitative terms, but there was almost no qualitative change. If the huge size of the traditional economy had any implications for technological change, they were probably negative. Any significant change in input-output relationships would have involved enormous amounts of materials and goods. For example, Britain's consumption of raw cotton tripled between 1741 and the early 1770s, when effective machine-spinning of cotton fiber first began. For China to have

tripled consumption in a thirty-year period would have been beyond the cotton-producing ability of the entire eighteenth-century world.

With falling surplus in agriculture, and hence falling per capita income and per capita demand; with cheapening labor but increasingly expensive resources and capital; with farming and transport technologies so good that no simple improvements could be made, the rational strategy for peasant and merchant alike argued not for labor-saving machinery but for economizing on resources and fixed capital. Large but nearly static markets did not tend toward creating the systemic bottlenecks that might have prompted technological creativity. Merchants dealt with temporary shortages by more creatively using cheap transport. This is the essence of the *high-level equilibrium trap* explanation.[8]

A related theory, called *involutionary commercialization*, also hypothesizes that China's large population was a major factor in the country's failure to modernize. With the size of farms shrinking as population pressure grew, peasants turned to commercialized crop production and handicrafts, which required much more intensive labor input than grain production. Total output value grew, but at the cost of lower marginal returns per workday. The peasants marketed not for capitalist profit, which could have been reinvested, but for sheer survival. And economic growth was not accompanied by economic development.[9]

Conclusions

A brief summary of the many points touched on in this chapter may be helpful. First, some contemporary Chinese analysts notwithstanding, China was not feudal in the usual sense of the word, nor had it been for almost two millennia. Second, there was a good deal of social mobility in traditional China—an unusual amount for a premodern society. Hard physical labor and diligent study had raised a number of paupers or their sons into the official class. Third, China was not unchanging, although changes tended to come slowly and within the context of tradition.

Fourth, history was perceived as cyclical rather than as marching progressively onward. Fifth, the Chinese state was culturalistic rather than nationalistic. Acceptance into the society depended less on an individual's ethnic background than on his ability to assimilate Confucian principles. Sixth, the imperial bureaucracy was hierarchically arranged and subdivided according to function. However, it did not extend down to the level of local government. Seventh, the individual was subordinated to his or her family group. The empire was conceived as a family writ large, with the emperor as a benign, if authoritarian, father.

Eighth, scholars, administrators, and even the emperor himself were expected to follow an ethical rather than a legal code of conduct. Western-style individualism and the supremacy of law never became established, nor did the personal freedom under law represented by Western civil liberties and institutions of private property. It should be noted that legal safeguards of personal liberty are relatively recent even in the West, and still far from perfect. Ninth, traditional China was based on noncommercial agriculture and ruled by a powerful bureaucracy. Although it was politically centralized, China was economically decentralized. Its structures were sanctioned by customs and ethical beliefs rather than religion or law. When traditional China lived up to its ideals, it was quite a good system.

Notes

1. See L. Carrington Goodrich, *A Short History of the Chinese People,* 3rd ed. (New York: Harper, 1959), p. 30, for a concise description of these and other achievements.

2. For those desiring more information on Chinese philosophy, Fung Yu-lan's *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1948) is highly recommended.

3. See Joseph R. Levenson, *Modern China and Its Confucian Past* (New York: Anchor Books, 1964), Chapter 2, for a discussion of this ideal as it relates to painting.

4. Goodrich, p. 187.

5. Burton Watson's "Chinese Protest Poetry: From the Earliest Times Through the Sung Dynasty," *Asia,* no. 17, Winter 1969–1970, pp. 76–91, contains some excellent examples of these. I am indebted to Dr. James D. Seymour of Columbia University's East Asian institute for calling this source to my attention.

6. See Karl Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1957), for a detailed explanation of this theory.

7. See, for example, Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966).

8. Mark Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1973), pp. 312–315.

9. This is the central argument of Philip C. C. Huang's *The Peasant Economy and Social Change in North China* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1985).

Suggestions for Further Reading

Mark Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1973).

Fung Yu-lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1948).

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