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Tilting at Postulates: A Revisionist Deconstruction of China and Chinese History

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Tilting at Postulates:
A Revisionist Deconstruction of China and Chinese History

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Abstract:

The study of "China" has long rested on a set of assumptions, or "postulates," that simplify the narrative. This paper seeks to complicate that narrative through four case studies: (1) the origin of the term "China"; (2) the evolving meaning of *Zhongguo*; (3) the linguistic diversity that hides behind the term "Chinese"; and (4) the diversity of ethnicity and identity. In homage to Don Quixote, the author calls each topic a "tilting field," an acknowledgement that the postulates the essay targets are deeply entrenched and hard to move.

In the conclusion, the author compares the standard narrative to Newtonian physics and the imagined alternative to Einsteinian relativity, acknowledging that just as Newtonian physics is satisfactory for most, the "Newtonian" narrative is accessible to most and the complications of the narrative the essay proposes are largely unnecessary. Yet, just as relativity comes closer to reality of motion at the macro level, so the complicated narrative this essay pushes provides a more accurate picture of the past.

Keywords: China, *Zhongguo*, local talk, *fangyan*, ethnicity, identity, Newtonian vs Einsteinian physics

INTRODUCTION

When I first engaged the study of China nearly six decades ago, the field was framed by several foundational premises, what might be called postulates. As an ignorant undergraduate first entering the field, I had no basis to challenge those postulates, so I accepted them. But that was many years ago. As my engagement with the field deepened and I gained more experience, my acceptance of the postulates on which the study of China rested, and still rests, decreased. What follows, therefore, is my reflections on those postulates about which I have become dissatisfied. It is an attempt to prompt reflection on some of my field's most deeply held assumptions. Perhaps the questions I raise about these assumptions, these postulates, will prompt others to think about them as well.

Postulates are not paradigms, the construct to which Thomas Kuhn gave such prominence so many decades ago,[1] but there are parallels to the two terms that merit consideration, for both refer to those unchallenged presuppositions. The *OED* offers the following definitions:

- Postulate: A fundamental principle, presupposition, or condition, *esp.* one assumed as the basis of a discipline or theory; (also) a proposition that is (or is claimed should be) taken as granted; *esp.* one (to be) used as a basis for reasoning or discussion, a premise.
- Paradigm: A conceptual or methodological model underlying the theories and practices of a science or discipline at a particular time; (hence) a generally accepted world view.

The terms are similar, but with an important distinction. Paradigms, as Kuhn argued, can change, but postulates are stable. Postulates are "a proposition that is … taken as granted." The discussions that follow are about some of those "propositions" that are "taken as granted." They are "the basis of my discipline."

1 Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 4th edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012, [first edition in 1962]).

In the comments that follow, I will challenge a number of postulates pertaining to the field of Chinese studies, and more specifically to the study of Chinese culture—challenges I will, tongue in cheek and with homage to Don Quixote, call "tilting fields" in recognition of the impossible task I set myself. My challenges confront assumptions that, left unchallenged, seem so patently obvious that the community of scholars accepts them with little question—they are foundational postulates. At a minimum, I hope, raising questions about them will prompt others to reconsider that unreflective acceptance, to be more reflective about the culture that we study.

SOME BACKGROUND

Like probably most if not all of my academic contemporaries who were trained in the 1960s and 1970s, I was introduced to the study of China through a very traditional lens that had held sway for myriad generations of scholars. Most basically, in this perspective China was and is real; for the purposes of my education China had always existed. It never occurred to me to question what that meant, or what "China" meant. The reality of eternal "China" was an accepted postulate, a given. In other words, it neither had to be proved nor was it open to question. The history of "China" was framed through a succession of dynasties that stretch across several thousands of years, the bane of countless students who could not keep Tang straight from Ming, much less from Shang … and generally didn't care to do so. "China," we were taught, was a "Confucian" society, an ironic claim given that there is no word in the "Chinese" discourse that exactly translated "Confucian," but it was unchallenged.

These were but two of the foundational postulates; the list could go on. The point is that the study of "China" rested, and still to this day largely rests on, exactly these postulates. It wasn't necessary to prove the reality of "China" because it was … it is so self-evidently real. Dynasties provide a useful heuristic framework, even if their sequence bores and alienates students and perpetuates the myth of a never-changing China. And everyone, of course, "knows" that "Confucian" means the study of Confucius and his disciples, except as all China scholars know the culture of the academic elite rested on a range of texts, many of which are only loosely "Confucian," if at all. One might add that the logical

translation of "Confucianism": *Kongzi xue* 孔子學, did not appear in Chinese discourse until western scholars forced it.[2]

The object of the present discussion, therefore, is to question these presumptions, to question my field's foundational postulates. In homage to Don Quixote, I am off to tilt against the untiltable, to tilt against postulates!

TILTING FIELD #1: CHINA

A starting place for generations of scholars in the West has been the presumed reality of China. It is an assumption that to myriad students and scholars has not required justification. I would argue, however, that there are several flaws to that presumption. China has not always existed. More problematically, I would propose that "China" may never have existed. These are related themes that this essay will get to, but the path is winding. To start, let us examine the word itself and its implications.

The English-speaking world generally refers to countries with names that are connected to those countries' self-referential term: France is "France," Italy is "Italia," and Russia is "Rossiya." If Germans call their land Deutschland, the Deutschlander recognizes the debt to Germanic culture. However, readers familiar with the Chinese languages, a topic that shall itself be examined below, are aware that there is no indigenous word in those languages that aurally echoes the word "China."[3] As such this contrasts with other Asian lands. "Japan," for example, a term that with little change is used throughout European languages, derives from the Cantonese pronunciation of the self-referential characters 日本: *jat bun*. "Korea" derives from the name of the last Korean imperial dynasty: Koryo. Although Southeast Asia has a more complex, multi-layered identity than either Japan or Korea, "Malaysia," the modern state occupying the Malay Peninsula, derives from *Orang Melayu*, a generalized ethnic term of self-reference among the complex tableau of peoples across the region. Yet every Germanic and Romance language

2 Notably, neither *Kongzi xue* nor the abbreviated *Kongxue* appear in the authoritative *Hanyu dacidian*.

3 The compound *zhi na* 支那, which appears in Buddhist texts and in pre-WW2 Japanese scholarship, is a special case, as is explained below.

refers to that land at the southeastern quadrant of the Eurasian landmass as China (Germanic), Sina (Romance), or Kina (in Scandinavian languages, pronounced "shina"[4]). Why?

Most scholars agree that "China/Sina" comes from the trading world at the western and southern ends of the complex network of routes across the Inner Asian heartland that are collectively, if misleadingly, called the Silk Road.[5] At the far ends of that world were merchants from Persia and the western coast of South Asia that faces the Arabian Sea, the northwestern lobe of the Indian Ocean framed by South Asia, the Arabian Peninsula, and northeast Africa (also known as the Gulf of Arabia). In addition to goods from their homelands, these merchants traded silks, a light-weight and compact good of uncertain origin but of very high value that was durable and easy to transport. Also paper, which was primarily used for wrapping and which to these merchants was of equally uncertain origin.

Neither Persia nor South Asia were sources of these goods; they entered the West and South Asian trading networks from elsewhere, but where was that? The merchants who traded them generally shared an understanding that silks and paper had come from a land that lay far to the east, but about this land they knew very little. We don't know when these merchants began to refer to that land as "China/Sina," although most agree it was sometime in the latter half of the first millennium BCE. The earliest textual reference is in a Greek text generally thought to derive from the first century CE called the *Periplus* [i.e., "circumnavigation"] *of the Erythraean Sea* (*Períplous tê̂s Erythrâs Thalássēs*]), a maritime route book that described the ports around the "Erythraean Sea," as the text calls the Arabian Sea. The

4 See https://www.babbel.com/en/magazine/swedish-alphabet (accessed March 12, 2024).

5 There are many monographs on the "Silk Road" ranging from the non-academic popular to the pedantically serious. Of the former, a very accessible and generally responsible example is Sally Wriggins, *The Silk Road Journey with Xuanzang* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2003). Among the scholarly assessments, though not at all pedantic, see Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road: A New History* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012). Hansen effectively dismisses any idea that there was a highway crossing the Eurasian landmass. Among a wealth of scholarship in Chinese there has been a heavy focus on the so-called "maritime Silk Road," the oceanic link between southern China and the western Indian Ocean. See, for example, the multiple volumes of the Taiwanese series *Zhongguo haiyang fazhanshi lunwenji* 中國海洋發展史論文集, multiple editors (Taipei: Zhongshan renwen shehui kexue yanjiusuo, 1984–). See also dedicated monographs including Huang Qichen 黃啓辰, ed., *Guangdong haishang sichoulu shi* 廣東海上絲綢路史 (Guangdong: Guangdong jingji chubanshe, 2003) or Li Donghua 李東華, *Quanzhou yu waiguo zhonggu de haishang jiaotong* 泉州與外國中古的海上交通 (Taibei: Xuesheng shuju, 1986).

anonymous author was most probably a Greco-Roman trader based in Alexandria. Having described the ports of East Africa, Arabia, and the west coast of India, with which the author was most familiar, he concluded with brief remarks about the east coast of the sub-continent above Sri Lanka, about which he admitted he knew little:

> Beyond this region, by now at the northernmost point, where the sea ends somewhere on the outer fringe, there is a *very great inland city called Thina* [italics added here and below][6] from which silk floss, yarn, and cloth are shipped by land via Bactria to Barygaza [an ancient port city near the mouth of the Indus River] and via the Ganges River back to Limurike [the Malabar coast of the western sub-continent]. It is not easy to get to this *Thina*; for rarely do people come from it, and only a few....
>
> What lies beyond this area, because of extremes of storm, bitter cold, and difficult terrain and also because of some divine power of the gods, has not been explored.[7]

What this tells us, with some added interpretation, is that goods originating in "Thina" passed through the forbidding waste of the Tarim Basin, a desert depression that is surrounded on three of four sides by the highest mountain ranges on the planet, a land "of extremes of storm, bitter cold, and difficult terrain," although whether "the gods" added to its mysterious isolation I will leave to others. Having traversed the Basin via the oasis settlements that dot its fringe, these goods proceeded via the Fergana Valley that leads out of the Basin to Bactria, as the region of modern Afghanistan was once known. From there they would have proceeded through such Inner Asian entrepots as Samarkand and Tashkent. Some would have continued on a western course to Mashad, in modern Iran, and Baghdad, and some diverted toward the south via the Khyber Pass and into the Indian subcontinent. Once through the Pass two rivers, the Indus and the Ganges, both with headwaters on the sub-continent side of the Pass, then

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6 Valerie Hansen, *Silk Road*, 18, points out that classical Greek, the language of the *Periplus*, lacks a letter for the "ch" diphthong. The author thus used *theta* θ, which, she notes, at the time "was probably pronounced something like *ts*.

7 Lionel Casson, trans., and commentary, *The Periplus Maris Erythraei: Text with Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 91–93 (sections 64 & 66). Casson (24) identifies Limurikê with the Malabar coast.

provided access to the wider Indian Ocean and ultimately, either directly via the Indus or an indirect path via the Ganges, the Arabian Sea. As the author notes, however, the route was treacherous. Thus it "has not been explored."

The resonance of "Thina" with "China" is apparent, but there is more reason to recognize that "Thina" refers to the semi-mythologized land that lay so far to the east and that was so nearly impossible to get to. For several centuries the routes in and out of the eastern empire passed through a kingdom called Qin 秦 (today pronounced "chin" but at the time of the *Periplus* probably closer to "tsin," thus echoing the classical pronunciation of *theta* θ [see note 6] and Sina, the common term among South Asian traders). Qin was one among more than a dozen regional courts that collectively constituted the Zhou empire. The rulers of these courts recognized the ritual authority of the Zhou ruler, but otherwise were largely self-governing.

Beyond Qin as one headed west was the Tarim Basin. As a consequence of the surrounding mountains, the basin is a desert region with little to no rain. It is ringed, however, by a series of oasis towns, each watered by rivers carrying the run-off from the surrounding mountains that collect precipitation from the moisture-laden summer monsoons that blow off the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The goods that had passed through Qin enroute to lands to the west were handed from trader to trader, moving from oasis to oasis, from caravansary to caravansary. The merchants who worked the eastern portion of these routes were no doubt well aware of Qin; many must have gone themselves to the kingdom's markets to acquire the silks and other goods that they were moving toward the west. They in turn passed the kingdom's name on to the merchants who linked the Basin oases to emporia beyond the embracing mountains, so step by step this name moved out into the Silk Road trading networks, and ultimately to the merchants of the Indian coast via the two great rivers of the sub-continent.

Thus "China" is an ascribed term with only a remote indigenous echo. It is easy to dismiss this fact, as generations of scholars have done, but perhaps the legacy is something that must be considered. The anonymous author of the *Periplus* was followed in the second century by Ptolemy (dates uncertain, late first to mid-second century CE; formally known as Claudius Ptolemaeus). Like the author of the *Periplus*, Ptolemy was a Greco-Roman from Alexandria. Although best known in later ages for his work on the geocentric model of the universe, he was also the author of the *Geographia*, a comprehensive geography *cum* atlas of the world as known to the Greco-Roman scholars of the second century that drew in turn

on the first century work of Marinus of Tyre, which no longer survives. Like so much of the classical legacy of the Mediterranean world, both Greek and Roman, at some point the *Geographia* was lost in western Europe. Much of that legacy remained, however, in Byzantine libraries, from where the text of the *Geographia* was recovered by Italian scholars in the fourteenth century, in the earliest stages of the Renaissance. But the maps that Ptolemy drew to accompany his text, maps that were the heart of his scholarship, were lost to all. The versions of his maps that accompany the text today are reconstructions of the originals by Renaissance scholars based on Ptolemy's narrative text. As such, they cannot be assumed to perfectly reflect second century geographical knowledge. They are influenced, instead, by the knowledge of European scholars of the early to mid-second millennium. As important as this proviso is, however, they are nevertheless useful for they do tell us what Renaissance scholars believed about the world.[8]



Illustration 1: The eastern half of the *Geographia* world map of Arnold Buckinck. Source: https://www.loc.gov/item/2021668470/ (accessed March 23, 2024).

8 Roughly contemporary with the recovery of Ptolemy's *Geographia* is the *Atles català* (Catalan Atlas), a *mappa mundi* (Map of the World) produced around 1375 in Barcelona. The Atlas explicitly references Marco Polo and includes a fantastical representation of Asia. See, for example, Angelo Cattaneo, "European Manuscript Maps of East Asia and China from Marco Polo to the sixteenth Century," with illustration, in *Regnum Chinae: The Printed Western Maps of China to 1735*, edited by Marco Caboara (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 64–78.

Of greatest relevance to our present discussion are the versions drawn by those Renaissance scholars of Ptolemy's comprehensive map of the known world. Illustration 1 shows the eastern half of one version of the map, that compiled by Arnold Buckinck and published in 1478. The map covers the Indic shores of the Arabian Sea, the Indian sub-continent including the Indus and Ganges Rivers, and Southeast Asia.[9] It ends with a vision of the east side of the Malay Peninsula, roughly but most likely only coincidentally reflecting what today we know as the Gulf of Thailand. North of the peninsula, however, the map projects the existence of two realms: Serica in the north, and Sina to the south. In referencing a realm called Serica, Ptolemy was echoing a claim that had echoed through Greek and Roman texts for several centuries. Ctesias (fifth century BCE), Strabo (first century CE), Pomponius Mela (d. ca.45 CE), and Pliny the Elder (23–79 CE) had all referred to the Seres, as the inhabitants of Serica were known.

Both *seres* and *serica* are cognate to the contemporary English word "silk.[10] Serica, therefore, can be rendered "Land of Silk." As the primary sources of Chinese silk were, indeed, in the basin of the Yellow River that defines the north, this reflects a reality that, for reasons explained below, was presumably known to the Renaissance scholars who placed Serica on the recreated map. The position of Sina, in contrast, is more complicated. In the world map (Illustration 1), the location roughly echoes the lands of the Yangtze River basin that is the heart of the eastern empire's south. In the detailed map of Southeast Asia and beyond (Illustration 2), however, Sina is tucked away in the upper right corner, beyond the imagined mountains. In either case, this reflects that this was a region with which Europeans, either as scholars or traders, had very little knowledge and even less contact before the mid-sixteenth century.

9 There are many versions of this map available on the internet. I have used the map of Arnold Buckinck published in 1478 held by the Library of Congress and posted at https://www.loc.gov/item/2021668470/ (accessed March 23, 2024). Although the early attempts to recreate the maps of the *Geographia* published in Europe beginning in the early fourteenth century have significant differences, they do not differ significantly in their treatment of the farther East and do not contradict my comments in text.

10 See the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "silk," at https://www.oed.com/dictionary/silk_n?tab=etymology#22846758 (accessed March 24, 2024).

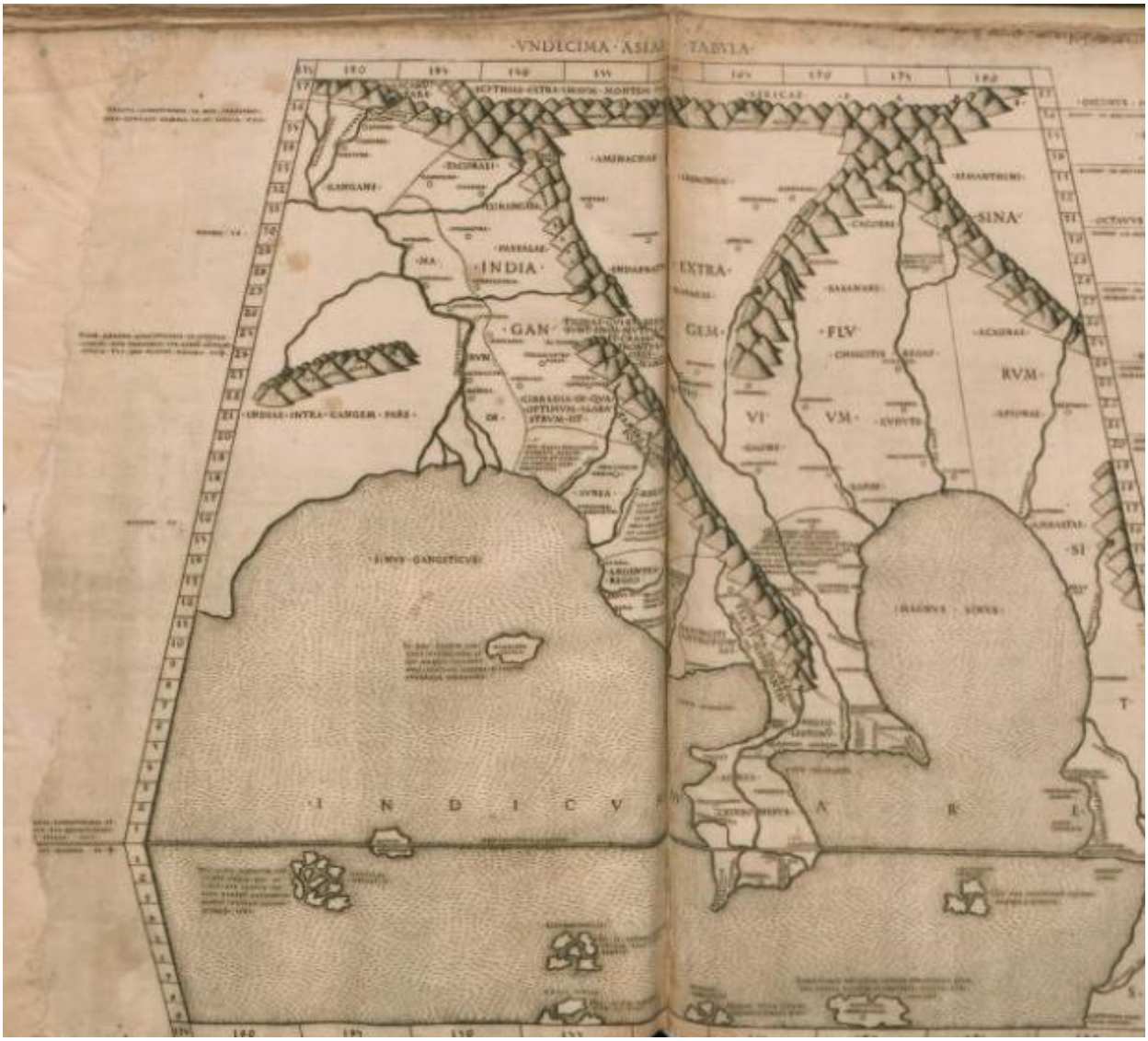


Illustration 2: *Geographia* detailed map of Southeast Asia and beyond. Source: https://www.loc.gov/resource/gdcwdl.wdl_10664/?sp=219&r=-0.162,-0.103,1.567,0.749,0

In considering the distinction that Renaissance scholars imposed on north versus south, we must keep in mind the availability of Marco Polo's *Travels*, detailing the years he allegedly spent at the Mongol court of Khubilai Khan in the late 1200s. The text had been circulating since the turn of the fourteenth century. Modern challenges to the legitimacy of the text not withstanding, this was the most important

source of European knowledge about the eastern empire.[11] Polo's *Travels*, moreover, were not the only first-person accounts of the Mongol empire. The Papacy had sent several ambassadors to the Mongol court, which in turn had sent a mission to the Papal court. The most comprehensive account of the Mongol court, however, was compiled by William of Rubruck (ca. 1210–1270), who undertook his mission to convert the Mongols on his own. Rubruck's account, which he submitted to the Pope despite the unsanctioned nature of his journey, circulated in conjunction with Polo's *Travels*. Although there is no record either that any papal envoy or William had travelled through the empire as Marco Polo allegedly had, the knowledge they did bring back greatly enhanced Europe's knowledge of the empire.

The sixteenth century marked a significant turning point in Europe's relations with and knowledge of China. In 1494 the rulers of Portugal and Spain reached an agreement known as the Treaty of Tordesillas, which affirmed a papal decree of 1493 that divided the world in half, granting Portugal monopoly rights to the eastern Atlantic Ocean, by intent meaning the African coast that Portuguese explorers had surveyed. and Spain monopoly rights to the western Atlantic and all the lands of the "New World."[12] Although the two powers disagreed on exactly what the treaty granted, disagreements that were never fully worked out despite several subsequent treaties intended to resolve the differences, it set the stage for European exploration of, and ultimately exploitation of, the maritime world. Most significantly to the present discussion, the Portuguese throne invoked the treaty to assert monopoly rights to the Indian Ocean and its maritime access to China. In the mid-sixteenth century the Ming dynasty, applying centuries of Chinese policy toward sojourning foreigners, granted the Portuguese

11 By the late fourteenth century Polo's *Travels* had been complemented by the *Rihla*, or "Travels," of Ibn Batuta (1304–1369). Although written in Arabic and not translated into European languages until the nineteenth century, it is certainly plausible that the Renaissance scholars who had found Ptolemy's *Geographia* were also aware of the text, which describes Ibn Battuta's experiences in southern China. The principle challenge to Marco Polo's alleged journey is Frances Wood, *Did Marco Polo Go to China?* (London: Martin Secker & Warburg, 1995, reissued by Routledge in 2018).

12 Technically the treaty was between the kingdoms of Castile and Portugal. However the reigning monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella had married in 1469 and ruled their respective kingdoms jointly. The treaty and its consequences have been the topic of innumerable books and articles. A solid narrative is J. H. Parry, *The Age of Reconnaissance: Discovery, Exploration, and Settlement, 1450–1650* (London: Cardinal, 1973). A more recent work intended for a wider audience is Stephen R. Bown, *1494: How a Family Feud in Medieval Spain Divided the World in Half* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2011).

suzerain authority over Macau, heretofore an insignificant fishing village near the mouth of the Pearl River and the great port of Guangzhou (Canton).[13]

Although the treaty granted Spain unchallenged rights to the riches of the Americas, at first it appeared they were blocked from trade with China, which fell fully on the Portuguese side of the meridian invoked buy the treaty. This changed, however, with Ferdinand Magellan's affirmation that it was possible to sail from Spain's New World colonies to a heretofore unknown archipelago near the Chinese empire: the Philippines. Asserting their right to the Philippines by virtue of Magellan's alleged "discovery" of the archipelago, the Spanish asserted rights to the Philippines—rights not technically granted by the treaty as the Philippines lay on the Portuguese side, but a claim that lay unchallenged. Although Magellan was killed, his voyage across the Pacific had proven that the archipelago could be reached from Spanish possessions in the Americas. It took another forty years for Spanish navigators to find the route back from the Philippines. Once that was established in the 1560s, however, the ample supplies of New World silver the Spanish could ship across the Pacific, supplies that were in great demand by the Chinese empire due to the tax policies of the Ming dynasty, drew Chinese traders to Manila, heretofore a small fishing village but blessed with an excellent harbor. Manila became the political and economic center of the colony.

The arrival of Portugal and Spain, however, was only the foot through the door. Before the century was out the merchant communities of both Great Britain and the Netherlands were marshalling their might and wealth to challenge the Iberian monopoly on the China trade. In 1600 the British throne chartered the East India Company and granted the company's merchant members monopoly trading rights in the Indian Ocean and beyond. In 1602 the Dutch followed suite with the Dutch East India Company (*Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie*).

The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries coincided with the glory years of the Ming dynasty (1368–1664). For the first time since the collapse of the Tang dynasty around the turn of the tenth century a Chinese dynasty could legitimately claim control over all the lands of the Qin-Han empire except the

13 On Portuguese trade in the Indian Ocean and beyond through the sixteenth century, see Kirti N. Chaudhuri, "The Portuguese Maritime Empire, Trade, and Society in the Indian Ocean During the Sixteenth Century" *Portuguese Studies* 8 (1992), 57–70.

remote protectorate in the Red River basin that is today northern Vietnam.[14] The economy was booming, the empire was stable, and its power unchallenged. It is notable that this was the empire the Portuguese and Spanish expected to encounter. This was "China." This "discovery" reified the legends that had evolved throughout west Asia and Europe. But it had not always been so.

Before the *Travels* of Marco Polo circulated around Europe, before William of Rubruck submitted his assessment of the Mongols to the Pope, there was no firsthand account of any European who had ventured so far to the East. To the extent there was any information on China available to Europeans before the texts of Marco Polo or William, it would have been via the accounts of west Asian scholars such as Ibn Khurdadhbih (820?–913). Ralph Israeli has described his *Kitab al-Masalik wa-l Mamalik* (The Book of Routes and Kingdoms), first issued in 846), as "the standard reference work from which later writers quoted extensively."[15]

Perhaps the best known account, however, is that of Ibn Battuta (1304–1369). Whereas Ibn Khurdadhbih had visited China in the waning years of the Tang dynasty, Ibn Battuta, like Marco Polo and William of Rubruck, toured the empire of the Mongols. His *Travels* ("Rihla," formally named *Tuḥfat an-Nuẓẓār fī Gharā'ib al-Amṣār wa 'Ajā'ib al-Asfār* [A Masterpiece to Those Who Contemplate the Wonders of Cities and the Marvels of Travelling] was perhaps the most thorough introduction to the empire in any outside language before the second half of the second millennium. Like Marco Polo he travelled extensively and for multiple years during which time he visited many of the most important cities of the empire. His text, much like Marco Polo's but from a very different point of view, is described by Ross Dunn as a solidly anthropological description of fourteenth century China.[16]

The powerful, unified, and extraordinarily wealthy empire is the model of China that has been bequeathed to generations of scholars. It is, unfortunately, misleading. Let me return to a statement in the opening paragraph of this section: "China has not always existed. More problematically, I would

14 This also excludes the Tarim Basin in the far west, where Han authority was never secure. The Tang and much later the Qing (1649–1912) also claimed authority in the Basin. The Ming never did.

15 Raphael Israeli, "Medieval Muslim Travelers to China (electronic publication, accessed at https://ar.unesco.org/silkroad/sites/default/files/knowledge-bank-article/medieval_muslim_travelers_to_china.pdf), 11.

16 Ross E. Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005)

propose that 'China' may never have existed." Of course for many centuries there has been an empire in the land we call "China." The question is, what does "China" mean and does that meaning reflect reality?

"China," I emphasize, was the creation of others. The Chinese—an equally problematic term to which I will return—did not call their empire "China," nor did they call themselves "Chinese." But the peoples of west Asia and Europe did. "China" was that other, that realm, wrote the author of *Periplus*, that "because of extremes of storm, bitter cold, and difficult terrain and also because of some divine power of the gods, has not been explored." And because it was so unknown, and was to remain so unknown for so long, it was a land that could be invested with whatever qualities one might project. Recall, as well, that William of Rubruck never went to "China." His journey was to the Mongol court in Karakorum. Something similar can be said of Marco Polo. His journey was to the Mongol court. When he travelled to points below the Great Wall, if indeed he did, it was as the eyes and ears of the Mongol emperor at a time when the Mongol empire marginalized the domestic inhabitants of its "Chinese" empire. Neither William nor Marco Polo told a story that reflected the depth and complexity that was reality. Neither really had any access to that reality.

Why, however, does this matter? When Portugal and Spain, and then a broad array of Europeans, opened direct trade between themselves and "China" in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Ming dynasty was at its apogee. The empire was unified and immensely prosperous. That was what concerned the merchants who opened that trade; as long as the silks and porcelains that they sought were available, they had no reason to be concerned with any facts behind the "China" they encountered. But to the missionary-scholars who followed it was an empire that was consistent with the legends that had been told for generations; they were now were confirmed. The "China" of legend was the empire they encountered.

That affirmation of legend, however, allowed them to simplify the complex history that lay behind the Ming empire. To these merchants and the missionaries who followed and to the scholars who came next there had been, but one "China." In reaching that conclusion, a conclusion that for generations has deeply influenced historical and cultural scholarship, those scholars neglected the myriad experiences, the myriad approaches that have come together to make the "China" those early scholars and merchants encountered and which together have made the "China" we know today.

Illustrative of this is the approach of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716). Known for the

immense breadth of his scholarship, encompassing virtually all areas of Renaissance knowledge, Leibniz had a deep fascination with "China." His primary concern was to defend the rites he thought were outlined in the ageless classics—works he only knew through the discussion of others for he neither could read them in the original nor were there translations—against the criticisms of missionary scholars such as Matteo Ricci. But in framing his defense he portrayed China as ageless. He wrote, for example, in his "Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese," composed around 1715:

> China is a great Empire, no less an area than cultivated Europe, and indeed surpasses it in population and orderly government. Moreover, there is in China a public morality, admirable in certain regards, conjoined to a philosophical doctrine, or rather a natural theology, venerable by its antiquity, established and authorized *for about 3,000 years* (Italics added here and below).[17]

If the agelessness of China and its civilization was not his primary concern, Leibniz repeated such observations elsewhere. For example, in "Remarks on Chinese Rites and Religion," written in 1708, he remarked that "temples and sacrifices *had existed 2000 years before Confucius*."[18]

Nor was Leibniz alone among European scholars of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who saw China as ageless. In the opening of his essay on Jesuit impressions of China, for example, David Morgan has written:

> [I]n the eighteenth-century European imagination generally, China played an exemplary role: it was a new orient, for thinkers and readers of the West, *more ancient*, wiser, and many other ways distinct from the more familiar Islamic East.... The Jesuits, with characteristic shrewdness, broadened the issue, and rested the defense of their concessions to Chinese tradition and ceremonies on a bold and imaginative paean *to*

17 "Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese," translated by Daniel J. Cook and Henry Rosemnont, Jr., in Cook and Rosemont, translators and editors, *Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Writings on China* (Chicago: Open Court, 1994), 78.

18 "Remarks on Chinese Rites and Religion," translated by Cook & Rosemont, in *Writings on China*, 9.

> *the antiquity*, moral purity, and philosophical enlightenment of the Chinese (italics added).

Morgan concludes that to the Jesuits "the Chinese *were most ancient of nations*.[19]

"China," the avatar embraced by the early European scholars and bequeathed to later generations, was ageless, "the most ancient of nations," a land of admirably moral government and society that had drawn on the ancient classics for untold eons. The real empire, however, was neither ageless nor static, but always evolving and changing. Han cultural, social and political theory was as unlike that of the Manchu Qing empire as the culture of post-Reformation and post-Enlightenment western Europe was from the world of the classical Mediterranean. By embracing "China," however, the scholars of the West established and then perpetuated a myth, a myth that only the most recent generations of western scholars have managed to surmount.

TILTING FIELD #2: ZHONGGUO

If scholars in the far west referred to the largely unknown land that lay far to the east as Serica, Sina, or China, this was not what the people of that semi-mythologized land called it. To them the most straightforward name was that of the ruling dynasty. For example, Xuanzang, the seventh-century monk who made his way to India in search of scriptures and training during the Tang, would have referred to himself as "a Tang person" 唐人. There were in addition several terms used in a generic sense to refer to the land of the empire: *hua* 華 or *xia* 夏, for example, either of which could be used alone but that were often used together as a compound. But the term with the deepest resonance was *zhongguo* 中國, and this leads in turn to further overlays of meaning.

Zhongguo is among the most ancient terms in the political lexicon of the Sinitic world. Although the earliest known use of the phrase is in an inscription embedded in a bronze vessel dated 1038 BCE

19 David Morgan, "Sources of Enlightenment: The idealizing of China in the Jesuits' Lettres Édifiantes and Voltaire's Siècle de Louis XIV," *Romance Notes* 37 (1997), 263 & 264 & 265.

known as the "Heh urn 何尊," some have argued its roots go back much deeper into the second millennium BCE.[20] Whatever its origins, *zhongguo* is spread throughout the classical literature of the first millennium BCE.[21] While there is a tension in its use between a purely cultural meaning: "the land of civilization," and as a reference to place: "the place that is civilized," in its classical usage it did not mean "China," except in the sense that the empire was where civilization was defined, the "place that is civilized," or where "this culture of ours" (*si wen* 斯文), the vast corpus of ritual and thought that defines the classical culture, is manifest.[22]

The disjunction between the cultural and political meaning of *zhongguo* is evident in its varied uses. The empire, it was argued, embraced the values of civilization, thus *zhongguo* and the empire were coterminous, even if the one term addressed culture and civilization and the other geo-politics. But Buddhist pilgrims such as Xuanzang who travelled to India, land of the Buddha himself and thus what they defined as "the land that is civilized," referred to the sub-continent as *zhongguo*. The monarchs of Japan, Korea, and Vietnam all at one time or another referred to their lands as *zhongguo*, albeit more in homage to the civilization of the Central Plain than in opposition to its emperor. Most illustrative, however, was the work of the Japanese samurai scholar Aizawa Seishisai (1782–1863), a scholar of the Japan-centric Mito School and a proponent of the restoration of imperial authority over that of the shōgun. In his polemical "New Theses" (*Shinron* 新論) first iossued in 1825, Aizawa argued that Japan,

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20 See, for example, Yongchun Zhao and Anran Chi, "The Earliest 'China': The Concept of *Zhongguo* during the Xia, Shang, and Western Zhou Dynasties," *Journal of Chinese Humanities* (December, 2022), 311–318.

21 There are many discussions of *zhongguo* in contemporary literature. See Zhao and Chi, "The Earliest 'China,'" and Hu Axiang 胡阿祥, *Weizai siming:* "Zhongguo" *gujin chengwei yanjiu* 伟哉斯明:《中国》古今称谓研究 (Wuhan: Hubei jiayou chubanshe, 2000) as well as the extensive citations in both.

22 This tension has been noted by others, although not necessarily with quite the same point in mind. For two fairly recent exam[les, see Chen Bo, "Making 'China' out of *'Zhongguo'*: 1585–1690," *Journal of Asian History* 50:1 (2016), 73–116, to which I shall return below, and Peter K. Bol, "Reflections on the *Zhongguo* and the *Yi Di* with Reference to the Middle Period," in "What Does It Mean to Be or to Become Chinese? Interdisciplinary Reflections on Chinese Identity," edited by Daniel A. Bell, *China Review* 23:2 (2023), 87–105. Although Chen is focused on how mid-second millennium European missionaries interpreted *Zhongguo* and China, his argument is a nearer parallel to my own; Bol is more focused on the cultural focus of Song to Ming commentators and the civilized/non-civilized tension. See also Ge Zhaoguang 葛兆光, *Zhai zi Zhongguo: chongjian youguan "Zhongguo" de lishi lunshu* 宅兹中国: 重建有关「中国」的历史论述. (Beijing: Zhonghua, 2011).

though once a student of the civilization of the mainland empire, had by the early nineteenth century surpassed the latter. Thus Japan was now the center of civilization. It was "the land that is civilized," thus *zhongguo* (or, in Japanese, *chūgoku*).[23] In all such cases, however, *zhongguo* was a cultural value, not a national name. Japanese culture, as Aizawa argued, may have supplanted that of the mainland as the definition of civilization and so of *zhongguo*, but politically Japan was still Japan. Point being, for Buddhist pilgrims and Japanese protagonists, the term could be expropriated and applied to other cultures, other lands.

Today, however, *zhongguo* is used as a national title. The government in Beijing calls itself the *Zhonghua renmin gonghe guo* 中华人民共和国, which in international fora it translates as The Peoples/*renmin* Republic/*gonghe guo* of China/*Zhonghua* (or PRC), or, for short, *Zhongguo*. The government of Taiwan similarly refers to itself as *Zhongguo*, which it also translates in international fora as "China." Although an idealization of ancient cultural norms may persist in the background, the term is used as a culturally neutral geo-political name, akin to "Iran" or "France."[24]

How did this come about? How did a term with such a deep and rich cultural heritage come to have such a narrow political meaning? Over the millennia since *zhongguo* was first introduced into the discourse of the Central Plain, the vast alluvial flood plain formed over eons by the Yellow River east of the Taihang Mountains that was the center of the ancient Shang and Zhou empires, the tension between the ritualized "land of civilization" and the political focus of "place that is civilized" has leaned one way at one time and the other way another. Even as *zhongguo* was not used as a national title, the identity of the physical empire as the center of all civilization created an identity between the two. Then came the Europeans.

Through the middle centuries of the second millennium the legal scholars of Western Europe struggled with definitions of state and sovereignty. Myriad journal articles and monographs have argued

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23 See Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi, *Anti-Foreignism and Western Learning in Early Modern Japan: The* New Theses *of 1825* (Cambridge. MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).

24 Illustratively, Word automatically "corrects" *zhongguo* with a capital "Z," in keeping with its contemporary political usage.

that the 1648 Peace of Westphalia was the crux in this struggle.[25] Although recent scholarship has challenged the long-accepted interpretation that the two conjoined treaties of 1648: the Treaty of Münster and the Treaty of Osnabrück that together established the Peace of Westphalia, marked the onset of national sovereignty in European international law,[26] the decades that followed Westphalia laid the foundations of new legal interpretations of "sovereignty." At the heart of this was the convention that national states, regardless of their size, were individually and equally sovereign. Perhaps most critically, at least for present purposes, legal experts increasingly argued that sovereignty lay with the state, an enduring institution, and not the ruler, a human being who is subject to the laws of mortality.

To illustrate this evolution, consider the "Compact between Spain and Portugal" of 1495 that affirmed the division of the globe between these two courts initially settled in the 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas. The Compact was signed by Ferdinand and Isabella for Spain and John II for Portugal. This was, in other words, an agreement between two rulers, two sovereign individuals; only derivatively was it between two sovereign nations.[27] Nations, a concept that was just beginning to circulate in western Europe, transcended the limits of mortality; rulers did not. Agreements between rulers, therefore, were themselves subject to mortality. Although legal analysis may differ, the fact was that new rulers could adhere to, dispense with, or modify agreements reached by their predecessors. As such the Compact is typical of diplomatic agreements between European courts as ideas of sovereignty were debated. Notably, in the absence of republican governments where leaders had temporal limits to their rule, there was a conflation between personal and state sovereignty.

In 1782, however, Louis XVI of France signed a contract with the "Thirteen United States of North America" stipulating how the rebellious "states" would repay the loans France had provided through the Revolution. The opening states, "The King having been pleased to attend to the requests made to him

25 The list is far too long to enumerate here. As examples of the debate, however, one might consult Leo Gross, "The Peace of Westphalia, 1648–1948," *The American Journal of International Law*, 42:1 (1948), 20–41, and Derek Croxton, "The Peace of Westphalia of 1648 and the Origins of Sovereignty," *The International History Review*, 21:3 (1999), 569–592.

26 See, for example, Andreas Osiander, "Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Westphalian Myth," *International Organization*, 55: 2 (2001), 251–287, who is explicitly critical of Gross, "The Peace of Westphalia.".

27 https://avalon.law.yale.edu/15th_century/mod002.asp (accessed February 10, 2024).

in the name and on behalf of the united provinces of North America."[28] The emergent United States presented a new concept, for there was no "ruler" in the classical sense of the word. Louis XVI was a ruler, and so the contract was signed on his side by himself. But his contractual partner was the United States of North America, not yet even a new nation and certainly not a partner with a comparable ruler. Louis pointedly referred to his contractual partners not as the "United States," as the compact is titled, but as the "united provinces" (note the capitalization or lack thereof), emphasizing that they were not really on the same level as him.

This hierarchy was reaffirmed but with a significant addition the following year when George III of the United Kingdom agreed in the 1783 Treaty of Paris to the cessation of hostilities between Britain and the American colonies. As had Louis XVI, King George personalized the agreement on his side: "His Britannic Majesty acknowledges the said United States, … to be free Sovereign and independent States,"[29] Unlike Louis, George allowed that his partners were "Sovereign and independent States." They did not constitute a monarchy, but his partners were sovereign and independent, and equally importantly they were States. George thereby acknowledged the distinct and coequal status of his treaty partner. George, moreover, included a significant commitment: "for himself, his heirs, and successors, [the king] relinquishes all claims to the government, property, and territorial rights of the same and every part thereof." The treaty was more than an agreement between the king and Sovereign and independent States, for it committed "his heirs and successors" to adhere to its terms, which but for the War of 1812 they have.

To underline the point, gradually the state, the institution that endures, replaced the mortal monarch as party to diplomatic agreements. Monarchs may have reached the terms of a treaty, but the treaty gradually became an instrument binding two courts, or nations, beyond the reign of any individual. As Horia Ciurtin has demonstrated, however, this interpretation applied only to European and European-derived courts and states. The rest of the world was not included.[30]

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28 https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fr-1782.asp (accessed January 16, 2024).

29 https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/paris.asp (accessed February 10, 2024).

30 Horia Ciurtin, "When Westphalia Goes to (Greater) China: Territory, Sovereignty and Legal Narratives Across the Strait," *The Journal of Territorial and Maritime Studies*, 5:1 (2018), 23–41.

European diplomatic engagement with the Qing empire began with the Manchu emperor Kangxi and his Russian counterparts the co-rulers Peter 1 ("The Great") and Ivan V to resolve tensions arising from Russian intrusion into the outer reaches of the Manchu homeland north of the Amur River. Negotiations culminated in the 1689 Treaty of Nerchinsk, which established boundaries between the two empires that anticipate the modern boundary between the Peoples Republic and Russia. The treaty was drafted in three languages: Manchu, Russian, and Latin; the latter, as the neutral language, was accepted by all parties as the authoritative version. Notably there was no Chinese version until decades later. Of greatest relevance to the present discussion, the Latin references the Qing empire as "Imperium Sinicum," a term that derives from the Hellenized "Thina" discussed above.[31]

The issue becomes most acute, however, with the onset of Sino-British diplomacy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. After decades of misunderstanding and tension between the two courts over opium, war erupted in 1838. Peace was uneasily restored with the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing. From its opening clauses the treaty was rife with misinterpretations as each side as yet imperfectly understood the meaning and nuances of the other.[32]

The English text repeatedly refers to "His Majesty the Emperor of China." Captive to the habitual nomenclature, the English diplomats equated the imperial realm with "China" without identifying exactly what that might mean; after centuries of use, to those diplomats it did not need defining. The Chinese text, in contrast, refers to the "August Emperor of the Great Qing Dynasty" 大清大皇帝. This carried a very different meaning than the English reference to "China," for the Great Qing Dynasty was a multi-cultural empire that stretched from the Manchurian forests to the Tarim Basin, from the grasslands and forests to the north to the ocean littoral to the south. The "China" alluded to by the British diplomats only covered a part of the whole.

Of most immediate relevance, is the use of *zhongguo* in the text, for it is used. In the Chinese text the dynasty is never referred to as *zhongguo*, nor is the emperor referred to as the "Emperor of *Zhongguo*,"

31 https://la.wikisource.org/wiki/Pactum_Nertschiae (accessed February 15, 2024). I am indebted to Pamela Crossley (Dartmouth College) for assistance on the Russian and Manchu texts.

32 I have relied on the text of the treaty at https://china.usc.edu/treaty-nanjing-nanking-1842 (accessed February 15, 2024).

or any other term that might loosely equate to "China."[33] The realm of the emperor was the land under the control of the Great Qing Dynasty; the dynasty is equated to the realm, and that was far greater than "China." The first use of *zhongguo* occurs in Article V, which addresses the role of the *cohong*, the guild of merchants who had controlled all trade through the port of Guangzhou. The emphasis of the two texts in Article V is evidently distinct and revealing. The English version states:

> The Government of China having compelled the British Merchants trading at Canton to deal exclusively with certain Chinese Merchants called Hong Merchants (or Cohong) who had been licensed by the Chinese Government for that purpose, the *Emperor of China* agrees to abolish that practice in future at all Ports where British Merchants may reside, and to permit them to carry on their mercantile transactions with whatever persons they please, and *His Imperial Majesty further agrees to pay to the British Government the sum of Three Millions of Dollars, on account of Debts due to British Subjects by some of the said Hong Merchants* (or Cohong), who have become insolvent, and who owe very large sums of money to Subjects of Her Britannic Majesty.[34] (NOTE: italics added here and in the following text)

The Chinese version, on the other hand, states:

> The English merchants in Guangzhou/Canton until now have dealt solely with the Hong merchants, which are also known as the Cohong. As of today and henceforth the August Emperor 大皇帝 *grants* that this custom need not be followed. Whatever port the English merchants may do business in, without regard to whomever they may trade with, they may do so at their convenience. Furthermore, *because among the Hong*

33 For an informative discussion of how the Manchus defined their empire in totality versus their rule over lands south of the Great Wall that constituted "China," see Pamela Crossley, "Was the Qing Empire China?," at https://www.suduri.net/comment.shtml (accessed February 17, 2024).

34 I have relied on the text available at https://china.usc.edu/treaty-nanjing-nanking-1842 (accessed February 16, 2024).

> *merchants some are greatly indebted to the English merchants we commit three million in foreign silver to make good the debts. This will be repaid by Chinese officials* (*Zhongguo guan* 中國官).
>
> 凡大英商民在粵貿易，向例全歸額設行商，亦稱公行者承辦，今大皇帝准以嗣後不必仍照向例，乃凡有英商等赴各該口貿易者，勿論與何商交易，均聽其便；且向例額設行商等內有累欠英商甚多無措清還者，今酌定洋銀三百萬員，作為商欠之數，准明由中國官為償還。[35]

The contrasts between the two versions are striking. Broadly, the English version proposes that the terms of the article were a set of concessions by the Qing emperor in response to British demands. The Chinse version presents the same concessions as imperial grants (*zhun* 准). More narrowly, the English version opens with an accusation against "the Government of China," The passage does not appear in the Chinese version. Absent a western concept of "government" in Chinese or Manchu discourse at the time, there was no straightforward way for Qing officials to translate this, which perhaps explains why it is omitted in the Chinese entirely.[36]

Most relevant to the present discussion, however, despite repeated references to "China" in the English version, the phrase *zhongguo* only appears in the Chinese version at the end of the passage, where it sits as a modifier to "officials" who must address repayment of debts; otherwise the Chinese version refers to the "Emperor of the August Qing Dynasty." Whereas in the English version the burden of ensuring repayment lies with the emperor himself, in the Chinese version "Chinese officials" (*Zhongguo guan* 中國官), and so explicitly not Manchu, are charged to ensure the debts owed to the

35 See the Chinese text at https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki (accessed February 16, 2024). This and all translations, unless otherwise noted, are the author's.

36 For an insightful discussion of the language challenge faced by both English and Chinese at this time, see Frederico Masini, "The Formation of Modern Chinese Lexicon and Its Evolution Toward a National Language: The Period 1840–1898," Journal of Chinese Linguistics Monograph Series, No. 6, (1993), especially Chapter 1, "Language and History From 1840–1898."

British merchants are made good. So in this instance *zhongguo* appears as an ethnic reference distinguishing those officials who identify as, or are identified as, Chinese rather than Manchu.

Zhongguo appears six more times in the Chinese version of the treaty. Akin to the reference to "Chinese officials" in Article V, half are as an ethnic reference, either as "*Zhongguo* persons" (中國人) or "*Zhongguo* merchants" (*zhongguo shangren* 中國商人) (articles IX and X), again apparently to distinguish them from Manchus. The other uses refer to place. Article VIII, for example, refers to all persons of any ethnicity "who are presently detained anywhere in *Zhongguo*": *jin zai Zhongguo suo guanxi ge difang beijinzhe* 今在中國所管轄各地方被禁者. Similarly, Article X refers to the British envoy "resident in *Zhongguo*" *zhu Zhongguo* 住中國.

Notably, nowhere in the treaty is the ancient cultural meaning of *zhongguo* alluded to. Although the Chinese text portrays the emperor as magnanimous, his concessions as "grants," nowhere does the treaty invoke ancient values of civilization or centrality. The meaning of *zhongguo* had clearly moved toward its modern meaning, although as yet it did not carry the meaning of "state" or "country." The Manchu diplomats and court were clearly distinguishing themselves from *zhongguo*, which now carries the sense of place.

Through the remainder of the nineteenth century the Qing court signed a succession of treaties with European powers as well as the United States, and ultimately Japan. For the most part they followed the conventions established in the 1842 treaty. The English (or other European languages) continued to refer to "His Majesty the Emperor of China," while the Chinese versions referred to the "Illustrious Emperor of the August Qing empire" (*DaQing huangdi* 大清皇帝). It is unclear to what extent either side recognized the disparity between the titles, but the English concept of "China" differed significantly from the Qing concept of *DaQing*.[37] Western diplomats conceived of the emperor as the emperor of China, a territory that was inhabited by single body of people called "Chinese." This, after all, was what the ancient term China/Sina had always meant. To the Qing, however, the "august" emperor was the ruler of a multi-ethnic realm that, in addition to Chinese, included Manchus, Mongols, Tibetans, and Muslims, to say nothing of the myriad local cultures of the uplands of the middle and deeper south. Not

37 For a thoughtful discussion of this, see Crossley, "Was the Qing Empire China?"

only was the Qing emperor *not* "Chinese," for he was proudly Manchu, but his empire could not adequately be defined as "China" as the term had long been understood in western discourse.

The next round of treaties were signed in the context of the Taiping Rebellion. A significant innovation in the European versions of the 1858 treaties is the repeated reference to China as a "nation." The word does not appear in the 1842 Nanjing treaty, but Article 1 of the British treaty states: "The Treaty of Peace and Amity between the *two nations*, signed at Nanking on the twenty-ninth day of August, in the year 1842, is hereby renewed and confirmed" (italics added). The Chinese text, in contrast, glosses over the issue entirely in Article 1. In the following article where the British version refers to the "universal practice of great and friendly nations," the Chinese substitutes *da bang* 大邦, where *bang* is a near synonym for *guo* 國.

A significant step was taken in the 1868 Burlingame-Seward Convention between the United States and the Qing. The opening line of the Chinese text reads: "The two *guo*/nations of August Qing and the United States" 大清與大合聚兩國 celebrate their good relations.[38] Indeed, throughout the Chinese text the Qing dynasty is referred as a "nation" (*guo* 國). Similar language can be found in the 1890 "Convention of Calcutta" that settled a brewing border dispute Britain and "The August Qing Nation" 大清國.[39] Clearly as the sequence of treaties between the Qing court and western powers evolved, European concepts of sovereignty and nationhood, which had always been part of the western text, worked their way into the language that was used by the Qing negotiators. Qing authorities all the way up to the emperor adopted the terminology of nationhood, although the treaties continued to be negotiated between western powers and the Qing dynasty. Yet a further step was codified in the 1900 Boxer Protocol.[40] The English text refers to "the state of the Qing dynasty." This was rendered into Chinese as "the nation (*guojia* 國家) of the August Qing state" 大清國國家.

Guojia (or simply *guo*) is an ancient term in the Chinese political lexicon. As originally used during the Zhou dynasty, it meant the territory ruled by a *zhuhou* 諸侯, a term commonly translated as "duke" or "prince" but not necessarily implying any blood relationship with the ruler, or *wang*. The *zhuhou* were

38 https://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/hb4m3nb03h/?order=2&brand=calisphere (accessed February 22, 2024).

39 https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/中英藏印條約 (accessed February 22, 2024).

40 https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/辛丑條約 (accessed February 22, 2024).

regional representatives of the Zhou ruler's authority, a system that is readily analogized to feudalism. But here it has a new meaning: "nation." When the Sinic world of East Asia: principally China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, encountered western political theory in the nineteenth century, it encountered a range of terms for which there was no analogy in classical political discourse. "Nation" was one. As China, and later Japan, engaged with the West both through translation and analysis, a new vocabulary was needed.

As Frederico Masini has demonstrated, the process of defining this new vocabulary began in China. Lin Zexu (1785–1850), best known for his efforts to suppress the opium trade that led into the Opium War, was among the first Chinese to realize that ignorance of the West created a great danger. As the great military strategist Sun Wu had argued in his classic text *The Art of War*, to defeat ones enemy one must know ones enemy. Lin took the lead in learning about the Europeans, in the course of which he had to come up with a range of neologisms, many of which remain in use today.[41] As Chinese scholars, but especially Japanese scholars, translated western works, the neologistic vocabulary expanded. It was in this context that *guojia* came to mean "nation," a term that has no parallel in classical Sinic discourse.

The use of *guojia* in the Boxer Protocol to mean "nation" had the effect, most likely intentional, of placing the Qing empire on a sovereign par with the European powers. Under western international law it was essential for the signatory parties to assert that a Chinese *nation*, legally on a par with all the western nations, had the authority to make the concessions the Protocol demanded. There is an obvious irony in this, as the Boxer Protocol was by far the most onerous treaty imposed on China by the foreign powers; it was not a treaty among equals. By the mid- to late nineteenth century the Manchu Qing dynasty had ruled the empire for well over two hundred years, but it had always been understood that dynasties had a lifespan. The Qing dynasty was not a nation. Under the premises of western international law, "the nation of the August Qing state" was. But there as yet was no legal equivalence between "the August Qing state" and "China."

The final step to equating *zhongguo* with "China" occurred following the 1911–1912 Republican Revolution. In order to distinguish itself as a republic from the two thousand years of imperial

41 See Masini, "Formation of Modern Chinese Lexicon," especially section 1.3, "The First Translations: Lin Zexu, Wei Yuan, and Xu Jiyu."

administration, the new government announced itself as the *ZhongHua minguo* 中華民國. In international fora this was rendered "The Republic of China." For the first time *zhongguo* and China were one and the same. The Chinese version of the 1915 Treaty of Kyakhta between the new republican government, imperial Russia, and Mongolia, was negotiated by the president of the *ZhongHua minguo*. [42] Similarly, the 1922 Nine-Power Treaty Concerning China, drafted in Washington in conjunction with the Washington Naval Conference by representatives of Belgium, France, Britain, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Portugal, the United States, and China, identified China as the *ZhongHua minguo*.[43] *Zhongguo*, the shortened form of *ZhongHua minguo* that became the common term, was now a national name.

In summary, as China was gradually enrolled as a fully participating member of the international community as defined by the western powers, the reigning authorities equally gradually adapted to the expectations of those powers. In the early nineteenth century, when Britain first challenged the authority of the reigning dynasty, the challenge was framed as one between Queen Victoria and the "emperor of the August Qing dynasty." Through a succession of negotiations and treaties Qing officials moved toward defining their dynasty in national terms, ultimately as "the nation of the August Qing dynasty state." It was only after the Republican Revolution of 1911–1912, however, that the Chinese side affirmed the equivalence of "China" and *zhongguo*. In the absence of a dynasty, a name was needed, and the name chosen was *Zhongguo*, or the more formal *ZhongHua minguo*. The ancient tension between "the land of civilization," and "the place that is civilized" is gone. *Zhongguo* had become a national name, neither more nor less, absent the moral overtones of its ancient usage. And so it remains into the twenty-first century.

42 https://www.jendow.com.tw/wiki/中俄蒙協約 (accessed February 22, 2024).

43 https://zh.wikisource.org/zh-hant/九國公約 (accessed February 22, 2024).

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If there is an insight to be gained from the foregoing, it is that until modern times "China" and the successive dynasties have not been synonyms; nor did *zhongguo* mean "China," as it does today. Both equivalencies are the result of the forceful integration of the Qing empire into the world of western international law, a law which incidentally identified the empire as "China." As I have discussed, "China" has no direct indigenous root. I will go further, and hark back to an opening thought: "China" never really existed. "China" emerged in the trade networks that linked the west coast of the Indian subcontinent and Persia to the Mediterranean. Local pronunciation may have varied, but however it was or is pronounced, in early times it referred to a semi-mythologized land about which the discussants knew very little. No one who lived about the time the anonymous author of the *Periplus* wrote of "Thina" has left us any record of having been there. As the author wrote, "because of extremes of storm, bitter cold, and difficult terrain and also because of some divine power of the gods, it has not been explored." It is not implausible that some venturous individual had made the journey. If so, however, absent a record that could have been shared the journey had no impact. The result: As "China" entered the discourse of the Mediterranean and then western Europe, it was open to imagination. The "China" that was imagined, however, never really existed.

Zhongguo, in contrast, was a deeply resonant phrase with a long history in the domestic discourse of the Sinic world that included not only the mainland empire but peripheral lands including Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. *Zhongguo* was a centralizing concept, both physically and metaphysically. It lay in the center of "all under the Cosmic Power" (*tianxia* 天下). At the center of the center was the "illustrious" emperor, the *huangdi*, on whom the Cosmic Power had bestowed authority. The empire pivoted around him.[44] The rest of the world pivoted around the empire. The "China" of the western trade networks was a secular concept; for all its mystery, it was a place. *Zhongguo* merged a secular identity rooted in place with a metaphysical meaning that transcended place.

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44 Through the entire course of imperial history there is only one woman who seized the imperial mandate. In the later seventh century Wu Zetian, the widow of the Tang emperor Gaozong, following a period as the regent for her son, took the imperial title for herself and proclaimed the Zhou dynasty. Illustrative of how irregular this was in the eyes of the empire's historians, her Zhou dynasty is not recognized, although her reign as *huangdi* is.

As is probably true of any such foundational term, there were debates about its definition, but what was generally agreed upon is that *Zhongguo* is where true civilization was practiced. This meant the Central Plain, the cultural if not political core of the Zhou dynasty. When the First Emperor imposed his rule on the Yangtze River basin and lands further south, there was no presumption that these lands shared the culture. The locus of *Zhongguo* was the Central Plain because the culture of the Plain was the closest to true civilization, the place where culture most closely embraced the rites and values of the Classics.

The upshot is that the merchants of the Arabian Sea and the scholars of the Central Plain were alluding to two very different concepts. To the former, Sina/China was a single and secular place that lay beyond the realm of their knowledge. To the latter, *zhongguo* was a complex, multi-layered concept that embraced "all under the Cosmic Power" in a quasi-religious hierarchical structure that began with the emperor.

For century upon century this was of very little importance. The merchant networks of the Arabian Sea spread word of "China" into the scholarly world of the West via the Greco-Roman culture of Alexandria, the presumed home of the anonymous author of the *Periplus*. Alexandria was the commercial link between the Arabian Sea and the Mediterranean and the center of classical scholarship. Both the merchant and scholarly communities of Alexandria were aware at some level of the existence of a realm far to the east, but neither was aware of *zhongguo* and its complex meanings. We know that by the later first millennium the merchant networks of the wider Indian Ocean had linked the Persian Gulf and littoral regions of the Arabian Sea to the farther east. There are hints that the occasional adventurer from the Greco-Roman world and later from expanding economies of western Europe may have found his way to the farther east, but is no explicit evidence.[45]

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45 See, for example, Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), Part III; K. N. Chaudhury, *Trade and Civilisation In the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985), especially Chapter 2, "The Rise of Islam and the pattern of pre-emporia trade in Asia," and John W. Chaffee, *The Muslim Merchants of Premodern China: The History of a Maritime Asian Trade Diaspora, 750–1400* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018). The Chinese literature on this topic is voluminous, but one might begin with the multi-volume *Zhongguo Haiyang fazhanshi lunwen ji* 中國海洋發展史論文集 multiple editors (Taibei: Zhongyang yanjiu yuan sanmin zhuiyi yanjiu suo, 1983–) and Chen Yan 陳炎,

Protected by the *Pax Mongolica* that overlay almost all the Eurasian heartland in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, small numbers of Europeans: Marco Polo and his uncles, for example, papal envoys such as John of Plano Carpini, and William of Rubruck who travelled to the Mongol court on his own to convert the Mongols, made the overland trek across the forbidding wastes of the Eurasian heartland. William even recounts the presence of several communities from farther west that had clustered around the Mongol court, including Nestorian Christians from greater Syria. All spent time at the Mongol court, and Marco Polo allegedly traveled through much of Sina/China, what he called Cattai (= Cathay) or Mangi, on missions for the Khan. But there is little evidence that they grasped the contrast between "China" (or Cattai), the reigning dynasty, and *zhongguo*.

Thus, as Chen Bo has explained in a recent study, when Matteo Ricci paved the way for Jesuit missionaries to engage the eastern empire, they did so unaware of the distinction. The implications of this, Chen asserts, have influenced western sinology down to the present: "Almost all sinologists [that is, foreign scholars of the eastern empire] … have shared the opinion that 'China' is identical with 'Zhongguo,' but in fact they are not identical. Between them lies a deep gap that needs to be bridged."[46]

My first two tilts, therefore, are about words, their meaning, and their impact. Next I will turn to two themes that are about structures.

Haishang sichou zhi lu yu Zhong-Wai wenhua jiaoliu 海上絲綢之路與中外文化交流 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1995).

One highly suspect text deserves mention here: *The City of Light* (Little, Brown, 1997), that purports to be the translation of a journal of Jacob, a Jewish merchant from Ancona (Italy) who travelled to the city of Quanzhou in Fujian Province in 1270. The translator, David Selbourne, refused to make the manuscript available on the grounds that the owner forbade him doing so, thus the general suspicion in which the book is held. We do know that throughout the eleventh to thirteenth centuries there was an active maritime trade linking southeastern China to Southeast Asia and on to the Indian Ocean (see the texts cited above), so Jacob's alleged journey is plausible. In the absence, however, of further proof in support of the text, including some of its remarkable assertions, it is impossible to rely on it.

46 Chen Bo, 73.

TILTING FIELD #3: IS THERE A "CHINESE" LANGUAGE?

Like many of my generation in the field of Chinese Studies who were not raised in a Chinese household, in the later 1960s I enrolled in Chinese language courses. Although the initial course was billed as Introductory Chinese, I was in fact taught the language, or "dialect," of Beijing, what in the West is commonly called Mandarin.[47] Because my instructor was from Taiwan, then as now the *Zhonghua minguo*/Republic of China, I was told this was "the national tongue" (*Guoyu* 國語). Had my instructor been from Beijing—very unlikely in the later 1960s when the USA and the PRC had almost no relationship—I would have been told it is "the common tongue" (*Putonghua* 普通話). For practical purposes, despite regional colloquialisms, the national tongue and the common tongue were, and remain, the same.[48]

Many years later my research took me to southern Fujian, where I was exposed to two variations on that norm that challenged the notion of a common or national tongue. In the cities and towns of Fujian almost everyone was and is "bi-dialectical," perhaps better recognized as bilingual. I had the experience of meeting villagers who spoke only the regional "dialect" called "southern Min speech" (*Minnan hua* 閩南話), which is unintelligible to those who speak the common tongue. Most, however, also speak the common tongue as well, for it is almost universally the medium of education, politics, and mass media. Those who only speak southern Min are generally older, as they are less likely to have benefitted from a formal education, which is conducted almost exclusively in the common tongue.

As my research took me around Fujian I found the local pronunciation of the common tongue difficult to understand. On reflection, however, it ought not to have been surprising. Those such as myself who speak standard American English are certainly familiar with the distinct accents of the British, Australians, or South Asians, to mention but a few. All speak English, but each can readily

47 "Mandarin," like "China," is an ascribed word ultimately deriving via a series of steps from Sanskrit via the mediation of Portuguese; see *Oxford English Dictionary* at https://www.oed.com/dictionary/mandarin_n1?tab=etymology#38381981.

48 For much of the following I rely on Jerry Norman, *Chinese* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Norman's study is not the only comprehensive study of the Chinese languages nor are some of Norman's analyses unchallenged, but it is regarded generally as the most scientific. See also John DeFrancis, *The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984).

recognize someone from elsewhere, and usually can identify where that is. More relevant to this discussion, however, are the regional distinctions of pronunciation within any one of the English-speaking countries. Americans are broadly familiar with the so-called "southern accent," and are generally familiar with other regionalisms such as are found across much of New England or the interior West. There are even "localisms," especially in the older cities of the East Coast: Bronx, South "Philly," Boston, etc. One could say the same of Britain, where speakers of so-called BBC, or "formal," English could have found themselves at a loss when speaking with a Yorkshire man,[49] or Italy, where a native of Milan would have been asea in Naples before a generalized standardization of Italian largely due to mass communication smoothed out regionalisms in the later twentieth century. The PRC is a vast land, equal in size to the United States. It should not be a shock to find that across the land there are regional pronunciations of the common tongue. Such was and is the case in southern Fujian and the myriad other regions of the PRC. Conversely, and despite my egregiously poor pronunciation, my colleagues in Fujian readily recognized that I had been taught "proper" Mandarin pronunciation and grammar.

At the same time, many if not most of the local population spoke and still speaks "Southern Min speech." This is the regional "dialect," a term that needs some unpacking. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines dialect as "a form or variety of a language which is peculiar to a specific region, *esp.* one which differs from the standard or literary form of the language in respect of vocabulary, pronunciation, idiom, etc."[50] That is, a dialect is a nonstandard version of an official standard language. As might have been the case with the Yorkshire man, dialects can be difficult for others to penetrate, but however bowdlerized they remain a version of the orthodox language.

Southern Min is only one of several regional "local talks" (*fangyan* 方言), the domestic term that is commonly rendered "dialect." In contrast to the definition provided by the *OED*, however, Southern Min is more than just an unorthodox pronunciation. It is, in fact, incomprehensible to anyone who only

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49 Illustratively, my mother, who grew up in Norfolk, had to interpret the speech of the family gardener, a Yorkshire man, for her father who never managed the Yorkshire accent. She also referred to BBC English as "rummy," a colloquial distinction alluding to its upper crust associations.

50 www.oed.com/dictionary/dialect_n?tab=meaning_and_use#6920297 (accessed April 2, 2024). For a parallel discussion, see John DeFrancis, *The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984), Chapter 1, "On Defining 'Chinese' and 'Language.'"

speaks the "common tongue." This is not the incomprehensibility of the Yorkshire man, but rather that of a Spanish speaker when confronted with Rumanian. Orally Southern Min is a distinct language, even as it follows most of the grammatical rules of the "common tongue."[51] Illustratively, across the region where Southern Min is spoken, a region marked by successive river basins separated by pronounced uplands that traditionally hindered communication, there are further sub-divisions. Although these can reach the point of mutual non-intelligibility, like the Italian of Naples or the German of Munich they are regional variations of the orthodox pronunciation of the "unorthodox" Southern Min.[52]

In one of the earliest academic surveys of "local talk," Li Fang-kuei (1902–1987) outlined eight broad language families in contemporary China: Northern Mandarin, Eastern Mandarin, Southwestern Mandarin, Wu, Gan-Hakka, Min, Yue, and Xiang; in addition he found a small number of isolated dialects that did not belong to any family. Li's analysis has been endorsed with minor modifications by later linguists such as Jerry Norman and James Matisoff.[53]

Of these, the three Mandarin dialects, which together are estimated to constitute roughly seventy percent of all "Chinese" speakers, are generally regarded as northern. While sufficiently distinct to merit recognition as separate, they retain some degree of mutual intelligibility. The remaining five—Wu, Gan-Hakka, Min, Yue, and Xiang—because the core region of each is south of the Yangtze River, are classified as southern. All five are mutually unintelligible with each other and with Mandarin. Which raises the question why they are considered to be "Chinese" at all. Put differently, this raises the question if there really is such a thing as "Chinese," or is the term once again a mask for a much more complicated topic.

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51 DeFrancis coins the term "regionalect" to bridge this issue; see *The Chinese Language*, Chapter 3, "Idiolects, Dialects, Regionalects, and Languages."

52 For a parallel discussion, see DeFrancis, *The Chinese Language*, 54–57.

53 Fang-kuei Li, "Languages and Dialects of China," *Journal of Chinese Linguistics*, vol. 1:1 (1973), 1–13. This is an elaboration on Li's earlier work published as "Languages and Dialects," *The Chinese Yearbook* (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1937), 59–65. James Matisoff, "Notes on Fang-kuei Li's 'Languages and Dialects of China,'" *Journal of Chinese Linguistics* vol. 1:3 (1973), 471–474 and Norman, *Chinese*. Li was among the first Chinese to study formal academic linguistics, which he did at the University of Michigan and Chicago, where he earned his Ph.D. His schema was affirmed at the 1955 Technical Conference on the Standardization of Modern Chinese.

In partially answering the second question, the linguist Timothy Light, writing on behalf of the Asia Society, has explained:

> Chinese itself is not a single language, but a language family like the Romance language family to which French, Spanish, Italian, Romanian, and Swiss Romansch belong. Like the Romance languages, the Chinese languages are mutually unintelligible (that is what makes them different languages).[54]

The term "Chinese," this approach argues, embraces a body of related languages just as does "Romance." But others approach the question differently.

While not contradicting Light, Jerry Norman has proposed that much as the Romance Languages all derived from Latin so all contemporary Chinese languages have a common origin. The southern languages, he maintains, diverged from the northern language that had been standard during the centuries following the collapse of the Han when the empire was divided north and south.[55] To appreciate Norman's point some background is necessary. Prior to the late first millennium BCE, for untold eons the area we call "China" today had been divided, at a minimum, between two separate worlds, a theme we shall return to. In the Yellow River basin that defines north China and the Central Plain, a distinct culture had developed no later than the early second millennium BCE with roots

54 See Timothy Light, "Chinese Language: Myths and Facts," at https://asiasociety.org/education/chinese-language, accessed May 6, 2024.

55 The following relies on Norman, *Chinese*, chapters 8, "Dialectical Variation in Norh and Central China," and 9, "The Dialects of the Southeast." I must emphasize that because my goal is to outline cultural contrasts in a very broad sense, my approach through the following comments is very generalized. Although I refer to northern and southern culture in the singular in fact there were numerous local cultures. The broad terminology I have used is only valid in the sense that there were some overriding commonalities. For a critique of attempting to go too deeply into identities in the pre-modern world, see Timothy Reuter, "Whose race, whose ethnicity? Recent medievalists' discussions of identity," in Reuter, *Medieval Polities and Modern Mentalities*, edited by Janet Nelson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 100–108. Although Reuter focuses on medieval Europe, his cautionary comments are broadly instructive.

archaeologists have argued go back as much as a millennium earlier.[56] As I have suggested above, across this sphere there was considerable regional variation, but there were several features that suggest a shared underlying commonality.

The economic basis of this culture was dry-land farming dependent on irrigation. Millet and wheat were the principle crops, but evidence points as well to other dry-land grains such as gaoliang and sorghum as well as to soybean cultivation, all of which was supplemented by animal domestication.[57] Among the most important innovations of this world, by the second millennium BCE a writing system had evolved that was broadly shared at least among the tiny fraction of literate elites.[58] The roots of this system have long been debated. It is already fully developed when it appears in the archaeological record as inscriptions on animal bones that had been used for prognostication, what are conventionally known as the "oracle bones." There is almost no record of a transitional system from which the fully developed system evolved, although it is commonly assumed there had been something. Regardless, this was the first and for many centuries only writing system to evolve in eastern Eurasia. How directly it was tied to the spoken language(s) of the Central Plain where it evolved is an unresolved and probably unresolvable question. It is likely that the language of the oracle bones was tied to the spoken language of the court, but how closely it reflected court discourse and what links it may have had to the language(s) of the common people cannot be known.[59]

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56 See K.C. Chang, *The Archaeology of Ancient China*, 4th edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), and Lily Liu and Xinggan Chen, *The Archaeology of China from the Late Paleolithic to the Early Bronze Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

57 See Liu and Chen, *The Archaeology of Ancient China*, especially Chapter 4, "The Domestication of Plants and Animals."

58 Debates on how best to define this system have been intense and sometimes vitriolic. Some call it pictographic, some call it ideographic, and some say it is neither or both. Some call it monosyllabic, others polysyllabic. What I think we can say without entering the debate is that it is ancestral to the contemporary system we call Chinese characters. As such it has been used by a broad range of East Asian cultures. For a good summary of the debates, see Ming Dong Gu, "Sinologism," in Language Philosophy: A Critique of the Controversy Over Chinese Language," *Philosophy East & West* 64:3 (2014), 692–717.

59 DeFrancis, *The Chinese Language*, emphatically argues against equating the written language and the spoken. Bearing his critique in mind, the written language nevertheless provided a medium of communication across a broad but shallow elite

Apart from these questions, however, there is one consequence of a system of writing that was not primarily phonetic.[60] Across the Plain and more broadly the Yellow River basin, where logic would suggest the range of mutually incomprehensible local dialects was significant, the writing system allowed a trans-dialectical discourse. By the first millennium BCE this fostered an elite culture with a common set of values framed by a shared body of texts.

If writing was perhaps the most important innovation of the Central Plain, a second important innovation was political. We can only interpret the politics of ancient times based on the archaeological record, but it would seem society had been organized at local levels. Tradition tells us that there had been some form of state structure under a central authority called Xia, but the evidence is very sketchy and its interpretation subjective. In fact there appears to have been little more than autarkic villages that shared some common rites and values, perhaps while acknowledging some nature of ritual center. Through the first half of the second millennium BCE, however, one political center had gained a distinct level of power leading other centers to acknowledge it as overlord; this was what the historical record calls the Shang or Yin dynasty. Although relations between the central court and outlying courts were fragile, this represents the first step toward a unified empire across the Plain.

In contrast, across the south, defined principally by the vast drainage basin of the Yangtze River as well as the embracing ocean littoral region, the economy was significantly more diverse. Rainfall was more reliable, and the landscape was dotted with lakes and marshes, collectively limiting the need for irrigation. A simple reductionism would identify rice, which grew naturally in the myriad marshes, at the core. As southern cultures learned to domesticate rice as early as a deca-millennium BP, they developed wet-land agriculture, a stark contrast to the dry-land foundation of the economy of the Yellow River cultures. In addition the emergent southern cultures harvested a range of products that complemented rice, which alone lacks the full range of nutrients the human body requires. Here, too,

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60 That mandates a brief clarification, because in fact the overwhelming majority of characters are at some level phonetic. Take, for example, the character for "records": 記, pronounced *ji*. Like most characters, this consists of two parts: 言 (pronounced by itself *yan*, but of no consequence because it was not the phonetic guide), called the radical, and 己, called the phoneme, which in this case was in fact pronounced just like the character—that was rarely the case. The radical, which by itself means "words," marks the character as having something to do with communication, either transcribed or oral. The phoneme provides a loose guide to pronunciation, but only to the dialect in which the character originated.

animal husbandry was an important supplement. Because wet-land farming requires a reliable access to water, fish and other marine products appear to have been more central to the southern diet than was the case in the north. While the economy of the southern cultures may have been richer than that of the north and the breadth of cultivars more varied, however, the south produced neither a writing system nor a centralized polity. Instead, southern culture apparently focused on the village and expressed itself through aliterate shamanism.

These were very different cultural worlds, made all the more so by significant linguistic differences. In both north and south there were myriad linguistic regionalisms, but most scholars agree that the language(s) of the North, which may have been somewhat more uniform than those of the South at least among the elite, belonged to the Sino-Tibetan language family. The languages of the South, in contrast, were divided between those belonging to the Austro-Asiatic language family, others that belonged to the Austronesian family, and some no doubt that were neither. Whether the distinct linguistic families shared a common base in the deeper past has been debated.[61] What is clear is that by the first millennium BCE, even if they had a common origin, they had significantly diverged and shared very little.

For uncounted centuries these contrasting worlds had developed independently. A transition zone existed where contact and exchange occurred, but the farther one might have gone into either the North or the South the more distinct the worlds became. The first millennium BCE, however, marked a series of dramatic changes in the politics of the Central Plain that reached culmination heralding a new era late in the third century BCE. The Shang/Yin empire that had long provided a limited degree of centralization over the Central Plain and the north was supplanted late in the second millennium BCE by the tighter unity of the Western Zhou empire.[62] The centralized authority of the Western Zhou,

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61 See, for example, Laurant Sagart, "The Expansion of *Setaria* Farmers in East Asia: A Linguistic an Archaeological Model," in *Past Human Migrations in East Asia: Matching Archaeology, Linguistics and Genetics* edited by Alicia Sanchez-Mazas, Robert Blench, Malcom D. Ross, Illia Peiros and Marie Lin (Oxford: Routledge,2008), 133–181.

62 For an illustration of the centralized authority of the early (or "Western") Zhou, see Edward Shaughnessy, "Western Zhou History," in *The Cambridge History of Ancient China*, edited by Michael Loewe and Edward Shaughnessy (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 298–299, the transcription of an inscription on a bronze vessel commemorating a royal appointment.

however, was shattered in the eighth century BCE. In the face of pressure from the grasslands that lay north and west of the Zhou realm, the court had to abandon its ancient capital that lay on the Wei River, a tributary to the Yellow River west of the Taihang Mountains that mark the western boundary of the Central Plain. The refugees found sanctuary on the Plain, but the Zhou court was reduced to a figurehead, preserved by a network of powerful regional courts only for the ritual functions performed by the Zhou ruler and court that affirmed the cultural and political order.

This relocation marks the transition from Western to Eastern Zhou. It also marks the devolution of political authority from an era of loose centralization of authority revolving around the Zhou court to the rise of numerous functionally independent courts. One of those was the aforementioned Qin court that straddled the trade routes in the northwest. Beginning about the middle of the third century BCE under the charismatic leadership of Ying Zheng 嬴政, or King Zheng, Qin launched a campaign of unification that culminated in 221 BCE when Qin had conquered all the autonomous courts of the Plain. The Qin conquest had forged a new level of centralized authority that extended across the Plain and west to the Wei River basin that was the Qin base. King Zheng assumed a new title: *huangdi* 皇帝, commonly mistranslated as "emperor," a title better rendered thearach, or "theocratic ruler," to invoke the quasi-religious role the *huangdi* assumed. Zheng then proclaimed his the first of ten thousand generations of rule. As such, he was the "First Thearch" (*Shi huangdi* 始皇帝). Having imposed unity on the Central Plain, the new thearch turned his attention to the south. Although his armies suffered grievously in the face of unfamiliar pathogens, his campaign was militarily successful. For the first time in history the vast drainage basin of the Yangtze River and the southern oceanic littoral were enveloped under the rule of an imperial center based on the Yellow River basin and the Central Plain. This was the theocratic empire of the Qin and Han dynasties (221 BCE – 220 CE).

Although a trickling stream of northern peasants into the rich lands of the Yangtze basin had gone on for decades if not centuries, Qin-Han for the first time in history established a holistic empire uniting North and South. There no doubt was a marked contrast between the formal language of the court and officialdom and the colloquial language of the migrants, but Norman believes they many were conversant in some form of what he calls the "Qin-Han standard language" (183), the underlying language structure of the Central Plain. As they filtered into the Yangtze basin, the immigrants encountered the broad range of indigenous cultures with their own Austronesian or Austro-Asiatic

languages, languages, it bears repeating, that were quite different from the "Qin-Han standard language" of the immigrants. Norman proposes that as the new empire imposed an administrative structure on the South and as immigrant communities found their place beside the indigenous world, the Qin-Han standard language that was shared by the empire's administrative class became a *lingua franca* that bound the new empire together, even if few of the indigenous peoples of the south could speak it.

The Qin-Han theocratic empire endured for more than four centuries, in the course of which, Norman writes,

> the spread of the [Qin-Han standard] language to ever more distant regions gave rise to a centrifugal force to create increasingly greater differences in the local varieties of the language; but at the same time the common or standard language created a centripetal counterbalance, the effect of which was to bring reginal varieties into greater uniformity (185).

The centripetal force and the uniformity the standard language promoted was upended when the holistic empire broke apart early in the third century CE. For nearly four centuries the Yellow and Yangtze River basins were once again politically separate. Beginning in the fourth century the Yellow River basin and the Central Plain were overrun by waves of conquerors with distinct linguistic backgrounds. Just as the administrators of the Qin-Han empire had fostered linguistic evolution across the South, so these conquerors influenced the evolution of language throughout the Yellow River basin. Even more dramatic, however, was the regional diversity that reemerged in the South. A succession of short-lived dynasties laid claim to the Yangtze basin and southern littoral, but the actual reach of these courts was limited. As one might have moved beyond the environs of the southern capitol in Jiankang (modern Nanjing), where the influence of the court culture was strong, into remoter regions of the south, the centripetal force Norman alludes to led to greater and greater linguistic divergence from the court standard. It is this process, Norman concludes, that led to the emergence in the middle centuries of the first millennium of the precursors to the "local talks" we find across southern China today.

With this in mind, we might revert to the original question of this section: What does "Chinese language" mean? Is there such a thing as "Chinese"? In common with Norman, most linguists today

maintain that all contemporary Chinese "local talks" derive from a common source; most likely this was the Qin-Han standard language that some call "archaic Chinese."[63] Like Timothy Light, author of the Asia Society essay on Chinese language quote above (see note 55), Norman explicitly likens the relationship among the "local talks" to the Romance languages, all of which derive ultimately from Latin (187). Considered in that light, one might well question whether there is any language we should call "Chinese," or is "Chinese" better thought of as a family of languages?

In fact, the only truly unifying language among the several Chinese languages was the language of the court and bureaucracy, what traditional sources have called "official talk" (*guanhua* 官話). Much work has been done in recent years on the evolution of "official talk," but the words of Alessandro Vilignano (1539–1606), one of the early Jesuit scholar/missionaries in the East, is illustrative:

> The Chinese have different languages in different provinces to such an extent that they cannot understand each other [i.e., "local talks"].... [They] also have another language which is like a universal and common language; this is the official language of the mandarins and of the court; it is among them like Latin among ourselves.[64]

Vilignano is echoed by his contemporary Mateo Ricci (1552–1610):

> With all the varieties of languages, there is also one that we call cuonhoa (*guanhua*), that is to say, the language of the law courts; it is used in audiences and tribunals; and, if one learns this, he can use it in all the provinces.[65]

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63 In addition to Norman, *Chinese*, see also Maria Kurpaska, *Chinese Languages: A look through the prism of the Great Chinese dictionary of Modern Chinese dialects* (New York & Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmdH & Co, 2010). The *Journal of Chinese Linguistics* is another excellent source of information. There is, of course, a vast corpus in Chinese.

64 Vilignano, "Historia del Principio y progresso de la Compaia de Jesus en las Indias Orientales," quoted and translated in W. South Coblin, "A Brief History of Mandarin," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 120, No. 4 (2000), 539.

65 Ricci, "Storia dell' introduzione del cristianesimo in Cina," quoted and translated in Coblin, Á Brief History," 539.

As W. South Coblin has demonstrated, "official talk" was distinct from but not isolated from the myriad "local talk" varieties.[66] Evidence presented by Coblin and echoed by others argues that from the early Ming through the eighteenth century "official talk" was related most closely to and interacted the most with the "local talk" of the greater Nanjing region. Despite the sharing, however, "official talk" remained a distinct medium of discourse. Only in the last centuries of the empire did the influence of the Beijing "local talk" begin to supplant that of Nanjing.

So, to suggest answers to the two questions: What does "Chinese language" mean? Is there such a thing as "Chinese"?, I would respond that "Chinese language" does not mean what my instructors who introduced me to "the Chinese language" might have meant had they posed the question. As Vilignano noted, "The Chinese have different languages in different provinces, to such an extent that they cannot understand each other." What my peers and I were taught in our "Chinese language" classes was one of numerous languages that together are the Chinese family of languages. But at the same time there has been an official language that allowed men from varied linguistic backgrounds to converse, the "official talk." Modern Mandarin, the language we were taught, is not simply the colloquial version of late imperial "official talk," as some have claimed, nor is it simply the common tongue of Beijing. It is an amalgam of the two that has become the standard speech of Beijing and more broadly of the modern Chinese state.[67]

In a not terribly distant past it for a native of the south where "local talks" proliferated: a native of Guangdong, perhaps, or of Fujian or Zhejiang, each with their own "local talk," was unlikely to encounter an individual from elsewhere. Everyone they were likely to meet spoke their "local talk" and no other. The "local talk" of the area met all one's needs; one might wonder if most "Chinese" were even aware of the diversity of local talks." Only those who interacted with the administrative hierarchy at the regional or local level were likely to engage with an individual from elsewhere. If, as is likely, the official spoke

66 This and the following draw on Coblin, "A Brief History of Mandarin." Complementary discussions can be found in Zhongwei Shen, "The Origin of Mandarin," *Journal of Chinese Linguistics* 39:1 (2011(, 1–31, and Tsai Fa Cheng, ""Ancient Chinese and Early Mandarin," Journal of Chinese Linguistics Monograph Series 2 (1985).

67 See Yen Run Chao, "What is Correct Chinese" in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 1981:3

his own "local talk" as well as "official talk," he most likely needed an interpreter who could bridge the gap between him and the locals.

Today, however, there is an official language that is largely shared by the two "Chinas": the PRC and Taiwan. Just as the modern state has cultivated the synonymity of *Zhongguo* and "China," so has the common tongue evolved under state sponsorship to become the official language. As has happened elsewhere: the United States, the United Kingdom, Italy, Germany, Japan, and too many others to enumerate, mass media has imposed a standardization of language. As I noted in opening this section, this has not eradicated the "local talks," but it has rendered them secondary to the common tongue. So yes, there is a language that can be called "Chinese," but it sits atop a much more complicated linguistic world.

TILTING FIELD #4: ETHNICITY AND IDENTITY

Allow me to open with another personal anecdote. Some years ago I was invited to give a lecture at the Museum of Overseas Trade History in Quanzhou (Fujian). The topic I chose very much anticipated the present essay. I was early in my reconsideration of the meaning of "China" in light of the many years that I had focused on the history of southern Fujian. I discussed evidence that a residue of pre-imperial culture survives in the local culture of southern Fujian, the region that has lain at the heart of my scholarship my entire career. My goal, then as now, was not to challenge contemporary reality but rather to offer a complication to the received narrative on how thar reality evolved. I could tell from audience reaction, however, that there was some unease at a foreigner deconstructing an imagined past. Finally, in the course of questions and comments following my lecture a very brave young man, an adolescent maybe twelve or thirteen, stood up and said something to the effect "China is my country and I am Chinese" 我國是中國而我是中國人. Many of the audience cheered him, I assumed both for his implied criticism and his courage.

In the immediate I too admired the boy's courage and conviction and sought to clarify my arguments while acknowledging his concern. I raise the anecdote, however, to make a point. Although the PRC recognizes fifty-five official "minorities" (*shaoshu minzu* 少數民族), the overwhelming

majority of the population, over ninety percent, identifies as ethnically Han 漢. The boy in question, however, identified himself as "*Zhongguo ren*," a native of *Zhongguo*. *Zhongguo*, as has been discussed, is both a political and cultural identity. It is, however, an identity that almost all citizens of the PRC, be they Han or otherwise, would share. That is, in defining ethnicity it transcends more specific identities. My young inquisitor may well have been any of several "minorities" that live in the area: Muslim, the most numerous of the recognized minorities with a long history in southern Fujian (as well as a strong connection to the museum), or more local ethnicities such as "Shed" (*pengmin* 棚民) or Hakka 客家. Most likely, to the extent at his age that he had considered the issue at all beyond his identity as *Zhongguo ren* (the identity, one might suspect, that he had been taught in school), he considered himself Han. Regardless, that he identified himself as *Zhongguo ren*, not Han or Muslim or any of the other possibilities, underlines how the modern state has reframed identity, to limit ethnic identity in favor of a national identity sanctioned by the state that in theory unites the myriad ethnicities of the PRC.

But this leads to further consideration of the meaning of Han ethnicity. During the Han dynasty itself, those who lived on the Central Plain heartland referred to themselves as "Han People" (*Han ren* 漢人). This was used especially in contrast to outsiders such as the Xiongnu 匈奴, a grasslands confederation with which the Han empire was in endless tension. "They" were outsiders; "we" are Han people.[68] Although this occurs in surviving texts most commonly in reference to the Xiongnu, it also was used to emphasize the contrast between Han people and allies such as the Western Qiang 西羌.[69] What we can interpret through these and further examples is that through the Han dynasty, or at least through the first century of Han rule, there was some sense of common identity across the Central Plain that united the "Han people" in contrast to the definably not-Han. Whether this was simply an identity among the literate elites or was shared across social lines we cannot really know. Especially notable for

68 See, for example, Liu Xiang 劉向, *Xinxu* 新序, "Jie shi 節士, #32, accessed at https://ctext.org/xin-xu/jie-shi/zh (November 18, 2024), or Ban Gu 班固, *Hanshu* 漢書, *juan* 94b, at https://ctext.org/dictionary.pl?if=gb&id=65702 (November 7, 2024), page numbers not available.

69 Ban Gu 班固, *Hanshu* 漢書, *juan* 45, accessed at ctext.org/han-shu?searchu=漢人#n65702 (November 7, 2024), page numbers not available.

the present discussion, however, among the limited instances where the phrase appears in Han era texts, none allude to southerners.[70] Except for a thin overlay, southerners were not-Han.

The shared identity among literate elites in the north was challenged by events in the decades that followed the collapse of the Han empire in the early third century CE. The century that followed was an era of uncertainty. Initially, in an era known to traditional historiography as the Three Kingdoms (*San guo* 三國), the holistic Han empire split into three: the Wei empire in the Yellow River basin, the Wu empire in the Yangtze River basin, and the Shu empire in far western Sichuan.[71] Late in the third century the Sima family usurped the throne of the Wei empire and established the Jin empire on the Central Plain and Yellow River basin. By the end of the century the Jin had overcome both the Wu and Shu empires and briefly restored the territorial, or "holistic," empire as it had been under the Han.

It was not until the following century, therefore, that the Han dynastic Mandate fully crumbled. From its inception in the third century the Jin dynasty had inherited a pattern of unrest among the several cultures that inhabited land along the northern frontier. This unrest crested early in the fourth century, culminating with the Rebellion of the Five Barbarians, a collective term addressing the range of Inner Asian grassland cultures that had made the northern frontier a poorly-resolved concern to the agrarian empire south of the grasslands for centuries. What was left of the Jin court in the North fled to the South. where a collateral relative of the Sima family consolidated a new power center based at Jiankang 建康 (modern Nanjing) on the Yangtze River.[72]

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70 This is based on a search for "漢人" in Qin and Han texts at ctext.org.

71 There is a suggestive element in the naming of this period. The Han empire had inherited the nomenclature of the preceding Qin empire, which had called the emperor *huangdi* (see earlier discussion in text); Han emperors were likewise called *huangdi*. As I have explained, under the Qin/Han structure, a *guo* was subordinate to the realm of a *huangdi* and was ruled by a *wang*, the term that is commonly translated as "king." By labelling the three post-Han empires *guo*, traditional historiography downplays their significance. The problem ancient historians faced was the presumption that there could not be multiple *huangdi*; there could only be one mandate. Thus when confronted with three empires of equal status, each ruler claiming to hold the mandate, they labelled them all *guo* ruled by *wang*. However, when the Jin empire conquered each of the three *guo*, the Jin ruler once again ruled a unified empire. He was, therefore, heir to the Mandate and *huangdi*.

72 Jiankang, or Jianye 建業 as it was originally called, had been the sometime capital of the Three Kingdoms Wu empire. Wu was the first southern *guo* to claim the imperial mandate, which in turn conferred some legitimacy on its capital as the seat of an empire. Thus it was not happenstance that elevated Jiankang to be the seat of a mandated empire. These

In the North a confusing chaos ensued as the Central Plain was overrun by competing cultures in an era illustratively known in history as the Sixteen Kingdoms. The conquerors were united by one central distinction: they largely were "not-Han." Those few who claimed to be "Han people" had long been intertwined with those who truly were not, thus compromising their identity. In this new reality, "Han people" was the term the new, and proudly not-Han, ruling elite on the Central Plain called their subjects who had once been registered under Han rule. "Han people" distinguished the native population of the Plain from the conquerors. As such, "Han people" remained a political term rather than an ethnic one; it had more in common with the term as used during the Han dynasty itself than with the much later ethnonym, although it was clearly moving in that direction.[73] The chaos of the Sixteen Kingdoms era resolved into a new stability late in the fourth century when the Tabghach lineage of the Xianbei people, known in Chinese records as the Tuoba 拓跋, consolidated power across the Plain. Although the 150 years of their reign are known in Chinese annals as the Wei 魏 empire (386–535), in fact this new power did not initially adopt the trappings of Chinese empire, reigning instead as a step empire. Nevertheless the new order held power until the mid-530s, when their empire split into two over cultural issues. By and large through these years the north was comparatively stable. The result was a gradual homogenization, at least among the political and social elite, of an ethnically diverse population. The holistic empire was restored late in the sixth century by the short-lived Sui dynasty (589–618).

By the middle centuries of the first millennium the population of the Central Plain and that of the Yangtze River basin and the broader South both had a polyglot heritage that mixed the Han with the not-Han. But the mixture was quite different. The not-Han who ruled the Central Plain and broader

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connections were critical to the decision of later historiography to recognize the succession of southern empires, known in history as the Six Dynasties (*Liuchao* 六朝), as holders of the Mandate.

73 There is considerable disagreement among contemporary historians on how to use the term *Hanren*. Marc S. Abramson uses it as a general reference across time to refer to those who defined themselves in contrast to the Five Barbarians; see *Ethnic Identity in Tang China* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008). In contrast, Andrew Chittick argues strongly that the term had a much narrower meaning and should be used only in specific contexts; see *The Jiankang Empire in Chinee and World History* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2020), especially Section 1, "Proto-Ethnic Identities."

Yellow River basin came out of the grasslands and forest lands that lay to the north. Although the Tabghach ultimately forged an uncomfortable accommodation between Han and not-Han, before they had resolved the chaos of the fourth century there was little interaction between the conquerors and their "Han people" subjects. In fact the unceasing turmoil of the fourth century had pushed large numbers of "Han people" out of the north.

The South: the vast drainage basin of the Yangtze River that extended from the fringe of the Central Plain in the north to the mountain barrier that set the deepest south apart, from the Sichuan basin in the west to the ocean littoral in the east, was a very different story. There the ruling elite identified as Han. The issue is the identity of the greater population over whom the Han elite ruled. As I have explained above, the indigenous populations of the greater south were ethnically, linguistically, and culturally distinct and diverse, and their experience was not uniform. One belief they all shared is that they were not-Han. Thus the South was essentially the inverse of the North: Han people ruled over a not-Han population in the South; not-Han ruled over Han people in the North.

The scholars of the Central Plain did not consider indigenous southerners to be Han people as well. In fact, as Andrew Chittick has put it, "the peoples of the Lower Yangtze region were consistently described as having relatively fixed, inherent characteristics and an inferior, barbarian culture."[74] This derives from a belief in environmental determinism, "the idea," as Chittick explains, "that cultural variation is the result of the *qi* 氣 [i.e., pneuma] of peoples, terrains, climates, and soils, and is therefore relatively inbred and hard to change."[75] The oldest surviving text to address this is the *Book of Rites* (Li ji 禮記), the earlier versions of which date to the Warring States era (traditional dates 474–221 BCE), although the received text was extensively modified during the Han dynasty:

> Wherever they may live, the people must accord to the heavens and the earth. Their solutions differ depending on whether the land where they are born is cold or hot, dry or moist, whether the valleys are wide or the rivers large. Whether they are hard or soft, frivolous or serious, slow or fast, they are ordered differently. The Five Flavors have

74 Chittick, *Jiankang Empire*, 40.

75 Ibid, 45.

different appeal, their vessels and implements are different, as is their chosen clothing. One might amend their learning, but it would not alter their customs. One could order their governing, but it not change what they find suitable.

凡居民材，必因天地寒暖燥濕，廣谷大川異制。民生其間者異俗：剛柔輕重遲速異齊，五味異和，器械異制，衣服異宜。修其教，不易其俗；齊其政，不易其宜

The *Rong* 戎 and the *Yi* 夷 and those [not-Han] of the five directions all have their [distinct] nature (*xing* 性), which can not be interchanged. The tribes on the east are called *Yi*. They have their hair unbound, and tattoo their bodies. Some of them eat their food uncooked. Those on the south are called *Man*. They tattoo their foreheads, their feet are crossed, and some (also) eat their food uncooked. Those on the west are called *Rong*. They (also) unbind their hair and wear skins. Some of them do not eat grains. Those on the north were called *Di*. They wear skins of animals and birds, and dwell in caves. Some of them also do not eat grains.

中國戎夷，五方之民，皆有其性也，不可推移。東方曰夷，被髮文身，有不火食者矣。南方曰蠻，雕題交趾，有不火食者矣。西方曰戎，被髮衣皮，有不粒食者矣。北方曰狄，衣羽毛穴居，有不粒食者矣。

The people of the Central Lands, as well as the *Yi*, *Man*, *Rong*, and *Di*, all have their dwellings that suit them, flavors which they prefer, clothes that are suitable for them, and implements that are appropriate. In those five regions, the languages of the people are mutually unintelligible, and their likings and desires are different.

> 中國、夷、蠻、戎、狄，皆有安居、和味、宜服、利用、備器，五方之民，言語不通，嗜欲不同。達其志，通其欲：東方曰寄，南方曰象，西方曰狄鞮，北方曰譯.[76]

Without ever directly addressing *qi*, the *Book of Rites* makes plain that those who live in all directions, including the Central Lands at the center, accommodate to the environment in which they live. The *qi* of that environment in turn forms their nature.

Ying Shao 應劭 (second century CE), a scholar and official of the later Han dynasty, picked up this theme in his *Fengsu tongyi* 風俗通義 (Comprehensive Meaning of Customs and Traditions):

> As for customs, the natural environment can be warm or cold, the contour of the land can be difficult or easy, the waters can be sweet or poison, and the grasses and trees can be firm or flexible. As for traditions, those of flesh and blood [i.e., people] are framed (by the customs) when they are born. Thus their speech and their songs are distinct, the movements of their dances are unique. Some are upright, but others are nefarious, some are good but others are evil.

> 風者天氣有寒煖地形有險易, 水泉有美惡草木有剛柔也. 俗者含血之類像之而生, 故言語歌謳異聲鼓舞動作殊形. 或直或邪或善或淫也[77]

Again, *qi* is not addressed directly, but it is there. *Qi* is the environment, the landscape and flora where one is born. Such influences determine the character, be it upright or nefarious, good or evil, brave or cowardly of those who live in that world.

The *qi* of the North was framed by a challenging environment. It was dry, open, and hostile, so its *qi*

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76 *Liji* 禮記, "Wangzhi" 王制 #36, initial translation by James Legge, with modification, accessed at c-text.org (June 11, 2025).

77 *Fengsu tongyi*, preface, c-text.org (accessed June 12, 2025), translation by D. Johnathan Felt, *Structures of the Earth*, 76, with adaptation.

bred men who embraced martial values. The *qi* of the South was different. If the North was dry, the South was wet. If the North was open, the South was forested. If the North was environmentally hostile, where life was a challenge and Nature had to be overcome, the South was welcoming and lush. The South, therefore, bred a very different man, one who embraced luxury and indolence, one who is easily led but avoided conflict. It was perhaps the *Huainan zi* (second century BCE), a text that combined practical advice on government with fanciful musings about the "other," that first addressed southern *qi* explicitly:

> The South is where *yang qi* gathers, where heat and damp reside. Its people have long bodies and are heavy above, with large mouths and prominent eyelids. All their body openings are channeled to their ears, which is where their blood vessels converge. The color red rules their hearts; they are early to mature and to die. The land there is suitable for paddy rice and has many elephants and rhinoceroses.
>
> 南方陽氣之所積暑溼居之, 其人修形兌上大口决眦, 竅通於耳血脉屬焉. 赤色主心, 早壯而夭. 其地宜稻多兕象。[78]

The preface to the monography on imperial geography of the official history of the short-lived Sui dynasty (prefaced 636) went farther:

> The twenty-plus prefectures that lie south of the [Nanling] mountains are, for the most part, damp and swampy, and plagued with malaria.... The character of the people varies

78 Liu An and John Major, eds., *The Huainanzi: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Government in Early Han China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 164, as quoted with adaptation in Chittick, *Jiankang Empire*, 45–46. See also Shao-yun Yang, "Their Lands are Peripheral and their *Qi* is All Blocked Up: The uses of environmental determinism in Han (206 BCE –220 CE) and Tang (618–907 CE) Chinese interpretations of the barbarians," *Routledge Handbook of Identity and the Environment in the Classical and Medieval Worlds*, edited by Rebecca Futo Kennedy and Molly Jones-Lewis (Routledge: New York & Abingdon, 2016), 390–412. Finally see also D. Jonathan Felt, *Structures of the Earth: Metageographies of Early Medieval China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2021, especially Chapter Two, "Region and Ecumene."

> between frivolous and ferocious, and they go back and forth between prosperity and rebellion.... The myriad *Man* are brave and independent. They value deceit and dismiss death. Only wealth is important. They nest on cliffs and devote their energy to agriculture. They carve contracts in wood and maintain their commitments until death without alteration. Fathers and sons pursue different work. If the father is poor, then he pledges himself to his son. The myriad southern barbarians are all this way.
>
> 自嶺已南二十餘郡，大率土地下濕，皆多瘴厲。。。 其人性並輕悍，易興逆節...諸蠻則勇敢自立，皆重賄輕死，唯富為雄。巢居崖處，盡力農事。刻木以為符契，言誓則至死不改。父子別業，父貧，乃有質身於子。諸獠皆然。[79]

As Central Plain control over the South was reaffirmed through the Sui and Tang empires (589–618 & 618–906 respectively), the disparagement of the South and the not-Han southerners deepened. To the culturally phlegmatic scholars of the North the South was a dangerous place, desired for its lush and beautiful landscape but feared for its hidden, and sometimes not hidden, dangers. Tang poets were some of the most illustrative voices. For example,

- Song Zhiwen (late seventh–eighth centuries), in "Entering the waters of Longzhou":

> In the confusions of the night the *jiaochi* demons skulk,
> And in the morning's eruptions the vapors spread abroad.
> The steaming lakes make the waters boil;
> The heat of the mountains births clouds of fire.
> Apes leap about, and from time to time call shrilly.
> Birds of prey fly above, so none dare make a sound.[80]

79 Wei Zheng 魏徵 (580–643), *Sui shu* 隋書(Electronic Siku quanshu ed.), 31:18b–191.

80 Song Zhiwen 宋之問, "Ru Longzhou jiang" 入瀧州江, (*Yuding*) *QuanTang shi* (御定) 全唐詩 (ESKQS ed.), 53:6a–b.

夜杂蛟螭寢，晨披瘴疠行。
夜雜蛟螭寢，晨披瘴癘行
潭蒸水沫起，山热火云生。
潭蒸水沫起，山熱火雲生。
猿躩時能嘯，鳶飛莫敢鳴

- Liu Changqing (733 *jinshi*), in "Bidding Adieu to Cui Daihua and Zhang Qizhi in Min":

I know nothing of the roads of Min 閩,
But from the distance I know I am cut off from my being that I have left behind.
The cries of monkeys resound through the close-packed mountains,
As I follow the narrow paths I beseech those who are buried in their depths.
I eat the food of the road and pass the villages of the barbarians,
All the words I hear have the sound of the *Yue*.

不識閩中路，遙知別後心。
猨聲入嶺切，鳥道問人深。
旅食過夷落，方言會越音。[81]

- Zhang Ji (ca. 765–ca. 830), in "On Seeing Off a Traveler Going to the South":

So, so far away, a wandering guest…
Surrounded by malaria, your body wasting away.
A land of blue mountains and endless travel,
Your hair will whiten and still you will not return.
In the lands across the sea they fight on elephants,

81 Liu Changqing 劉長卿, "Song Cui Daihua Zhang Qizhi Minzhong" 送崔載華張起之閩中, (*Yuding*) *QuanTang shi*, 147:11b.

In the lands of the *Man* they use silver in the markets.
One family, separated across many places.
Who is it who will see the spring in the far south?

去去遠遷客，瘴中衰病身。
青山無限路，白首不歸人。
海國戰騎象，蠻州市用銀。
一家分幾處，誰見日南春?[82]

- And Bao He (later eighth century), in "On Seeing Off the Esteemed Master Li to Quanzhou":

The lands by the sea are all the realm of barbarians
Where the official's tally grants the Han officer respect.
In this land of cloud-shrouded mountains and the roads of the myriad Yue
The peoples of foreign lands gather in the markets.
Grasping jade, they come to our land from afar,
Bearing pearls they time and again bring tribute.
For many years you will see no snow;
Wherever you go it will be spring.

傍海皆荒服,分符重漢臣.
雲山百越路,市井十洲人

82 Zhang Ji 張籍, "Song nan qian ke" 送南遷客, (*Yuding*) *QuanTang shi*, 384:4b–5a. Edward H. Schafer, *The Vermillion Bird* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 21, offers an alternative translation. Schafer devotes his entire book to images of the south among Tang literati. While some loved it, to most of those he profiles it was hateful, a place of death.

執玉来朝遠,還珠入貢頻.
連年不見雪,到處即行春.[83]

No one expressed their loathing of the South as eloquently as Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元 (773–819). Although he was among the most famous scholars of his generation, he fell afoul of court politics and was exiled to the deepest South—a punishment that was intended to lead to the miscreant's death, as it did that of Liu. And although he generally maintained an up-beat approach to his exile, he could devolve into despair, as he did in a poem to his younger brother Zongyi composed not long before he died:

Abandoned, my soul destroyed, time and again in despair,
We both shed tears of separation, I by the rivers of Yue.
One of us is six thousand *li* from home,
Where I have died ten thousand times,
    thrown away in this desolation for twelve years.
In the mountains of Gui the noxious vapors abound
    and the clouds are black like ink;
But at Dongting Lake the spring is in its fullness, the water blue like the sky.
I wish that I knew that hereafter would be like my dreams,
That I would grow old at your house, amidst the burning fires of Yin.

零落殘魂倍黯然，雙垂別淚越江邊。
一身去國六千里，萬死投荒十二年。

83 Bao He 包何, "Song Li shijun fu Quanzhou" 送李使君赴泉州, (*Yuding*) *QuanTang shi* 208:1a; see also in Li Fang 李昉, *Wenyuan yinghua* 文苑英華 (ESKQS ed.) 271: 8a.

桂嶺瘴來云似墨，洞庭春盡水如天。
欲知此后相思夢，長在荊門郢樹煙。[84]

Although in return for his honest and enterprising administration Liu earned the affection of the southerners among whom he lived, an affection he generally returned, he was not above despairing of the culture that surrounded him. In one essay, the commemoration of the reconstruction of a Buddhist temple composed in 817, he complained:

> The people of Yue believe in omens and that they can easily be killed. They reject the transformation of civilization (*hua* 化) and abuse human empathy (*ren* 仁). Faced with severe illness they turn to shamans, who will divine with chickens. [To beseech the intervention of the gods] they will initially offer a small sacrifice. If that does not suffice, they will offer a sacrifice of middling size. And if that does not suffice they will offer a grand sacrifice. If they are still not cured they will take leave of their kin and make preparations for their death, concluding that "the gods will not prop me up." Then they will cease eating, cover their face, and die. Consequently their houses turn to ruins, their fields go wild, and their livestock do not multiply. If you try to manage them with rituals, they respond with stubbornness. If you restrain them with punishments, they run away. They only acknowledge Buddhist mandala and serve the spirits.
>
> 越人信祥而易殺，傲化而偭仁。病且憂，則聚巫師，用雞卜。始則殺小牲，不可，則殺中牲，又不可，則殺大牲，而又不可，則訣親戚，傷死事，曰：「神

84 "Bieshe di Zongyi" 別舍弟宗一, *Liu hedong ji* 柳河東集 (Shanghai, Renmin chubanshe, 1974 punctuated edition), 42:704.

> 不置我，已矣！」因不食，蔽麵而死。以故戶易耗，田易荒，而畜字不孳。董之禮則頑，束之刑則逃，唯浮屠事神而語大。[85]

And in a letter composed probably in 804 he expressed his loathing for the world that surrounded him:

> Yongzhou is far to the south of Chu; it is a land where there is no difference between the Zhuang and the Yue. When I am depressed, I go out and about. But as I go about I find much to fear for through the wilds there are poisonous snakes and great wasps. Whether I look to the sky or regard the land, to walk but an inch is exhausting. How is it?
>
> 永州於楚為最南，狀與越相類。仆悶即出遊，遊復多恐。涉野則有蝮虺大蜂，仰空視地，寸步勞倦；近水即畏射工沙虱，含怒竊發，中人形影，動成瘡痏。時到幽樹好石，暫得一笑，已復不樂。何者？。[86]

This was not a place of civilization. It was not the *Zhongguo*, and the people who lived there were not-Han people. But if they were not Han people, then who or what were they? Yue Shi (930 – 1007), who compiled the *Comprehensive Geography of the Taiping Era* (Taiping huanyu ji) in the years following the Song consolidation of their empire around 980, provided an indirect answer. Quoting the *Hanshu*, Yue says the people of Yuezhou 越州 (Jiangnan East) "tattoo their bodies and cut their hair in order to avoid the dangers of the *jiaolong* 蛟龍 [crocodile]. It is said they do this in order to resemble dragon offspring" 文身斷髮以避蛟龍之害，言人常在水中故斷其髮文其身以象龍子.[87] The people of Wuzhou 婺州, Hengzhou 衡州(both in the mountainous uplands of Jiangnan East, remote from Hangzhou 杭州, a center of orthodox culture), Mingzhou 明州 and Taihou 台州 (both on the southeast coast) were

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85 Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元, "Liuzhou fu Dayunsi ji 柳州復大雲寺記, *Liu hedong ji* 柳河東集 (Shanghai, Renmin chubanshe, 1974 punctuated edition), 28:465–466. For a parallel translation, see Schafer, *Vermillion Bird*, 100.

86 "Yu Lin Hanlin Jian shu" 與李翰林建書 *Liu hedong ji* 30:494–496, quoting from 494.

87 Yue Shi 樂史, *Taiping huanyu ji* 太平寰宇記 (Taibei: Wenhai chubanshe, 1962 reprint of 1803 ed.; hereafter TPHYJ) 96:3a

"frivolous, rarely honest, and embraced heterodox sacrifices" 風俗輕躁少信行，好凂祀.[88] The people of Wenzhou 溫州, also on the southeast coast, "embrace heterodox sacrifices" 俗好凂祀,[89] while those of Chuzhou 楚州 are just like the people of Taizhou.[90]

These were all prefectures with long histories by the tenth century of interaction with the "civilized" culture of the Central Plain, yet Yue Shi tells us the local customs of them all were notable for their "heterodox sacrifices." He never explains what those rites involved, so we can only surmise. But consider what he does say about Quanzhou 泉州, a port city in southern Fujian.[91] In large part because of the lack of easy riverine access, Fujian broadly had been bypassed by the southern migration of the Qin and Han empires. But "following the southern crossing [of the Yangtze River] [at the time of] the Eastern Jin [in the early fourth century], those of hats and gowns [i.e., officials] and prominent local clans in large numbers gathered there in search of security" 東晉南渡衣冠土族多萃其地以求安. Although all the evidence argues that the registered population of Quanzhou remained very low until the last century of the Tang when an "immigrant wave" broadly transformed the demographic profile of the South,[92] the early fourth century witnessed an influx of northern refugees that reshaped both the local social structure and that more broadly of all Fujian.

Having made that point in the historical summary with which he opens each prefectural discussion, Yue Shi then turns to the "customs and traditions" of Quanzhou itself. He introduces the *Quanlang* 泉郎, who he identifies as the "barbarian households" 夷戶 of Quanzhou; they were, notably, also known as the "floating boat people" 游艇子. Tradition claimed that the *Quanlang* were the surviving remnants of a rebellion that had wracked the deepest South in the early fifth century. Following the final collapse

88 TPHYJ 97:2b, 97:7b, 98:2b, and 98:6a.

89 TPHYJ 98:2b.

90 TPHYJ 99:8b.

91 The following draws on TPHYJ 102:1a–3a.

92 See Clark, *Sinitic Encounter*, 130–34. The distinction between registered and unregistered population is important, but unquantifiable for the simple reason that the unregistered population was not included in any census. The unregistered no doubt included some northern migrants who avoided registration in order to avoid tax liabilities, but logic argues that the unregistered were predominantly the not-Han indigenous population.

of that rebellion some had fled up the coast and found refuge on the Quanzhou coast where they lived on their boats, "moving back and forth with the seasons" 隨時移徙. It is a vague passage that is not elaborated upon in any other source,[93] so who were these *Quanlang*? A specific answer is not necessary to recognize that they were *not* Han people. They were "barbarians," "floating boat people." But then indulge a leap: On an island called Meizhou that sits off the central Fujian coast a cult emerged that was dedicated to the Divine Lady 神女; later she became known as the "Maternal Ancestor" (*Mazu* 媽祖) and even later as the Cosmic Empress (*Tianhou* 天后), the spouse of the Jade Emperor.

We do not know the actual origins of the Divine Lady's cult, but one thing seems pretty clear: Her cult was centered on Meizhou and the adjacent mainland shore, exactly where the *Quanlang* were to be found. Although devotees brought all manner of requests to her, her cult especially celebrated her role in protecting mariners, the issue most pressing to the *Quanlang*, the "floating boat people" whose lives were fully entwined with the sea. Was she a deity brought to the waters off the Fujian coast by the not-Han *Quanlang*? Perhaps. Was she a deity outside the orthodox pantheon? Almost certainly when Yue Shi wrote of the *Quanlang*, although that was later rectified. Before the court legitimized her cult in the twelfth century were the sacrifices made in her honor heterodox? For sure, indeed by definition since her cult was considered heterodox. Did those sacrifices offend the culturally-civilized elite? Absolutely—they were heterodox. Her cult was patronized by the not-Han; it stood a[art from the "civilized" world of the Han people.

Nor was the cult to the Divine Lady the only such cult in the greater Quanzhou region. Indeed, there were many that populated the regional landscape, as many still do today. That to Wu Tao 吳本 is notable. This cult emerged in the administratively and culturally ambiguous borderland between Quanzhou and Zhangzhou 漳州, Quanzhou's neighbor and the southernmost prefecture in Fujian. The two prefectures are separated by an upland, and the interior of both is mountainous. Late in the seventh century when Zhangzhou prefecture was first recognized by the imperial government it was plagued by raids on the lowland settlements where the population was registered, a mark of "civilizing." The "bandits" who conducted these raids came from the upland border region between Zhangzhou and Chaozhou, the adjacent prefecture to the south. They are not defined in surviving sources, all of which are local and

93 There are other sources that quote the TPHYJ, but no other source adds additional information.

from more than a millennium later. However they were clearly regarded as not-Han and "uncivilized." And their upland redoubt is exactly where Wu Tao's cult emerged.

Wu Tao was a healer: "Not a day passed that people did not clamor at his door.... Near and far he was regarded as divine (*shen* 神)."[94] In later times he was deified as Baosheng dadi 保生大帝 (The Life Protecting Great Lord) when, like the Divine Lady, his cult was granted court recognition. In its origins, however, it emerged in an area where the unregistered population most likely predominated. That is, it is likely that many of those who "clamored at his door" drew on the heterodox traditions of the indigenous culture. They were not-Han people. As a final point, early in the thirteenth century his devotees undertook a restoration of his main shrine. As they celebrated its completion "the god possessed a workman" and demanded that the shrine be returned to its original location. When the people gathered at the abandoned site they discovered three earthenware jars. In one they found a snake, and "none failed to feel the aura of the god." Snake cults were integral to the indigenous culture.

And that offers a tantalizing but unverifiable clue to who it was that Yue Shi claimed was embracing heterodox sacrifices. These were the rites and sacrifices of the not-Han people who had lived in the South before the Han immigration reached the critical mass that "civilized" marginal areas. This is, perhaps, most clearly illustrated by a third cult, that to the Lord of Manifest Kindness (*Xianhui hou* 顯惠侯). Unlike either the Divine Lady or Baosheng dadi, both of whom were celebrated in numerous shrines, the Lord was honored with a single shrine located in Baidu Village 白度村 outside the Putian prefectural city. Before the tenth century, when a collateral branch of a locally prominent family surnamed Fang settled there, Baidu Village had had been lightly occupied.[95] There is no solid evidence when the Lord's shrine was first established. However, the earliest text to address the Lord, composed in 1138, stated that "already by the Five Dynasties [tenth century] there was a shrine where blood

94 Zhuang Xia , "Baijiao Cizi zugong bei," in *Fujian zongjiao beiming huibian: Quanzhou fu fence* 福建宗教碑銘彙編:泉州府分冊, edited by Ding Hesheng 丁荷生 (Kennerth Dean) and Zheng Zhenman 鄭振滿 (Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 2003), 954–955. See also Yang Zhi 楊志, "Ciji gong bei" 慈濟宮碑, in ibid., 952–954. See Clark, *Sinitic Encounter in Southeast China through the First Millennium* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2016), 147–152.

95 See the discussions in Clark, *Portrait of a Community*, 189–197, and Clark, *Sinitic Encounter*, 156–172.

sacrifices were conducted."[96] "Blood sacrifices," generally offerings of animal meat to the deity, were anathema to the "civilized" community. The blood sacrifices, however, at least suggest its origins went back into the hazy past when the Putian Plain was at best lightly occupied by Sinitic immigrants.

As the civilizing imperative took shape in the area through the tenth and eleventh centuries, the Lord increasingly took on "civilized" qualities. Among other things, he protected the village from bandits, plague and locusts. He was even adopted as the titulary deity of the local Fang clan. In short, as the area surrounding Baidu Village was "civilized," the rituals of the Lord S shrine were similarly "civilized," the prior "uncivilized" blood sacrifices left in the past.

A REFLECTION

The question to consider is how does this address the parallel issues of ethnicity and identity with which this section began. What did it mean to be "Chinese"? Was there even such a concept, however one might choose to frame it? And that loops us around to what we mean by "China." Recall my young interlocutor introduced earlier. He identified himself as a *Zhongguo ren*, a native of *Zhongguo*. For him, and for everyone in the room, that was equivalent to calling himself "Chinese." But that only corresponded to modern identities. "China" and "Chinese," as I have argued above, were not in the vocabulary of the historical *Zhongguo*, either as cultural or political markers. The European terms "China" or "Sina" alluded to something conceptually and applicably that was quite different from *Zhongguo*. In contemporary "China" *Zhongguo* transcends any of the available ethnic identities: Han, Muslim, Hakka, etc. My question, however, is what did it mean to be "Chinese" in earlier times?

When we look back to the years when Han authority over the as yet largely "uncivilized" lands of the South was established we need to recognize that there were three distinct southern populations, only one of which: the elite immigrants who had left their roots in the northern heartland and sought security in the south was regarded as "civilized." Andrew Chittick has argued that was a tiny fraction of

96 Fang Lūe 方略, "Xiangying miao ji" 祥應廟記, *Minzhong jinshi zhi* 閩中金石略 (Shanghai: Zonghua shuju, 1934 reprint of Shuzhuang ckongshu ed.), 8:21a–25b.

the overall population; he estimates that they made up perhaps 2–3% of the overall population of the southern empires. Although others disagree with his numbers, none doubt that elite immigrants were but a small percentage of the overall southern population.[97] Nevertheless, this was the one segment of the southern population that scholars in the following centuries believed adhered to the values of the classical civilization. It is reductionist to note that they did not regard themselves as "Chinese"; although they considered their empire represented *Zhongguo* values, they were not *Zhongguo ren*. If they did not define themselves by the reigning dynasty, as would have been most likely, then they regarded themselves as Han people.

A second group were the non-elite migrants who had ventured to the South over many centuries, a group I have already referred to in my discussion of language (see p. 50). Chittick divides this segment into two groups: Those from the Central Plain itself that he calls *Zhongren* 中人 and those from south of the Huai River basin that straddles North and South including the highlands of central Yangtze basin whom he called *Churen* 楚人.[98] The two groups, he argues, were roughly co-equal in numbers. If the *Zhongren* were indisputably Han people, however, the *Churen* , drawing on the much more polyglot demography of the Huai basin, were not.

Following Chittick's argument, as the relocated Jin court consolidated in Jiankang, it was controlled by *Zhongren*, refugees who had fled with the court to the Yangtze basin in search of safety while maintaining the power structure that had benefited them in prior years. In this pursuit, the *Zhongren* controlled the court to the exclusion of other groups. "Anecdotal evidence" cited by Chittick, moreover,

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97 Chittick, *Jiankang Empire*, Appendix B, "Migration." Chittick's estimate, for which he provides a full explanation, is considerably below that of others, most notably Hans Bielenstein, "The Census of China during the Period 2–741 A.D.," *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 19 (1947), 125–163. Bielenstein uses a very different set of assumptions to come up with a much higher number of immigrants. See also Ge Jianxiong 葛劍雄, ed., *Zhongguo renkou shi* 中國人口史 (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2002), whose data leads to a conclusion nearer to Bielenstein than to Chittick. Chittick adds another 2–3% composed of migrants from what he calls the "Eastern Chu Cultural area," as he calls the Huai River basin. Although no one can legitimately claim to know the actual numbers or percentages, I find Chittick's analysis most compelling and so privilege it.

98 Chittick, *Jiankang Empire*, 368. *Churen* are central to analysis of Maxim Korolkov, *The Imperial Network in Ancient China: The Foundation of Sinitic Empire in Southern East Asia* (New York & London: Routledge, 2022), although he does not use the term.

suggests that the *Zhongren* tended to marry among themselves, a clear mark of social distinction. The *Churen*, on the other hand, had generally fled their ancestral homelands in the highlands of the central Yangtze basin solely in search of safety. They were not cultural elites. Chittick points to evidence that they at least sometimes settled as groups, thereby maintaining their distinct identity. They did not forget their distinct identity in the sea of the "uncivilized" South. A point Chittick does not make but his evidence infers is that the *Churen* may also have married among themselves for they sustained their distinct identity well into if not beyond the fifth century.[99]

Finally there was the indigenous population, the "uncivilized.". They were the largest by number, most likely a sizable amount yet they were the least powerful. They had no links to the imported power structure that initially defined the Jiankang courts. There is little doubt that, after decades if not centuries of contact with the "civilized" culture of the Central Plain, many had been influenced by, may even have fully adapted to, the cultural norms of the *Zhongren*. Regardless, they were not regarded as "civilized," as the preface to the monography on imperial geography in the official history of the Sui dynasty quoted above makes clear: "The character of the people varies between frivolous and ferocious,... They nest on cliffs and devote their energy to agriculture" (see above, p. 60).

Nor did the restoration of the holistic empire through the Sui and Tang resolve all issues of identity across the South. Yue Shi clearly recognized the *Quanlang* as a distinct culture, but they were hardly unique. Assessing prefecture after prefecture across the South he time and again pointed to the "uncivilized" traditions of the indigenous people.[100] It is, perhaps, a poem by Wang Anshi (1021–1086), the controversial statesman of the eleventh century, that elicits the civilized world's distaste for the South. The poem is called "On Sending Li Xuanshu to be Assistant Magistrate in Zhangzhou" 送李宣叔倅漳州. Well beyond the eleventh century Zhangzhou remained a culturally marginal region with a very sparse registered population. Although sources are not explicit, it would appear that the "uncivilized" indigenous population remained an unusually large percentage of the whole. Li Xuanshu, the unfortunate assistant magistrate, is otherwise unknown; we might surmise he was a junior colleague

99 See Chittick, *Jiankang Empire*, 169–170, where he explores the continuing identity of the *Churen* as ferocious warriors serving the southern courts.

100 For a cursory overview, see Clark, *Sinitic Encounter*, 23.

of Wang Anshi or perhaps the son of an associate—or perhaps "xuanshu" is a *zi* 字, a literary name that hides his identity. To Wang, regardless of who he was, the young man's assignment was most unfortunate. He lamented,

> Through passes and mountains you will reach Zhangzhou exhausted,
> This land that is so confounded by the southern barbarians
> The mountains and streams hold poisonous fogs, and
> Malarial epidemics know no seasons…
> To be detached [from the civilized world] by myriad miles,
> This is something the learned man does not enjoy.
>
> 閩山到漳窮，地與南越錯。
> 山川郁霧毒，瘴癘春冬作…
> 超然萬里去，識者為不樂。[101]

Like many in the years before him, Wang Anshi considered the deeper South an uncivilized abomination.

Clearly at that early date there was no universal identity, there was no *Zhongguo ren* that subsumed all other identities. The empire, be it the holistic empire of the Qin and Han or the limited empire of the southern dynasties, was a patchwork of ethnicity and identity. The terms are not synonymous, an issue on which too many pages have been devoted. One could identify with the civil culture of the Central Plain yet maintain a distinct identity, a point eloquently made by Charles Holcombe.[102] One of the critical policies of the contemporary PRC has been to overcome the separate identities of the empire, be it a contrasting identity of North versus South or the distinct identities of the fifty-five minority

101 Wang Anshi 王安石, *Linchuan wenji* 臨川文集 (Siku quanshu digital edition), 7:8b–9a.

102 This is a central theme of Holcombe, *The Genesis of East Asia, 221 B.C.–A.D. 907* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press for the Association of Asian Studies, 2001).

groups the government recognizes. Yet another personal anecdote, however, suggests even now ethnic identity in the PRC remains an issue.

I was travelling by car with two companions from Fuzhou to Zhangzhou, northern Fujian to southern Fujian. We stopped for lunch at a roadside restaurant where our driver joined us. The conversation was friendly and unremarkable until one of my companions asked our driver where he came from, which was the interior hill country of Fujian. My companion then asked "are you 'shed' (*pengmin*)," a recognized minority group that has been mentioned above. "Yes," he replied. Immediately the nature of our conversation changed. Our driver was no longer just a companion over lunch, but a marginalized "shed" person.

Identity and ethnicity are complex issues. Identity is a very subjective, individual concept. Although there may be a myriad of forces driving it, an individual constructs his/her identity; it is personal. Ethnicity, on the other hand, is a social construct. Ethnic boundaries are by no means absolute, but one's ascribed ethnicity is as much imposed by social constructions as it is a personal choice. If I once again go back to my youthful interlocutor, he chose to identify as *Zhongguo ren*. This was his choice to make. But if, like our driver, he was "Shed," or if he were Hakka, Muslim, or any of the other minority, this would be an ethnicity that was ascribed to him by others and inherited from his parents. It was not his to choose. Notably, this is even true of Muslim, or *Hui* 回, ethnicity, which the state classifies as a formal minority ethnicity to which one either belongs or not; like Shed, it is not a choice. The modern Chinese state, both the PRC and the Republic of China on Taiwan has made Chinese identity that sits above all the potential sub-identities an integral part of building the modern Chinese nation.[103] But before there was modern China in whatever guise, there were multipole identities within the empire, and no one identified as "Chinese."

103 Although a strong case can be made for such an identity in earlier times, that was built on Han identity; see, for example, Abramson, *Ethnic Identity in Tang China* and Nicholas Tackett, *The Origins of the Chinese Nation: Song China and the forging of an East Asian World Order* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017).

CONCLUSIONS

Early in the essay I suggested that the land early Europeans called "China" has never been. That "China" was an imagined whole, a single, unified empire. What I believe my discussion has demonstrated is that "China" was a fiction. The so-called empire, the real "China," was riven by issues of politics, language, identity, and ethnicity. The concept of *Zhongguo* that unified the elites did not penetrate into the local levels of society where people were devoted to local, regional, and even trans-regional deities.

Yet one still might ask: "So what?" Was not the "China" imagined by the scholars of the Classical world at the beginning of the Common Era the "China" encountered by European and American traders, diplomats, and warriors in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? Of course that is not entirely true, as my third and fourth "tilting fields" should have made clear. Even in the recent past "China" was riven by linguistic, ethnic, and identity divisions. Nevertheless, one might ask, what need is there to deconstruct the distant past if the imagined "China" appeared to be the real "China"?

Let me address that by turning to the world of physics. Few who are professionally engaged with the study of classical East Asian culture from whatever perspective today are as naïve as I was sixty years ago, when I first engaged the field. But making that observation is a bit like contrasting Newtonian physics to Einsteinian relativity. As the physicist Brian Greene has explained, we all initially engage the physical world from a Newtonian perspective because it is consistent with what we perceive. At the microscale in which we experience our world, the Newtonian deviation from relativity is so slight as to be inconsequential. Without really being aware of the fact, we use Newtonian physics to calculate where the ball is going to land, how fast the approaching car is going, how hard one must push to get the rock up the hill, or any of the myriad such calculations that arise in the course of day to day life. Greene explains that the "error" of Newtonian formulae only becomes significant when the dimensions are vastly larger. Were the ball going from galaxy to galaxy, the scale at which relativity becomes important, it potentially could wind up at least one solar system away from your target![104] Recognizing this,

104 Greene has written about this is a series of books that aim to make the far end of theoretical physics comprehensible to the average individual (one might argue with how successful he has been!). See *The Elegant Universe: Superstrings, Hidden Dimensions, and the Quest for Ultimate Theory* (New York: Norton, 2003), *The Fabric of the Cosmos: Space, Time, and the Texture of Reality* (New York: Vintage, 2004), *The Hidden Reality Parallel Universes and the Deep Laws of the Cosmos* (New

understanding the significance of this, however, only comes with specialized training. For everyone else, Newton's flawed laws are fine—the outfielder does not need relativity to catch the ball.

Likewise, when one first engages Chinese Studies one is unlikely to appreciate the pitfalls that only become apparent with experience. Survey texts on Chinese history and culture uniformly treat the narrative as a coherent, unbroken tale. To the producers of those texts, and especially to the publishers who hope to sell the text, this is the easy approach, and one that is consistent with common knowledge…. "Newtonian knowledge," one might say.

Take, as an example, the "Tribute System." For many years students in the English-speaking world were introduced to this system of court-to-court relations by John K. Fairbank, whose survey of Chinese history was for many years the premier narrative text used in countless college courses.[105] As described by Fairbank, the system was simple: Courts that were not administratively governed by the Manchu empire were to send tribute-bearing missions to Beijing, the Manchu imperial capital, according a schedule as expressions of subordination. Once in Beijing the emissaries were feted, given an imperial audience where they performed the ritual koutou (kowtow) and presented their tribute. They were then sent home with valuable gifts from the emperor.

As a simple outline, this is an adequate summation that meets the needs of the average student encountering China's past for the first, and probably last, time. Like the driver using Newtonian physics to drive her car, this "Newtonian knowledge" suffices. Yet it omits much of what was going on. Most importantly, the home courts of the tribute envoys were independent; they were not subordinate to Beijing except as it benefited them. Furthermore, those courts had their own versions of the tribute

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York: Penguin, 2012), and Until the End of Time: *Mind, Matter, and Our Search for Meaning in an Evolving Universe* (New York: Vintage, 2020). As for the ball, not only would it miss the intended target by the vastness of space, but it would also be lost in time!

105 John King Fairbank and Edwin O. Reischauer, *East Asia: The Great Tradition—A History of East Asian Civilization* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1960) and *East Asia: The Modern Transformation* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1965). These volumes have been adapted to Fairbank and Reischauer's specific fields as individual volumes devoted to China and Japan and updated in subsequent editions. While they remain in print and are still used in colleges and universities, however, as newer options that reflect the maturation of the field have become available they no longer have the commanding position they once held. See also John King Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968) and his extensive writings on the history of US–China relations.

system among themselves. As they did toward the Manchu empire, those courts performed rituals before each other as it benefitted them. Perhaps Fairbank's ultimate omission, however, was the long history behind the Manchu system, a history that goes back at least until the Tang dynasty and in some ways all the way back to the Han. Beyond Fairbank's bear boned summary the system had a complicated relationship to imperial domestic policy, and the relationship between the parties involved was not quite so unbalanced as he described it. The Qing court, as has been discussed earlier, was confronted with an increasingly complicated world as Europe and North America engaged the court and refused to play the expected role. Through the nineteenth century the traditional system of court to court relationships that had been used throughout East Asia for centuries ultimately collapsed, and that is the system that Fairbank described.

Fairbank's summary of the Tributary System is a narrow example. Considered more comprehensively, the "Newtonian" narrative begins with a time long ago when a culture and empire emerged out of a network of Neolithic cultures on the Central Plain that was "China." Even at that early stage, when this nascent "China" was politically and culturally confined to the Plain, the "Newtonian" narrative maintained that all the lands that lay beyond that Plain: the Wei River basin that fed the Yellow River before it made its 90 degree turn out to the Plain; the vast basin of the Yangtze River, including the Sichuan basin; the remote lands of the deeper South, all was incipiently "China." Although tradition alluded to a dynastic era called Xia, the "Newtonian" narrative dismissed Xia as legend and concluded that the first dynasty was the Shang (sometimes called "Yin"), which welded the Neolithic cultures of the Plain into a loose empire. Shang was succeeded by Zhou, followed by an era of turmoil before the rise of the Qin empire. It was Qin that pulled all those distant lands together into the fully realized empire that was China. Then dynasty followed dynasty, and it … whatever "it" might be, has been "China" ever since. This, it should be apparent, is exactly the error, exactly the postulate, that the scholars of the ancient Mediterranean made. Indeed, it is the postulate this entire essay has targeted.

Just as the formulae of Newtonian physics are a satisfactory explanation of what transpires in the limited realm of Planet Earth, so the "Newtonian" narrative is satisfactory for the initial engagement. But it is flawed; like the Newtonian formulae, it does not hold up under closer examination. Was the cultural complex that emerged on the Central Plain in the second millennium BCE the original "China"? What did "China" take from the dozens of flourishing and often technologically sophisticated local and

regional cultures that had dotted the map for centuries before they were incorporated into the expanding empire? How real was the control of the Qin/Han empire over the Yangtze basin and points further south? Did the southern courts of the fourth to sixth centuries really sustain "Chinese" culture through the era of division? How deep was the proto-Turkic influence on Tang culture and social structure? What are we to make of the interregnum century that divided Tang from Song? Were the policies of the Mongol Yuan dynasty responsible for the economic collapse that paved the way for the rise of the Ming empire? And what really was the Manchu Qing system of court-to-court relationships? These are but a few of the complications that the "Newtonian" narrative minimizes, if it doesn't entirely pass them over. Just as physics could not correct the errors in the Newtonian model until the discipline complicated its analyses by incorporating relativity in the early twentieth century, so it was not until recent decades that Chinese Studies has acknowledged the flaw in the postulates that underlie the "Newtonian" narrative.

Many scholars today recognize the complicated and multi-layered history that lies behind modern China, a fact that is evident from the extensive citations to secondary literature in my preceding discussion, citations that address only a fraction of what is available. But just as relativity is a borderline incomprehensible but unnecessary distraction for many of us, the complications behind the narrative of "China" are for most a similarly unnecessary distraction. Indeed, the complications behind the early history of the empire, complications that when recognized we see playing out even today, are often unappreciated even by those whose specialty is late imperial or modern China, for whom the early history itself is an unnecessary distraction. Yet just as relativity has solved some of the issues with Newtonian physics that were only beginning to become apparent, so these complications, these distractions, give the history of "China" a depth and coherence that is missing without engaging them.

At the beginning of this essay I described it as "an attempt to prompt reflection on some of my field's most deeply held assumptions." I have called it "Tilting at Postulates," in homage to Don Quixote, an acknowledgement that these postulates, these assumptions, about the past are held by many and my comments likely read by few. I hope, however, that they will prompt those few to think about our approach to the East Asian past and push for greater recognition that it rests on a stack of dubious postulates.

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