HIST 250
HISTORY OF CHINESE CIVILIZATION

COURSE TEXTBOOK

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The Ruins of Yin

At the dawn of the twentieth century, China was on the verge of revolution. Repeated defeats on the battlefield had left the Qing dynasty weakened and demoralized. Confucian reformers were demanding the adoption of a constitutional monarchy. Young revolutionaries were advocating the overthrow of the Manchu imperial family. And Japan, long an afterthought on the East Asian mainland, was starting to supplant Chinese influence in Korea and Taiwan.

And at this acute moment of self-doubt, in the throes of a national crisis of identity, a remarkable discovery opened a new window onto the origins of ancient Chinese civilization itself. This discovery was the ruins of the Yin, or "Yinxu," also known as the capital of the earliest recorded dynasty in East Asian history: the Shang dynasty.

Declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2006 in recognition of the extraordinary light it has shed on Bronze Age China, the ruins of Yin include a vast royal necropolis and the foundations of a temple and palace complex. What makes the site even more special, however, are the fragmented remains of some 200,000 turtle shells and ox bones, 50,000 of which are inscribed with the earliest known traces of the Chinese script. These precious relics, known in English as "oracle bones," mark the beginning of history in East Asia more than 3,000 years ago. But while the history recorded by these oracle bones bore some resemblance to the more famous Chinese dynasties that followed, in other ways they told the tale of an utterly alien—and downright horrifying—world.

In the year 1899, a group of peasants in the northern Chinese village of Xiaotun happened to discover an unusually large batch of what they called "dragon bones." The bones had turned up in the eroded soil alongside the Huan River, a tributary of the Yellow River. This was not the first time the villagers had stumbled upon these sorts of things. In fact, there was a long tradition throughout China of selling such dragon bones to local apothecaries and pharmacists, who would grind them up for use in various medicinal concoctions. But the bones near Xiaotun were different than others: for *their* surfaces were covered with scratches and scuffmarks. In order to secure as high a price as possible for their commodities, the villagers of Xiaotun often scraped these surfaces clean before presenting them for sale. At some point during this latest harvest of bones, however, an antiquities dealer named Fan Weiqing happened to pass through the nearby city of Anyang. Intrigued by the strange markings that persisted on some of these bones, Fan decided to purchase a small batch and take it the distant cities of the eastern seaboard. When these same nicks and scratches managed in turn to arouse the curiosity of Confucian scholars, the oracle bone business was born.

But no one in China actually referred to them as oracle bones at first. Instead, they were known as *jiaguwen* 甲骨文, or "writings on shell and bone." The reason is because no one yet grasped the full significance of those mysterious markings. It was not until the year 1903, when a scholar by the name of Liu E published the first collection of rubbings taken from these bones, that the strange etchings began to be accepted as a form of Chinese writing that no one had ever seen before. Over the next ten years, Luo Zhenyu, a famous scholar of classical Chinese literature and history, managed to identify within this mysterious script the names of nine ancient kings whom many people had begun to regard as legendary. With that, it was clear that these bones dated from the thirteenth to the eleventh centuries BC, the last two centuries of the Shang Dynasty.

Unfortunately, progress in deciphering these inscriptions was slow. After the 1911 revolution, political instability and economic hardships prevented systematic excavations or

preservation of the site. Instead, local peasants continued to dig in hopes of selling bones to the highest bidder. And these bidders came from around the world, leading to the dispersal of the oracle bones. Local landlords fought with one another for the right to prospect for new oracle bone sites; groups of impoverished peasants undertook their own clandestine digs under the cover of night; and the manufacture of fake oracle bones flourished. In fact, it was not until 1928 that the newly established government of Chiang Kai-shek was able to sponsor the first scientific excavations in and around Xiaotun Village. And once the first Chinese archaeologists set spade to soil, it did not take long for them to discover that the banks of the Huan River had managed to conceal a lot more than just oracle bones.

Today, the ruins of Yin are spread out on both sides of the river. Most of the original oracle bone pits were discovered within a bend on the southwestern side of the river, near fields once cultivated by the villagers. Subsequent excavations on the northwestern and northeastern sides of the river, however, revealed the foundations of ancient palaces and temples, along with a vast royal necropolis. But this only encompasses the ceremonial center of the Shang capital—the places where its kings, ministers, princes, and royal consorts ate, slept, worshipped, married, plotted, and died. In its heyday, the city probably supported a population on the order of several hundred thousand, quite possibly the most populous urban enclave in the world at that time.

According to the oracle bone inscriptions, this region was referred to at the time as the "great Shang settlement" (*da Shang yi* 大商邑). As evidence of the greatness of this settlement, those who visit the site today are greeted not by the oracle bones, which are incomprehensible to all but the most highly trained specialists, but by a tomb. This tomb belongs to Lady Hao (Fu Hao 婦好), who was one of more than sixty consorts of the earliest documented Shang king, Wu Ding 武丁. Unlike those in the royal necropolis on the other side of the Huan River, Lady Hao's tomb is the only one not to have been looted in antiquity. As a result, it furnishes an unprecedented glimpse into the wealth and sophistication of elite Shang culture.

Let us begin with the bronzes. All told, there are 468 bronze artifacts in Lady Hao's tomb. Bronze production was a highly developed art in ancient China, and the vessels produced during this era were widely coveted as markers of high political status. Taking the form of wine vessels, tripods, bells, animals, weapons, and other ritual objects, these bronzes were also adorned with intricate and finely detailed patterns along the outer surfaces. It bears noting that bronzeware was by no means confined to the ruins of Yin. Manufactured at about the same time as the "great Shang settlement" is a collection of remarkable bronze masks and figurines unearthed at the site of Sanxingdui in present-day Sichuan Province. Though the craftsmanship on display—and resources involved in the commissioning of such works—was no less impressive than those found at the ruins of Yin, the lack of a written script at Sanxingdui has doomed its civilization to relative obscurity.

In the Shang period, to own a finely crafted bronze object was to stake a claim to wealth and power. One remarkable wine vessel, or *zun* 尊*,* cast in the form of an owl, is one of the most beautiful and intricate bronze items found in the tomb of Lady Hao. Many of the bronzes took the shape of animals in the Shang and Zhou periods, but the owl is a particularly common motif. Its significance in the Shang period is still not fully understood, but it's likely people of this time venerated the owl as a source of supernatural power, and perhaps as protectors of agriculture.

The owl and other animal motifs can also be found amongst the tomb's extraordinary collection of jade carvings. In death, Lady Hao was surrounded by 755 jade objects. The raw material for most of these jade objects could be traced back to the productive riverbeds of Khotan, which was an oasis in the Taklamakan Desert more than two thousand miles to the west.

Though the Taklamakan Desert now lies within the boundaries of the People's Republic of China, in a region known as Xinjiang, it would have been worlds apart from the great Shang settlement. As evidence of just how alien the people of the Taklamakan Desert would have appeared to Shang traders or envoys, we need look no further than a series of remarkably preserved mummies that were excavated from the sand in the late twentieth century. Just like the Sanxingdui bronzes, these mummies have also been dated to the second millennium B.C., making them more or less contemporary with the ruins of Yin. A single glance at the mummy known as Cherchen Man is enough to remind us of the astonishing diversity of the lands and people now subsumed within modern China. For Cherchen Man stood 6 ft. 6 in. tall—a veritable giant back then—and sported colorful felt leggings, deerskin boots, and reddish-brown hair. Along with the hauntingly named "Loulan Beauty" and other mummies, Cherchen Man, with his striking Caucasoid features and genetic heritage that has been traced to somewhere in Siberia, serves as a warning about the pitfalls of projecting modern-day conceptions of "China" back into antiquity.

Now back to the Shang. Another spectacular bronze from the ruins of Yin was unearthed on farmland not far from the tomb of Lady Hao. The Houmuwu bronze, or *ding* 鼎, was discovered in 1939 – we now know it was a ritual funerary cauldron for Fu Jing, another of Wu Ding's wives, but when her tomb was eventually discovered it was found to have been robbed. The Houmuwu *ding* is the heaviest piece of bronzeware to survive from anywhere in the ancient world – standing 52 inches tall, it weights nearly 2,000 pounds! A *ding* like this one would have been used to make ritual offerings to gods or ancestors. This one is exquisitely decorated with a variety of motifs, from tigers and dragons to cloud and lightning patterns, except for large blank rectangular spaces in the middle of each side.

In addition to jade and bronzes, Lady Hao's tomb also contained nearly 7,000 cowry shells from the coasts of India. During Shang times, cowry shells were valued as a form of currency and political capital. Some of the oracle bones even describe how the king would bestow a certain number of cowry shells on favored subordinates, who would then commission the production of a new bronze vessel to mark the occasion. Cowry shells and jade were so highly valued during Shang times that in tombs they were usually placed in close proximity to the central coffin, sometimes even on the eyes or in the mouth. In the case of jade, this practice would be continued for many more millennia. In fact, a thousand years later, during the Han dynasty, imperial princes and princesses would sometimes be buried within a full-body suit made entirely from thousands of pieces of jade that had been sewn together.

By our standards today, Lady Hao's tomb may seem lavish. But by Shang dynasty standards, it was actually one of the more modest graves. What makes it worthy of our attention today is not only the fact that it was an intact tomb, but also that it is one of the only ones whose occupant can be identified with any certainty. This is because the Shang were the first people in East Asian history to leave written records that have survived down to the present day. As a result, Lady Hao's name is actually inscribed on over one hundred of the bronze vessels and weapons buried alongside her. And beyond the tomb, there are also about 180 oracle bones that mention her name. Why did her name appear so many times? Well, in order to answer that question, we first need to understand how the oracle bones worked—and for what purpose.

To put it in the simplest terms possible, oracle bones were a means of addressing the anxieties and uncertainties of life at the apex of Shang society. As such, they deal almost exclusively with the high affairs of state: things like war, political alliances and marriage, the birth of male heirs, the annual harvest, and the favor of the gods. Unfortunately for the Shang

king, all of these things are inherently unpredictable. But they are also of great consequence. So, in order to alleviate the king's many concerns, oracle bones were utilized as a way of obtaining additional information from the netherworld about the best course of action to adopt.

This is how they worked. First, large numbers of turtle shells and the shoulder bones of oxen would be collected from neighboring lands, usually as a form of tribute to the Shang king. After scraping their surfaces clean, a shaman would carve out a series of hollow circles into the backside of the bone. Then, during an elaborate ceremony involving the use of numerous bronze vessels and specially prepared wine and stew, the Shang king and his royal guests would look on as the shaman began to speak. His words were short and sweet, usually phrased in terms of a series of opposing statements or a single question. For example, he might say: "If the king dances for rain, there will be approval." This would then be followed by an opposing statement, such as: "The king should not dance for rain." After he finished speaking, the shaman inserted a red-hot poker into several of the hollows bored into the backside of the shell or bone. This would produce cracks on the other side. These cracks would then be interpreted by either the king or his shaman as the approval or disapproval of the netherworld. Finally, both the previously posed questions and the response of the netherworld would be etched into the front side of the bone in Chinese characters, as a permanent record of the divination process.

Now, who exactly were the Shang king and his shaman communicating with? According to the oracle bones, there was an elaborate hierarchy of supernatural beings who were imagined to play a role in royal affairs. At the top of this hierarchy was a god known simply as Di 帝. It seems that Di had ultimate authority over the weather, the harvest, war, and the general fortunes of the dynasty. For instance, one oracle bone concludes that on such and such a day "Di may order wind." Another divination discovered that "it is Di who curses our harvest." And yet another purported to figure out that "it is not Di's orders that are creating my difficulties."

It is notable that among the hundreds of thousands of oracle bone fragments that have been recovered, not one records the performance of a sacrifice directed toward Di. The implication seems to be that that Di is beyond supplication. As the most powerful deity around, Di simply does as he sees fit—and the king has to deal with it. But Di's exalted status would not last long. Just two centuries later, the kings of the Zhou dynasty, who conquered the Shang, would instead initiate the worship of a force they referred to as Tian 天—or Heaven. And the king would come to be known as the "Son of Heaven." Di, however, was not entirely forgotten, and to this day, the Chinese word for "emperor" is *huangdi* 皇帝: that is, the Supreme Di.

But there were also other spirits who, unlike Di, *could* be reckoned with. Entreaties to spirits of the mountain, river, forest, wind, and others have been found on oracle bones. But most sacrifices were directed to the king's royal ancestors who had died in recent memory. The logic seems clear: the more personal the king's relationship with the spirits of the netherworld, the more likely they were to be receptive to appeals and give him the information he needed to improve his fortunes.

As the oracle bones make clear, the king's fortunes could be glimpsed in anything from war to a toothache. One divination reads: "There is a sick tooth; it is not Father Yi who is harming." This was useful information, of course: now the king knew not to waste any time or resources on performing a sacrifice to Father Yi. Of course, there were still a lot of other ancestors who might be the cause of ill health. Fortunately, other oracle bones were a bit more specific. For example, one reads as follows: "For the sick foot, perform an exorcism to Ancestress Ji." Another records that "today we offer one penned sheep to Ancestor Xin, and promise five more cattle."

One particularly wordy divination even speculates on the gender of Lady Hao's expected child, with a shaman named Que hoping that "Lady Hao's childbearing will be good." Unfortunately, the inscription on the turtle shell tells us exactly what happened: "The king read the cracks and said: 'If it be on a *ding*-day that she give birth, there will be prolonged luck.' After thirty-one days, on *jiayin* day, she gave birth; it was not good; it was a girl."

This overt misogyny is only one of the darker sides of the oracle bones. The divinatory record also brings us face to face with an astonishing amount of violence, both on the battlefield and off. Sometimes the king would ask his ancestors if he should go to war against a neighboring rival. At other times they would simply order him to press an attack. Regardless, the decision to go to war seems to have set in motion a complex process of mobilization, one that reveals the limits of the king's authority. One divination reveals the multiple layers of alliances involved in raising an army when it advises the king to "call upon Bu to order Zhi to harm the Qiang."

One of the most intriguing oracle bones suggests that some of the king's own consorts may have had their own armies, and that the king had to enlist their help to deploy them. This was precisely the case with Lady Hao, who was once called upon by the king and his ancestors to contribute 3,000 troops to the battlefield. Some scholars have even speculated that Lady Hao herself was a general, and that she may have led her soldiers onto the battlefield personally.

But the Shang king was no absentee general, either. In fact, the oracle bones make clear that he personally participated in these battles far more often than we might expect for a king of his stature. Of course, he wasn't fighting alongside lowly foot soldiers. Instead, he would have ridden into battle on an imposing vehicle that few people at the time would have ever seen before: a horse-drawn chariot.

Archaeological excavations of the Shang capital have revealed that the chariot made its first appearance in eastern Eurasia at about this time. It was likely introduced from the west through the steppes of Inner Asia, though the exact path of transmission isn't known. In battle, the chariot ensured that the king—and a few trusted archers by his side—could participate in some combat situations while maintaining a safe distance from the central fray.

Off the battlefield, the chariot would have been the king's chief mode of conveyance as he shuttled from place to place. In fact, the chariot was so deeply intertwined with the royal identity that some kings took their chariots with them into the afterlife: excavations at the ruins of Yin have uncovered not only the structural remains of the chariot itself, but also the skeletal remains of its horses, archers, and drivers. Today, six of these unearthed chariots of ancient warfare can be found in an exhibition hall on the site, ghostly reminders of those who fought to protect the glory of Yin.

This brings us to the darkest side of the oracle bones: human sacrifice. The revelations of pervasive human sacrifice during Shang times came as quite a shock to modern scholars, who had expected to find customs more in line with later manifestations of Chinese culture. Of course, later texts did preserve some cryptic hints about the possibility of human sacrifice during the earliest periods of Chinese history. In the *Book of Odes*, a collection of songs and poetry dated to the half millennium after the fall of the Shang, one set of lyrics describes the scene of a royal burial. "Who followed Duke Mu to the grave?" the song went. "Ziche Qianhu. And this Ziche Qianhu could withstand a hundred men. But when he came to the grave, he looked terrified and trembled."

In the absence of supporting evidence, vague references such as this could be chalked up to literary license. With the excavation of Yin, however, there was no longer any doubt. Remember that one oracle bone that urged the king to perform an exorcism to one of his female

ancestors? Well, here is another one that makes clear precisely what such exorcisms entailed: "Exorcise Ancestress Geng with twenty decapitated people and perhaps thirty captives." And here is another one that lumps human victims alongside animal victims: "Exorcise Tang, Da Jia, Da Ding, and Ancestor Yi by using one hundred captives and one hundred specially reared sheep."

Now, most of these sacrificial victims were indeed captives of one sort or another, and most were probably captured in war. And of these, most seem to have belonged to a group of people referred to in the oracle bones as *qiang* 羌. *Qiang*, which would later evolve into a general term for barbarian tribes who lived to the west, seems to have served as a general designation for anyone that the Shang armies captured alive in battle and intended to sacrifice to the king's ancestors. The oracle bones, however, provide very few details about these sacrifices.

In order to paint a fuller picture, we must turn to the twelve royal tombs across the river. Now known as the Xibeigang necropolis, all twelve of these enormous tombs were looted in antiquity. So, while they cannot provide as vivid a portrait of Shang material culture as we saw in Lady Hao's tomb, they do still preserve traces of those things that looters had little interest in removing. As a result, the Shang royal tombs are filled to the brim with the grisly remains of human sacrificial victims.

The number of victims in each tomb seems to have been tied directly to the status of its chief occupant. For instance, Lady Hao's relatively modest tomb contained only sixteen sacrificial victims, and most tombs contained none at all, or substituted dogs for people. But the largest Shang tomb, likely that of a king, contained a staggering 339 human victims!

The vast majority of these sacrifices consisted of young males aged between 15 to 35 years old, though there were also a handful of children and women as well. Now, the most common method of execution was what we can only hope was a mercifully swift decapitation. But the skeletal record also bears silent testimony to the many specialized cutting methods alluded to in the oracle bone inscriptions, each of which must have resulted in unbearable agony if the victim was still alive. These included cutting bodies in half at the waist, sawing through skulls just beneath the cranium, limbs cut off, ritual burnings, and being buried alive.

Once this horrific butchery was over, the victims were dumped into burial pits dug alongside the ramps leading to the central chamber of the tomb. The largest royal tombs were equipped with four ramps, one in each direction, with various ledges and antechambers marking the descent into the tomb. One reason these tombs were so big was due to the sheer numbers of bronze vessels and human victims that would accompany the deceased into the next life. In addition to the hundreds of human captives, the biggest tombs also contain armed guards, servants, consorts, and slaves.

It seems likely that these victims faced their death with somewhat less resistance, confident that they would emerge intact to serve their lord in the netherworld. Unlike the sacrificial captives, whose hands often appear to be tied behind their back and whose bodies were frequently dismembered, retainers were usually buried intact, with their own coffins, grave goods, and sometimes even their own ritually sacrificed servants. And instead of being tossed into a pit on the edges of the tomb, they were buried in close proximity to the king's body in the central chamber.

All in all, the royal Shang necropolis provides us with a vivid preview of later Chinese mortuary practices and views of the afterlife before the arrival of Buddhism. In short, the next world is more or less a carbon copy of this world. As such, tombs were equipped with everything its occupant would need in the next world: this included weapons, furniture, wine cups, bronze

tripods, musical bells, jade, cowry shells, and other humans—both those who served you at home and those whom you defeated in battle. A thousand years later, such beliefs would still predominate, but with one major caveat: instead of placing actual humans into the grave, inanimate statues, such as the terracotta warriors, would take their place.

But this humane shift in burial practices merely underscores a larger point: in many ways, the China that we see in the oracle bones and at the Shang royal necropolis is not really the "China" that we think of today at all. Certainly, there are some things that bear a major resemblance to later periods of history. After all, we saw evidence of ancestor worship, a preference for sons, a love of jade and bronzes, and, perhaps most importantly, an early form of the Chinese script. But the differences also loom large, and much of their world, and even their language, was unrecognizable—and in some ways utterly repugnant—to those who rediscovered their traces thousands of years later.

The ruins of the Shang polity may mark the beginning of recorded history in China, but that doesn't necessarily mean that the Shang were "Chinese." Perhaps it might be easier to think of a Western analogue: though modern-day Italians owe much of their language, history, and culture to the Romans, none of us would dream of referring to the Romans as "ancient Italians." The ruins of Yin remind us that much the same is true of the ancient Chinese.

Religion in Chinese History

For the first fifteen hundred years or so of recorded Chinese history—that is, from the first oracle bones in 1250 B.C. until the decline of the Han Empire in the second and third centuries A.D.—the religious landscape was dominated by a belief in what we might refer to as "the carbon-copy afterworld." Based on the grave and tomb remains of political and economic elites, the world that you inhabited after death was more or less imagined to resemble the one you inhabited while alive. Extant tombs for the wealthy went to great lengths to replicate the rooms and material furnishings that officials and landlords enjoyed while alive. The goal of funerals and death rituals was simply to ensure that the deceased passed successfully from one realm to the next, without any incentive to return to the world of the living. If you were the wife of an official in life, you would also be the wife of an official in the nebulous afterworld, with an otherworldly bureaucracy that bore a striking resemblance to the bureaucracy of worldly states.

The main gatekeeper was known as the Queen Mother of the West, who was said to reside on Mt. Kunlun (now identified with mountains in the region of Tibet but originally just a really distant place far off in the west). Once the Queen Mother let you pass, you would have to pass inspections with various spiritual bureaucratic elites—men with titles like the Director of Life Spans (who ensured no one was taken before or after their allotted time), Underworld Minimum Wage Officers (seriously, these titles aren't a joke), and the Earl of the Tomb. This, at least, is what we know of elite views of the afterlife. Presumably, if you were a peasant who spent his entire life picking at bedbugs and fleas and barely getting enough to eat, you might hope to experience something slightly more comfortable after you died. But the poor didn't leave any traces of what they imagined the afterworld to look like, so we can only reconstruct elite views. If later religious practices among the poor are any indication of the earliest practices, then they probably worshipped a range of local landscape spirits, household gods, and dead ancestors who brought misfortune or fortune to individuals based on the sincerity of your prayers and offerings to them—a more humbler and localized version of the gods that the Shang king communicated with in the oracle bones. The goal, for most poor souls, was very much a utilitarian give-and-take: here is a bowl of rice presented on our family's finest cloths, with a local shaman or other religious expert whom we've paid to perform a ritual or two. In return, please send us rain for the harvest and cure the illness now threatening to claim the life of our son.

As for Daoism, China's only native religion that eventually coalesced into institutionalized form, it was noted for engaging with a range of potions, medicines, and rituals designed to ferry specially designated mediators back and forth to another world invisible to human eyes. Daoism catered to many different audiences: for the peasant masses, it was often little more than what we today would deem "hocus pocus": chants and bodily movements that were believed to exorcise demons from both people and things, or influence the spiritual composition of the immediate environment. For elites, including emperors and officials, Daoism offered the potential for immortality: indigestion of melted mercury and crushed cinnabar were thought to prolong one's life, perhaps for eternity. The historical annals do record a handful of emperors and princes who appear to have inadvertently died as a result of ingesting mercury or even gold (or perhaps they just transformed into immortals?).

When Buddhism entered the Chinese heartland in the first couple centuries of our era—i.e., during the Eastern or Latter Han Empire (25–220 A.D.)—it radically transformed the religious landscape. Buddhism, as most people know, originally evolved in northern India during

the same time that Confucius was promulgating his *Analects* in the East Asian heartland. But we do not really begin to see its widespread adoption in public art and architecture in China until the middle of the first millennium A.D. It was at that point that Buddhism began to be patronized by some of the northern and southern states that succeeded the Han Empire, with the result that Buddhist architecture—stupas and pagodas—began to dominate the urban skylines of most state capitals, taking their place alongside the drum towers common to every major settlement.

When Buddhism entered China, it already had a fully formed otherworld populated by various types of spirits, gods, and spiritual landscapes. It also brought an extensive textual corpus of *sutras* that purported to record the words of the Buddha. For most of its translation into Chinese, Buddhism relied on metaphysical language familiar to Daoism. For much of the general population, popular religion simply became a scarcely undifferentiated mixture of these three religious traditions: only an expert ethnologist could try to determine where Daoism ended, pre-Buddhist religious beliefs began, and Buddhist concepts appeared. For elites, however, the three traditions were often clearly delineated, and loyalty to one or the other would be claimed. Many states decided to adopt some form of Buddhism as the official face of their rule, while some—most famously the Tang—took Daoism under its official patronage. Don't be fooled by New Age interpretations of these religions familiar to the West, however: Daoist and Buddhist states were just as prone to go to war to defend their very worldly material interests as any other state in world history. Few states ever attempted to proscribe or prohibit widespread worship of any of these three traditions: though occasional campaigns to crack down on one or the other would occur, they never lasted, and all three traditions continued quite healthy into the twentieth century. More often than not, whenever Daoists or Buddhists were persecuted, it was for very worldly concerns: the tax-exempt status and political refugee functions of Buddhist monasteries were frequent targets for crackdown by Confucian officials in search of greater state revenue.

More than anything else, Buddhism was responsible for introducing and further developing an amazingly vibrant view of the afterlife, populated with an colorful array of exotic gods and spirits doling our rewards or punishments in accordance with your worldly behavior (i.e., whether you had accumulated sufficient karmic credit to be reborn on the next level of existence, or had done evil acts deserving of punishment in the depths of Hell). In its most basic parameters, this is one of the essential transformations Buddhism brought about in China: from an indigenous view of the afterlife as one largely replicating the one you lived before death—with no apparent consequences for good or bad behavior—to one in which your fate after death was inextricably intertwined with how well you conducted yourself before death. We might call this the "moralizing of the afterlife." Before Buddhism, the only spiritual transition of any significance between life and death was the act of passage from one realm to the other. The goal among the living was simply to ensure that the funeral rites were done properly, so that passage to the identical afterworld could be accomplished without a hitch. Your right to make that passage into your predetermined afterlife was not in question; the only question was whether or not the passage would be completed successfully and without complications. Now, with Buddhism, your entire life was a referendum on your right to pass into an attractive afterworld, as reward for your worldly merits—or punishment for your worldly demerits.

It is important not to get too caught up in sophisticated textual descriptions of the various religious schools of thought and their philosophies, for these were imbibed by a miniscule percentage of the population. For the vast majority of souls, Buddhism could be reduced to what they saw in public murals painted onto city walls and outside monasteries. One of my favorite descriptions of one of these Buddhist murals comes from Gustav Mannerheim, a Finnish traveler

who encountered one of them while traveling in the northwestern province of Gansu during the twentieth century. The image conjured up by Mannerheim's description can stand with the best of a Heironymus Bosch painting or Dante description of the lowest rung of Hell. If this doesn't encourage you to seek karmic merit in this life, then nothing will:

"The 12 gods of hell, larger than life-size, sit along the walls in 12 larger niches, each with 2 heiduks with terrifying faces by their sides. There are white-bearded ancients, who sit watching with the mildest of expressions the horrors being perpetrated at their feet, and red-bearded giants, apparently burning to leap down from their niches, consumed with desire to torture some poor sinner to death with their own hands. Horrible scenes are depicted on the floor, everything being reproduced with the crudest realism. You see intestines being pulled out with long tongs, whole bodies being flayed, skulls being sawn asunder, eyes being gouged out from being pecked out by a cock, women being hanged by their breasts, tongues being cut off, people being broken on the wheel, or crushed so that gobbets of flesh and streams of blood are pressed from between the grindstones, while a pair of feet in finely embroidered women's shoes protrude from the hollows in the middle. Such horrors should surely suffice to rid the inhabitants of Gansu of any desire to sin."

Speech and Script in East Asia

When you think about "the Chinese language" today, you are most likely thinking of what is popularly known as "Mandarin Chinese." Why "mandarin"? It has nothing to do with oranges. "Mandarin" is the pronunciation given by the British to the Portuguese pronunciation of an Indian word meaning "official." When the Portuguese first started visiting southern China in the 16th century—their colony at Macau was a legacy of this—they would stop first at a port in India, usually Goa. There they would pick up hired deckhands from the local population and take them with the ship to southern China. When these Indian laborers saw the Chinese officials the Portuguese came into contact with, they referred to them as "officials"—in their own language, of course (*mantrin* in Sanskrit). After a few linguistic turns and twists, we have "mandarin" as the word used to refer to an official of the Ming (1368–1644) and later Qing (1644–1911) state.

But this still does not explain why the term is used to refer to present-day speakers of Chinese, few of whom are officials of any sort. There is a reason for this. At the time Westerners first began to visit China in great numbers, there was no one single spoken language that was spoken across the breadth of the empire, or even the agricultural "Han heartland." The best way to think about the linguistic make-up of China prior to the twentieth century is to make an analogy to Europe. Linguists will tell you that there is just as much diversity and distance between individual languages in Europe as there is within China. We are accustomed to speaking of distinct European *languages* such as German, Spanish, French, English, and Russian. But the same amount of linguistic diversity in China is often captured by reference to *dialects*. The reason is political. After all, from a purely linguistic standpoint, the definition of a language is a form of speech that is unintelligible to speakers of another form of speech. In other words, if you put two humans in a room together and they cannot make themselves understood to one another via verbal communication, then they speak two distinct languages.

But up until very recently, people from southern China—say, speakers of Cantonese—could not communicate with speakers from northern China, unless one of them had studied the other's language or both had studied a common third language. So why do we speak of *dialects* in China, yet *languages* almost everywhere else in the world? The answer is simple: many powerful and influential people had a vested interest in portraying the people of China as constituting a relatively homogenous community whose cultural, ethnic, and linguistic similarities justified their inclusion into one Chinese state, as opposed to many smaller states. This is manifestly a political act. For instance, ever since the 1940s, some political activists in Taiwan have attempted to justify its separation from the mainland Chinese state by claiming that the Taiwanese people were sufficiently unique and different from those on the mainland—thus the ability to speak the Taiwanese "language" suddenly carries enormous significance. So, is Taiwanese a "dialect" or a "language"? The answer: it depends on whom you ask. Those who insist on calling it a "language" are likely making a political statement that emphasizes the uniqueness of the people who speak it, and their suitability for a state of their own. Those who insist on calling it a dialect are likely making a deliberate attempt to demonstrate cultural affinities with the people of the mainland—and thus the inevitability of Taiwan one day reuniting with the mainland state. Those who have never given a single thought to the matter—likely the majority of the world's population—probably don't care one way or the other.

But the lesson for us here is that the way in which a form of speech is characterized carries enormous implications for how political activists may attempt to "claim" the speakers of that form of speech for this or that state. Because Europe has long been composed of many

separate states, we have no problem thinking of distinct "languages" as representing the majority of speakers in each of those states. But in China, where every couple of centuries or so a new dynasty emerges and manages to do what Charlemagne, Napoleon, and Hitler consistently failed to do in Europe—i.e., conquer and hold most of it—there is a long and deeply politicized history of attempting to portray literally hundreds of mutually unintelligible *languages* as mere *dialects* of one, unitary Chinese language family. If we applied the same rhetorical rubric to Europe, however, we would have to dispense with the terms German, Italian, French, and English, and instead refer in blanket fashion to "the Indo-European language" of Europe, in the singular. For that is what we are doing when we refer to "the Chinese language," instead of Shanghainese, Taiwanese, Fujianese, Shandonese, Pekinese, and Sichuanese as separate languages.

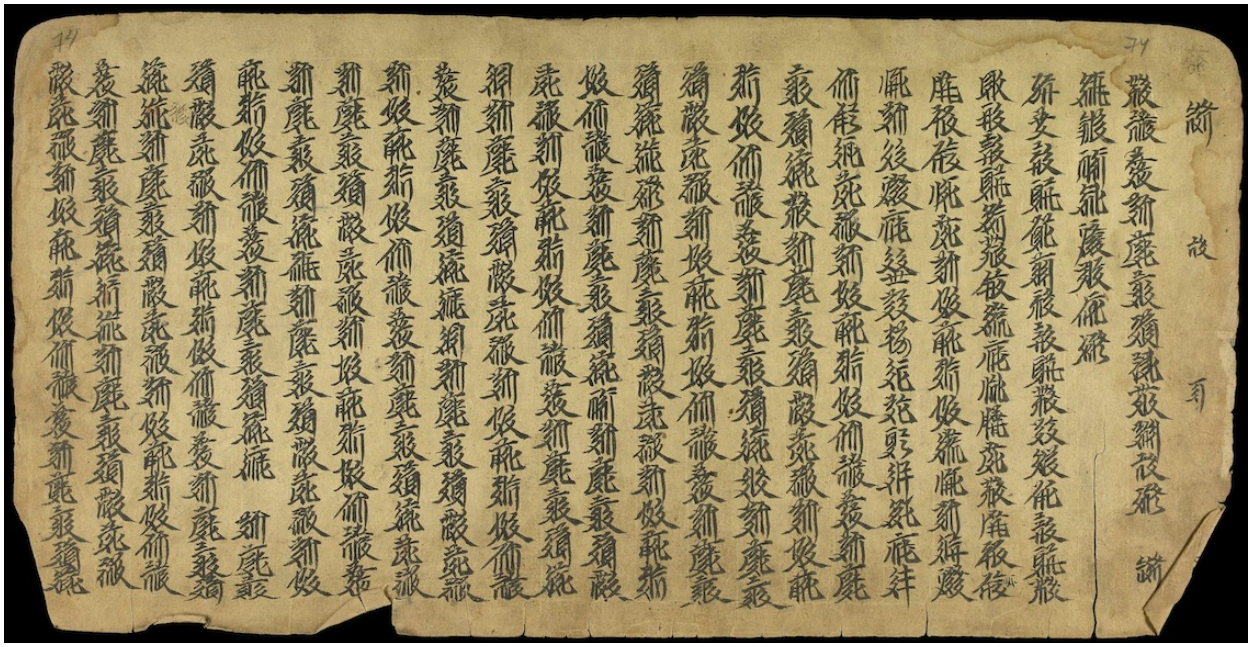
Yet if there was ever an independent state to which most of the speakers of one of these forms of speech belonged, you can be certain that their leaders would be quick to proclaim their spoken words as a distinct language separate from "Mandarin Chinese," rather than a mere dialect of Chinese. For instance, in the 1930s, ethnologists and linguists in the Soviet Union did precisely that, devising independent transcription systems for what they identified as six distinct and mutually unintelligible languages spoken by expatriate Chinese communities living within the borders of the Soviet Union. The names for these languages (in Russian) were based upon the province from which these speakers came: Shandunskii (Shandong), Guandunski (Guangdong), Futszianskoi (Fujian), Tsziansu (Jiangsu), Chzhetsziana (Zhejiang), and Tsziansi (Jiangxi). Not surprisingly, political elites in China expressed absolutely no interest in adopting such categories of difference within their own state, as they could potentially facilitate regionalist or even separatist movements. Insisting that the Han people of the inner provinces were more or less united in culture and speech was much more politically desirable.

So, what is Mandarin Chinese? Well, it was originally one manifestation of a northern dialect/language within the Sino-Tibetan language family that got adopted as the standard form of speech that anyone who served in the imperial bureaucracy—more often than not located in the north, say in Beijing or Chang'an (Xi'an)—would need to learn in order to do their job. Chinese empires were large and diverse, and you can't run such a large and diverse polity unless your civil and military servants learn to communicate with one another in a single language. But since these officials were originally drawn from all over the empire, growing up speaking their own mutually unintelligible local forms of speech, they couldn't rely upon their own mother tongues to bring about such communication. So they learned a refined form of speech based on the local version of a single manifestation of the Sino-Tibetan language family spoken around the imperial capital, which, as I've already pointed out, was more often than not located in the north. In the twentieth century, this "official speech"—i.e., Mandarin Chinese, the language of the *mantrins*, or officials—was still considered the most refined and suitable language for propagation to the rest of the country. Any foreigner who wanted to curry influence and power in China needed to learn it (though many missionaries would learn other languages, too, such as Fujianese or Cantonese, in order to facilitate conversion by the locals).

Because Mandarin Chinese has long been the language of government—and, since the 1950s, the language of mass education—it is what everyone thinks about when they think about "the Chinese language." In truth, however, it is merely one language among hundreds within the Sino-Tibetan language family that have always existed throughout the Han heartland (and beyond), and most of which were mutually unintelligible to every other single language. When I made my first trip to Hong Kong in 2010, I was surprised to find that I could not order a simple bowl of noodles in Mandarin Chinese—the waitress spoke only Cantonese and English (the latter

a result of British colonial influence). If you want to think of a European analogue, the equivalent during Medieval, Renaissance, and nineteenth-century Europe would likely be French (or possibly German). Though a European nobleman or merchant from Prussia or Slovakia might have spoken Polish or Slovakian growing up, he would learn and use French or German whenever he interacted with other men in government or business across Europe or whenever he had occasion to hold the reins of government administration himself.

So that's the story of Mandarin Chinese as the pre-eminent spoken language of the East Asian heartland, standing apart from a fertile sea of linguistic diversity among the (mostly) illiterate masses. But what about the script? The Chinese script has been in verified continuous use since about 1250 B.C., when it first appears on the scapula of an ill-fated cow or shell of a doomed tortoise. Along with Egyptian hieroglyphics, which eventually evolved into the Roman alphabet still in use today, the Chinese script has one of the longest continuous histories of any script in the world. What purpose did it serve? First and foremost, we should think of the Chinese script as a bureaucratic tool that proved useful in helping maintain records of a sedentary state. It could be mastered and utilized by anyone, regardless of ethnic identity. Written scripts are very difficult to invent, and such a feat has only been accomplished three or four times in the history of humankind. So, once the Chinese script was successfully created to represent the sounds of whatever spoken language its inventors happened to utter—and we have no idea what that spoken language sounded like today—everyone in proximity to this script could quickly see the benefits of using or adapting it. In just the past 2,000 years, people who would today be classified as Han, Koreans, Japanese, Sarbi, Manchus, Mongols, Tanguts, Turks, Khitans, and Jurchens would all choose to adopt the Chinese script for the purposes of administering their states. Some of these people would borrow it wholesale, writing their documents and novels in what today is referred to as Classical or Literary Chinese—something that would be more familiar to Confucius than it would be to Xi Jinping. Others, such as the Koreans, Japanese, and Tanguts, would eventually adapt the Chinese script to their own purposes, changing its physical appearance so as to better represent the phonemes of their own spoken language. Take a look at the script on this ancient Buddhist sutra:



To the untrained eye it looks like Chinese. But no one literate in Chinese, either today or a thousand years ago, is likely to be able to make head or tail of this script. This is because it is in fact a unique Tangut adaptation of the Chinese script as it existed around 1100 to 1300 A.D. The Tanguts took various elements of Chinese characters—a downstroke here, a radical there—and reassembled them in creative ways to forge their own unique script, so as to better reflect the sounds of their own spoken Tangut language, the official language of the Western Xia state.

The Japanese and Koreans would eventually do something similar. Because the Sino-Tibetan language family is marked by grammatical forms that are strikingly different from those which characterize the Altaic language family—within which Japanese and Korean are generally agreed to belong—the Chinese script was ill-suited for representing the sounds of spoken Japanese or Korean. The Chinese script was designed to represent the sounds of a spoken language that rarely involved grammatical inflections or verbal conjugations; there is no way to change the appearance of a single Chinese character to reflect the type of transformation evident in the difference between the present-tense "take" and the past-tense "took." So, when Koreans and Japanese wanted to give full expression to their unique grammatical structures, they began to develop new alphabetic systems—known as *hiragana* and *katakana* in Japanese, and *hangul* in Korean—capable of expressing tense and verbal conjugations not present in Chinese. This is why many people—myself included!—think that studying Japanese is actually harder than learning Chinese: not only do you have to memorize several hundred Chinese characters (mostly representing Japanese nouns and verbal stems imported from Chinese), but you also have to learn two additional alphabetic systems to express the full richness of the spoken language. (Plus, the complex grammar of Japanese is pure torture compared to the relative simplicity of Chinese, in which you do not need to learn how to conjugate verbs).

But we shouldn't give undue weight to the innovations of the Koreans, Japanese, and Tanguts. Over the vast time frame of East Asian history, the *lingua franca* for *written* interstate and intercultural communication was Classical Chinese, which should not be confused with Mandarin Chinese. Mandarin Chinese is a form of speech based in the region around Beijing that was used during face-to-face contact among peoples who grew up speaking mutually unintelligible forms of speech from elsewhere in the empire. Until the twentieth century, it was the native language of very few people outside of the North China Plains. Conversely, Classical Chinese was not a spoken language. Not a single person ever grew up speaking it as their mother tongue, nor could they learn to speak it fluently even if they tried. If you try reading out loud a document written in Classical Chinese to an audience of highly educated people who are not looking at an exact copy of the same characters whose sounds are being pronounced, then they will not be able to understand what you are saying. It is an artificially constructed medium of written communication, economical in the extreme and highly refined. But no one ever talked in Classical Chinese on the street, even those who knew how to write it. When an official from Guangdong (in the far south) wanted to talk from another official from Shandong (in the north), he spoke to him in the courtly forms of speech known as Mandarin Chinese, which subsequently became the basis for the popular vernacular now spoken by more than a billion people on our planet. That means that the official from Guangdong, who probably spoke Cantonese, had to learn a *second language*: Mandarin Chinese.

But when that same official from Guangdong wrote a philosophical treatise or a personal letter that he wanted another official from Beijing to be able to read, he wrote in Classical Chinese. And when either of these officials returned home to chat with their wives or sons about mundane daily affairs, they very likely used neither Mandarin Chinese nor Classical Chinese, but

rather their local "dialect," itself unintelligible to anyone outside a hundred-mile radius of their hometown. Likewise, when a Buddhist monk from the Japanese islands wanted to communicate in writing with a Buddhist monastery located in China, he too would write not in the present-day form of Japanese, with its mix of Chinese characters and alphabetic *hiragana* and *katakana*, but rather in Classical Chinese, in a form that Confucius himself likely could have read and comprehended. If this same monk traveled in person to the ancient Tang capital of Chang'an (present-day Xi'an), however, he would speak to local officials in Mandarin Chinese while sharing travel documents and Buddhist sutras written in a form of Classical Chinese.

The equivalent written *lingua franca* for most of European history would have been clerical Latin, along with French or German. Though a priest or nobleman from Canterbury might speak a form of vernacular English amid his own local parish, when he traveled abroad to the European mainland he almost certainly spoke French or German, even if his audience was composed entirely of Spaniards—so long as his audience was educated, they would be fluent in both. And if he wanted to communicate in writing with his priestly counterpart in Nuremburg, he would do so in clerical Latin, a dead language that neither man spoke as his native tongue, if they ever spoke it at all. Much as a Mongol or Manchu who wanted to rule over an imperial bureaucracy in China could and would master both Mandarin Chinese and Classical Chinese, so too did Scots and Russians learn French, German, and clerical Latin if they entertained any hopes of engaging with institutions of power in Europe.

If there is one enduring lesson we should take from all these examples, it is that the language that a person speaks and writes does not always align with what we might expect to be their cultural or ethnic background. If this is often the case today, it was even more the case for most of the world's peoples prior to the introduction of mass education in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To put it simply, in the old days, to be educated was to master "cultured" forms of speech and writing that your friends and family back on the farm could not understand unless they themselves somehow managed to acquire years of similarly rigorous education in what to them were alien forms of speech and writing.

In the largest Chinese dictionary ever compiled, nearly 50,000 characters were included. The majority of these, however, are redundant and rarely used. To be considered literate today, with knowledge of enough characters and their phonemic referents to be able to read a newspaper, you probably need to master about 2,000 to 3,000 characters. To read an erudite work of literary fiction, you should probably double that number. These numbers, however, give a misleading impression of how difficult the Chinese script is to grasp. It is not nearly so hard as it sounds to the uninitiated. Once you learn about a hundred distinct characters, you have already memorized the constituent graphic elements that will be reassembled and rearranged in different ways to create the other 2,000 characters necessary to read most things you will encounter in the course of a normal educated life. These 2,000 characters are not 2,000 entirely distinct and unique characters. Mnemonic patterns and repetitive elements are everywhere. In fact, I often tell people that Chinese is one of the most commonly misrepresented languages in the world. If you can overcome the (admittedly tricky) tonal system and persevere through those first hundred characters, then you will be rewarded with perhaps the easiest and simplest grammar of any language in the world.

One final point. The Chinese script has changed significantly over its 3,000-year recorded history. Only a handful of highly specialized scholars can even begin to make sense of the earliest forms of the script, those that appear on oracle bones. At several points in time, the reigning dynasty would commission a vast overhaul of the script, often in the belief that a more

simplified and streamlined version of the script would facilitate the workings of a growing bureaucracy. The last major reform occurred during the years when Mao Zedong was in power (1949–76), this time for a different reason: the belief that the further streamlining of hundreds of common characters would facilitate mass education among the hundreds of millions of illiterate peasants in China. There is, in fact, little evidence that this latest reform actually achieved the goals that it set out to achieve. Critics note that Hong Kong and Taiwan long ago achieved near universal literacy without ever simplifying the Chinese script, which suggests that lack of access to free public schools, not the difficulty of the script itself, was the real culprit of illiteracy. Regardless, the broader implications of the Maoist reforms is that there are effectively two different versions of the Chinese script in widespread official use today: simplified characters on the mainland and traditional characters in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and most overseas Chinese communities. With the enormous increase in mainland Chinese tourists and emigrants throughout the world in recent decades, simplified characters are increasingly supplanting traditional characters in overseas Chinese communities, making Taiwan one of the last bastions of traditional characters.

From a Unipolar to Multipolar World

Our narrative conception for this lesson is that of a transition from a unipolar world dominated by the Zhou to a multipolar world defined by numerous warring states all modeled on the Zhou model. This transition occurred from approximately the 8th to 5th centuries B.C. Recall that the Shang era (1250–1050 B.C.) overlapped with an equally sophisticated—but not literate—sedentary civilization known today as Sanxingdui, the remains of which were unearthed in present-day Sichuan. The Shang kings also shared their age with materially advanced communities of Caucasoid peoples in what is today the northwestern part of China, along with several others in the Yangzi River Basin. So why do we not refer to the Shang era as a "multipolar world"? The reason is that we have no evidence whatsoever that any of these regional heavyweights maintained direct contact with one another, or were even aware of one another's existence. And they certainly did not see themselves as existing in a state of competition with one another. Furthermore, from what limited evidence we do have regarding what one of these advanced civilizations thought about those neighbors with whom they did maintain contact—i.e., the descriptions of hostile tribes and communities of peoples handed down to us on the Shang oracle bones—it appears that none of these regional powerhouses considered themselves to be surrounded by actual or potential equals. In other words, they conceived of the world around them as being populated with less sophisticated and less civilized peoples than themselves. There was no sense of a world in which two or more materially sophisticated, socially complex, and economically advanced political centers co-existed with neighbors believed to bear any resemblance to their own states and societies. The Zhou dynasty differs from that of the Shang era merely in being an even more materially rich, more bureaucratically complex, and more "image-conscious" (e.g., the Mandate of Heaven, dynastic cycle) than that of their predecessors. But in another respect, the Zhou world was very similar to the world inhabited (or at least envisioned) by the Shang kings: a world in which only one state—their own—represented the highest order of human enterprise. And that's what we mean when we say that the early or "Western" Zhou period was a unipolar world.

The Zhou state borrowed and adapted the Chinese script found on Anyang oracle bones, then added several critical rhetorical innovations of their own. Another way to put it is that the Zhou were the first to produce "narrative histories" of how their world came to be. The goal of Zhou narratives was to explain why they deserved to be the sole ruling power in the known civilized world. They came up with a catchy phrase: "the mandate of heaven" (*tianming* 天命). In short, the mandate of heaven held that a morally virtuous ruler would receive the "mandate" to rule the land from Heaven. He could only lose this mandate through degenerate and unvirtuous behavior. Thus, if the Shang kings were defeated in battle, their bronzes removed, and their cities destroyed, that was proof that they had lost the mandate of heaven, since virtuous rulers could not fall from power. Note how this is a self-fulfilling prophecy: if you win, you have the mandate of heaven; if you lose, you don't have it. So go into battle and try your luck! The Mandate of Heaven has exerted a powerful moral influence on the writing of history in East Asian ever since. It is largely responsible for the idea of the dynastic cycle: that early rulers of a new state are always virtuous and vigorous, gradually degenerating into depraved and corrupt rulers on the eve of disaster. No serious historian gives any credence to this model of history anymore, but it retains a powerful hold on mainstream popular consciousness, as mediated through the entertainment industry.

The early Zhou state (1050-750 B.C.) is significant for providing a bureaucratic and literary model for later states to emulate and rework. Many of the foundational texts of the classical Chinese canon begin to take shape during this era. The Zhou also devised systems to routinize a growing bureaucracy in which many tasks had to be delegated to officials who may not be related by blood or marriage to the ruling family. With its bureaucratic models and systems of political legitimation—the Mandate of Heaven and dynastic cycle—the Zhou laid the foundation for every state that grew up in its shadow for the next 800 hundred years, until the founding of the first empire in 221 B.C. We can see the staying power of Zhou institutions in the fact that even though its actual political and military supremacy lasted only about 300 years (to around 750 B.C. or so), no competing state saw fit to depose its ruling sovereign for an additional five centuries. Rather, they simply aspired to becoming the "protector" of a Zhou king and cast themselves as the righteous upholder of everything that was virtuous and good in the world. But to actually do away with the only examples of sedentary political institutions that the civilized world had ever produced? That was far too risky of an enterprise, and sort of like trying to re-invent the wheel. The Zhou had already created portable systems of political legitimacy and models of bureaucratic efficiency. Why risk bringing down the entire house of cards by deposing a puppet boy king? No, it was much better to simply rule in his name, and continue to benefit from the reflected glory and prestige of the first ever narrative-producing state in East Asian history.

Beginning in the 8th century B.C., we start to see a number of "copycat" states throughout the central and eastern stretches of the Yellow River plains, or what today is usually referred to as north-central China. Now, these new Zhou-like states usually began life as an outpost of Zhou civilization, very often as a subjugated state that pledged allegiance to the Zhou king, then saw that alliance solidified through marriage to a consort of the royal house. Or perhaps these new states may have been the result of an agricultural colonization initiative on the part of some Zhou prince or uncle, who attempted to cultivate a sparsely populated patch of land and soon oversaw its flourishing. Regardless, the ruling elites of these states were often the product of a union between someone of the royal Zhou blood and a native chief or consort of some sort. They modeled their state on that of the Zhou, importing state, ancestor, and family rituals along with the entire Zhou bureaucratic apparatus. They would have borne a similar ideological outlook, having read, digested, and regurgitated the same sort of written texts. After several generations had passed, however, the elites of these one-time vassal states would have increasingly developed a new regional identity, and, as the Zhou center became weaker, these former "outlying" polities would have discovered that they could challenge the Zhou royal house for political, economic, and military resources of their own. Eventually, they would even adopt a new dynastic name and assert their identity as a new independent state.

The reason we refer to this sort of situation as marking a "multipolar world order" is because it consisted of a number of states all roughly equivalent in access to political and economic resources. Furthermore, they did not view one another as culturally alien and "inferior" neighbors, but rather as legitimate peers whose sources of political legitimacy—rituals, narratives, and texts—and composition of social elites were more or less identical to their own. They may have gossiped about one another and disparaged or extolled some more than others, but all agreed that they had more in common with one another than they did with any other sort of human communities. It is at this time that historians first begin to see references to the word *zhongguo* 中國, which today stands as the most common shorthand moniker for "China." Back in the Warring States era, however, it was understood in its *plural* form as

referring to the "central states" writ large, and not any single state. (In its more literary usages, foreigners often translate *zhongguo* as "Middle Kingdom," which is a gross distortion of its original meaning). What was meant by "the central states" was simply those polities that followed Zhou rituals and governance practices, and whose elites intermarried with one another. They also shared a common body of literary and spiritual texts, burial practices, musical forms, etc. At the same time, the central states were characterized as the abode of Chinese culture. But what exactly was meant by "Chinese"? The word most often deployed for "Chinese" in the ancient texts is *huaxia* 華夏. Like *zhongguo*, the phrase *huaxia* is often misunderstood. It literally means something like "fluorescent and grand." But because it refers to the cultural and social practices of elites who lived in the central states, it is often translated into English (and understood in modern-day Chinese) as "the Chinese people," which in turn usually gets equated with the "Han" people as an ethnic group. But one can be identified as *huaxia* yet consider themselves a Mongol or a Turk. And one can live in the central states yet not be considered a member of *huaxia*. Here is where we need to distinguish between cultural practices and ethnic identity. *Huaxia* does not refer to an ethnic group, and it is not a genetic quality than someone can inherit. Instead, it refers to a set of practices, knowledge, rituals, and behavior acquired through years of study and self-improvement, usually by reference to a series of common accepted canonical texts. If I, a pale-skinned American who grew up in a suburb of Seattle, were to spend 20 years of my life mastering these practices, knowledge, rituals, and behavior, and then spend my days putting what I learned into actual daily practice, then I could be considered a member of the *huaxia* (and so could you, no matter what your skin color or facial features are). However, if a "Han" person born and raised in Beijing were to act in a manner considered to be in gross violation of *huaxia* norms, he could lose his status as a member of that privileged community. Long story short, *huaxia* was a cultural designation, not a racial designation—and anyone could become a member of that culture, or lose their membership. To be *huaxia* was, simply put, to be "civilized"—as conceived of by the person doing the labeling, of course!

During the Zhou and Warring States period, the ruling houses, along with their retainers, families, and other hangers-on, were generally considered to embody the ideals of the *huaxia* culture. They saw themselves as existing in stark contrast to the "barbarian" peoples living just outside their states. (However, the barbarians could become *huaxia* if they adapted and adhered to the ritual, social, and cultural mandates of the *huaxia* community). The central states were thus viewed as the embodiment of *huaxia* culture, but it was by no means a fixed boundary, and its membership by no means exclusive and unchanging. "Insiders" are those who adhere to *huaxia* cultural norms and thus deserve to be considered as the rulers of *zhongguo*. When pressed to explain precisely what was meant by *huaxia*, most ruling elites of this period would simply have pointed to the Zhou ruling house and its institutions as the quintessential embodiment of *huaxia* norms. This is why the official dynastic lifespan of the Zhou is so ridiculously long (1050-256 B.C.!). Despite only exercising pre-eminent political and military power on the ground for the first two to three hundred years of its existence, none of the other *huaxia* central states saw fit to formally depose its ruler and end the reign of the Zhou dynasty. As a symbol of political and cultural legitimacy, the Zhou were too useful to all of its "copycat" successor states for it to seem worthwhile to destroy it. All the elites of the central states saw their common heritage as rooted in Zhou institutions, and the highest ideal they could aspire to was to become the strongest of the copycat states and thus claim to be the protector (*ba* 霸 in Chinese, or "hegemon") of the Zhou king against rivals less worthy than the hegemon himself. Cleary, by this time (700-500 B.C. or so), the Zhou king was a king in name only, and his "protector" used him as a puppet for his own

designs—a practice very similar to what later occurred in Japan, with a powerless emperor "protected" by a *shogun* (military general) who ruled in his name.

The pretense of a unipolar world held in place by a virtuous hegemon selflessly protecting the ceremonial Zhou king lasted only for a couple of generations. By the fifth century B.C., all of the central states—several tens of them—were engaged in constant warfare with one another. One of the central ironies of this period was that each of the leading combatants claimed that they were preserving the purity of Zhou rituals and the survival of the *huaxia* civilization at large. Yet the most successful and powerful states were usually the ones positioned on the margins of the central states and *huaxia* culture, because they had access to the most valuable military resources of the pre-industrial world: horses and chariots. With the rise of mounted cavalry around the fifth century B.C., the benefits of an alliance with northern nomads across Inner and Central Asia rose exponentially. The nomads of the north and northwest were invaluable to sedentary states in the agricultural heartland because they served two critical functions: 1) as middlemen for all trade and technological intercourse throughout Eurasia; and 2) as breeders of the best and most numerous horse pedigrees. No one who wanted to field an army against his rivals could do without several strategic alliances with those people whom central state elites regarded as "barbarians." In short, pretty much all of the largest and most successful empires and states throughout East Asian history have been those that incorporated a massive non-*huaxia* element into their civilian leadership and military ranks. In this vein, it should come as no surprise to learn that the Qin state, located far out on the northwestern margins of the central states, was best situated for fielding the types of armies needed to win on the battlefield during the Warring States era. The irony of all this is clear: in order to uphold and defend *huaxia* orthodoxy, ruling elites needed to work hand in hand with "barbarians" from the northern zone.

More on that in later. For now, what is most relevant for our purposes is to recognize that by the 5th century B.C. a large multipolar world order had taken root all along the middle and eastern stretches of the Yellow River, and even southward to the Yangzi River (this would be the Chu state, which all the northern states regarded as a slightly odd manifestation of *huaxia* culture). And though each of these states evinced significant regional differences, they all saw themselves as political and cultural heirs to the Zhou state and proclaimed it as their duty to restore what they imagined to be a golden age that once existed under the first Zhou kings. In reality, of course, each and every one of them was driven by power-hungry elites who simply wished to increase the size of their personal influence and fortunes and were willing to do so no matter what the consequences to their subjects. It was in just such a geopolitical milieu that some of the most memorable thinkers in world history began to discourse on the ills of the world they lived in, and began to propose a wide spectrum of solutions to problems of their day. These men were the humanist philosophers.

Confucius, Confucianism, and the Confucian Classics

Few things conjure up the image of "China" and "the Chinese" more than the name of Confucius (*Kongzi* 孔子, or "Master Kong"). As a result of his raging popularity over the millennia, however, a fair amount of myth and misinformation has accumulated around all things "Confucian." Here I will aim to clarify three distinct aspects of the Confucian legacy: 1) Confucius the man, placed in historical context; 2) Confucianism as an institution, useful to imperial elites; and 3) the Confucian classics, assumed to have been edited or written by Confucius himself (but not really).

Confucius the man is not terribly interesting. As with pretty much every historical figure that lived during this period in human history, we know virtually nothing about him except what we can glean of his life from the works attributed to him. And that isn't much. He came from the state of Lu, located in present-day Shandong, and probably lived from the middle of the sixth century to the early part of the fifth century B.C. (i.e., 550-480). He was likely descended from a family that once claimed some prominence and distinction in the not-too-distant past—otherwise Confucius would never have had access to the resources necessary to obtain an education—but which was no longer sufficiently distinguished and wealthy to give him access to important government offices. In this regard, Confucius would have resembled a growing number of his peers, collectively known as the *shi* 士. Over the millennia, this word has meant a lot of different things, and in various contexts it can be translated as "scholar," "knight," and "gentleman." During the Warring States, it came to denote a class of people descended from the Zhou nobility but no longer entitled to the economic and political privileges of their ancestors. In other words, they had all the ideological and material trappings of the elite classes, but none of the economical or political substance necessary to maintain their class entitlements and privileges. Many of them lived in a borderline state of poverty, subsisting only on the charity of the new nobility or wealthy merchants. The key thing to know about the *shi* was that they needed to make a living, but they weren't about to get their hands dirty by working in the fields like a common illiterate peasant.

So the *shi* made themselves relevant again by advertising the only thing over which they could plausibly claim to hold a monopoly: knowledge. More specifically, they claimed to be experts in two specific areas of knowledge: ritual (*li* 禮) and antiquity (*gu* 古). Both of these areas of expertise built upon on the literacy of the *shi*—a rare thing 2,500 years ago—and their study of the written word. Based on their memorization and interpretation of all extent texts and bronze inscriptions still surviving from the early Zhou period, the *shi* claimed that there was once a golden age of peace and prosperity ruled over by sage-kings who favored talent and ability over pedigree. In the philosophical tracts bearing the names of many of these philosophers, references to antiquity and sage-kings are legion. Due to their mastery of historical narrative and textual knowledge, the *shi* peddled their intellectual wares from state to state during the Warring States period, hoping for a court position (and salary!) and a platform from which to influence the ruler of the state. The *shi* varied in the types of values they believed would lead to the most prosperous and peaceful state, but they all fell back on one unshakeable human trait: virtue (*de* 德). They interpreted this term differently, and it would be futile to attempt a single gloss on its meaning. Suffice to say, it was a malleable and subjective idea, one that every philosopher could mold to his own agenda. But they were all insistent that only a *shi* could teach a ruler how to obtain virtue, even if every *shi* had his own particular roadmap on how to achieve it. But there was no mistaking where virtue was supposed to come from: it came from a *shi* whom you

sponsored financially by giving him an advisory post of some sort in your court. The unspoken agreement was as follows: in return for helping to cultivate and broadcast a benevolent image of a ruler and his state, the *shi* who helped construct this image would be rewarded with political and economic resources to further his own livelihood and school of thought. I often like to think of the *shi* as public relations agents who were willing to make a deal with the devil: I will tell the world how great you and your government is, and you in turn will give me a paycheck and title for doing so. In fact, Mencius once came to precisely this conclusion, realizing that a ruler had only employed him in order to convince other rulers and ministers that he was a benevolent ruler—look at me, I populate my court with moral philosophers who give me no financial recompense or utilitarian value—but without ever heeding any of Mencius' advice.

Like Confucius, the humanist philosophers taught that the world could be managed and ordered with their help, and that ritual and knowledge of history were among the chief mechanisms that would help set the world aright. Almost none of them achieved any real influence or power during their own lifetimes, Han Feizi being one of the few exceptions.

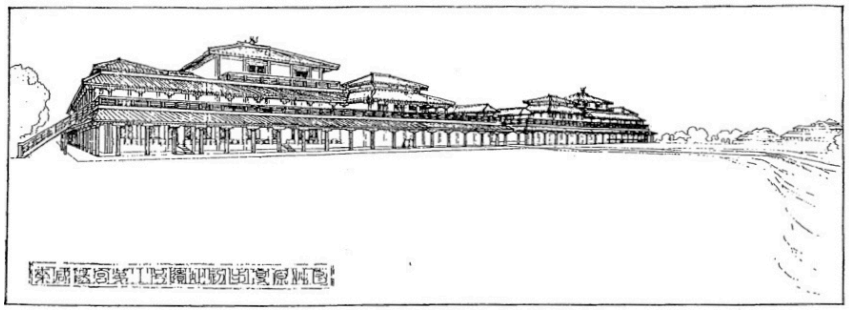
This point brings us to the second topic of this commentary: Confucianism as an institution, useful to imperial elites. Despite never obtaining an official post of any consequence during his own lifetime—and nor did any of the other humanist philosophers—the teachings of Confucius and other *shi* were committed to writing by their followers and continually debated over the generations. So long as the East Asian heartland was a multipolar world, Confucius was just one of many *shi*, all peddling variations on a similar theme. But once this multipolar world became a unipolar world with the establishment of the first empire in 221 B.C.—the Qin Empire—it became possible for a single state to canonize and institutionalize the writings of its favored *shi* as the public face of its government. Though the Qin empire only lasted fifteen years, far too short a time to finish the canonization process, its successor, the Han dynasty, ruled for nearly four centuries. Thus it was the Han Empire (206 B.C.-220 A.D.) that decided to enshrine Confucius and his intellectual descendants—chief among them Mencius—as the ideological edifice of the empire. Consider why this may be the case. In other words, what did the Han Empire have to gain by making Confucius the official face of the new state? How do the teachings of Confucius ultimately bolster the conservative status quo of any sitting power? As we will see, there is a strong strain of authoritarian paternalism in the teachings of Confucius and other *shi* philosophers, and those whose writings proved most congenial to justifying a top-down paternalistic form of government would find their legacies most prolonged in the centuries after the rise of the first empire. Conversely, those that advocated too radical or revolutionary a position—such as Mozi—would eventually find themselves ignored. And finally, there were those realist philosophers such as Xunzi and Han Feizi, whose Machiavellian and utilitarian prescriptions would be followed behind closed doors, but considered too inflammatory or harsh to be lauded in public. In other words, any ideology that needs to meet the needs of a large government bureaucracy and enormous subject population needs to be as bland and benign as possible. It also helps to be ambiguous—and Confucius and Mencius are nothing if not ambiguous. In fact, I would argue that their teachings are the among the most ambiguous and subjective of any of the *shi*, an important quality that helped future generations of pundits read a wide-ranging spectrum of values and interpretation into their writings. Those *shi* who argued precisely and adamantly for their clearly delineated positions were the ones who were most easily marginalized by a state that preferred benign catch-all phrases open to rhetorical massaging as new developments arose.

The last aspect of the legacy of Confucius that we need to address here is that of the Confucian Classics. This phrase refers to a body of texts that were later assumed to have been written or edited by Confucius himself. We cannot talk of the Confucian classics until the advent of the Han Empire, for the simple reason that Confucius and his teachings were not the beneficiaries of imperial sponsorship until nearly four hundred years after his death. But with the institutionalization of the Confucian teachings during the Han dynasty, so too do we see the appearance of the belief—commonly accepted by educated elites across East Asia for the next 1,500 years—that particular texts were more hallowed and important precisely because the "uncrowned king" Confucius was intimately associated with their production. There were originally five texts in the Confucian canon: *Book of Odes* (*shijing* 詩經), *Book of Documents* (*shujing* 書經), *Book of Changes* (*yijing* 易經), *Rites of Zhou* (*zhouli* 周禮), and *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*chunqiu* 春秋). Most historians today believe that the only one of these texts that Confucius possibly could have been associated with—likely as editor—was the Spring and Autumn Annals, a bland scribal record of significant events in the state of Lu. But until the 17th century or so, almost everyone believed that Confucius himself had an intimate hand in the production of all five of these texts. This meant that what was originally a disparate and often random collection of ancient texts, most dating from the Zhou or early Warring States era, became invested with the aura of infallibility that surrounded the name of Confucius. Much like the hallowed position of the Bible in the Western intellectual tradition, it was widely believed for nearly two millennia that the answers to all of the world's problems could found by reading between the lines of the Confucian classics and attempting to understand just what Confucius "meant" when he "wrote" or "edited" these classics. After all, everything that is worth knowing was known in this mythical golden age of antiquity, and they bequeathed their infinite wisdom to us in these classic texts. So, if you can't find the answer for every worldly problem by reading these texts, that's your problem, not the text's problem. Better hire a *shi* to read it for you and figure out what the answer is! And that is precisely what every educated elite tried to do generation after generation, with the result that few people ever just read the *Analects* or Mencius' teachings all by their lonesome—you also had to read the extensive commentaries that later scholars had appended to each line of these classics, in an attempt to explicate just what they meant. In the end, the most important takeaway point from all of this is not necessarily the content of the *Analects* per se, but rather the fact that it and other writings within the Confucian canon served as the foundation of the educational and ideological edifice upon which every upwardly mobile educated elite had to base his writings and proposals. In this sense, it served much the same function as did the Bible on the other end of Eurasia.

Warfare during the Warring States Era

It is during the Warring States period that we begin to behold some of the first contemporary images of what the urban spatial layout of cities in the East Asian heartland actually resembled. If you have ever watched a movie purporting to show a medieval European war drama (the King Arthur films) or perhaps an Akira Kurosawa film that takes place in Japan during the 14th or 15th centuries, then you should already have a pretty good idea of what sort of architecture and urban planning existed during the Warring States era. In short, the urban landscape was marked by conspicuous castle-towns all surrounded by their own defensive walls. These walled castle towns were home to the ruler of the state, his family and noble retainers, ministers, and other important people considered of high economic or strategic value to his administration. If you lived within the walls, you were referred to as a *guoren* 國人, literally "a person of the state." If you lived outside the walls, you were known as a *yeren* 野人, literally "a person of the wilds or fields." In other words, there was a sharp spatial contrast between those who produced agricultural products—i.e., common peasants, or *laobaixing* 老百姓 ("old hundred surnames")—and those who taxed those products and then used the surplus to build, rule, and expand the state apparatus. Those elites who lived within the walls identified more with elites within other walled castle towns than they did with the *yeren* who lived outside their own castle walls. Again, as we will see so many times throughout human history, for most people in most places, class usually takes precedence over any invented claims of ethnicity. When these castle town elites referred to their culture as the *huaxia* 華夏 culture, they were referring to an ideal image of themselves and other castle town elites, and not to the dirty illiterate peasants toiling outside any of their walls. There was not yet any sense of a "Han" ethnic identity shared among those inside and outside the walls.

Because warfare during the Warring States era was brutal, protracted, and often stationary, the defenses erected in and around your castle-town were of the utmost importance. Ideally, you wanted to deter potential enemies from ever even considering your castle-town as a potential offensive target. One way to do this was to try and build really tall buildings. Unfortunately, the architectural knowledge necessary for constructing such complex buildings was not yet fully developed. Certainly some of the wealthiest states could build multi-story castles. But for those lesser states who wanted to project the illusion of grandeur but could not hire the teams of workmen or engineers necessary for the task, they designed a clever way of making their buildings look taller and more formidable than they actually were. Here is a modern reconstruction of what appears to be a multi-story castle during the Warring States era, but which is really just a one-story building inside. The trick was to build artificial mounds of earth at the points inside where you needed to give the illusion of a second or third story. Then you built a "first story" on top of that mound of earth, but from the outside looking in, it



would look like a second or third story to an invading army. If that army was so bold as to attack your castle-town anyways, then they would have deployed a dangerous but elaborate maneuver known as the "cloud tower," which contemporary rubbings depict as follows:

The goal of going to battle during the Warring States era was to obtain control over additional tax-producing human resources of another state. This differed from warfare during the early Zhou era, when battles were mostly limited engagements fought by nobles and those of the royal blood themselves (think of knights and kings going to war in medieval Europe). During the Zhou, the showcase of any given battle was often a chariot charge by opposing warriors of noble rank. Total combatants would usually number only in the hundreds, rarely totaling more than a thousand people. By the Warring States era, we see the rise of mass infantry and conscription of the common people. Wars could last not mere days, but rather weeks, months, and even years. They were fought all over the place, but the culminating event was always the final siege of the castle-town where the ruler of a besieged state would be hiding. And while you wanted to keep the agricultural-producing subjects of rival states free from harm, you had no compunction about wiping out their infantry. Indeed, records from this era show that soldiers were sometimes rewarded on the basis of how many of their opponents' ears they managed to bring back after the battle was over—proof that they had indeed slayed their enemies (for who would willingly let someone cut off their ears unless they were practically dead anyways?). With so much at stake and so many resources in play, rulers of the many tens of Warring States would resort to any and all measures to ensure victory, even to the point of consulting the increasingly disreputable shamans (disreputable in the eyes of the humanist philosophers such as Confucians, that is). Consider the following image:

This is an image from a treatise on military magic during the Warring States era. It is the product of a ruler consulting the dark arts in an attempt to determine when an auspicious time would be to attack a certain neighboring state. It is also a lucid reminder of just how much hocus-pocus

Confucius and the other humanist philosophers were up against when they tried to establish themselves as rational logicians convinced that they had a better prescription for world peace and harmony than those who dealt in the occult. They certainly had their work cut out for them, especially if they were not interested in putting their necks on the line to defend the weaker states against the stronger ones.

Legalism and the Qin State

With the teachings of Xunzi (312-230? B.C.), we have reached the point at which the triumph of one Warring State over all the others is imminent. Though the final victory of the Qin over the last of its rivals did not occur until 221 B.C., it would have been apparent throughout most of Xunzi's lifetime that the era of constant petty warfare was nearing an end, and that it would be the height of folly to bet against Qin. The establishment of the brief-lived Qin Empire (pronounced "cheen," the origin of Western words for "China") is often referred to erroneously as the "unification of China." Such phrases are misleading for two simple reasons: 1) no single entity known as "China" (*zhongguo* 中國, "the central states"—note the plural "states"!) had ever existed in East Asia up to that point; and 2) as a result, there was nothing to "unify." In the interests of historical precision, it would be more accurate to describe what happened in 221 B.C. as follows: it was the first time in East Asia that a multipolar world, comprised of numerous self-proclaimed defenders of Zhou and *huaxia* culture, was subordinated to the dictates of a single monarch presiding over a unipolar world. This is not to suggest that the new Qin emperor was entirely successful in this endeavor—his state, the Qin Empire (221-206 B.C.), collapsed after a mere fifteen years—or that the unipolar world that he attempted to create somehow defined the "natural form" of the Chinese state ever since. After all, no single state in the history of East Asia has ever occupied the exact same territorial boundaries or included the same subjects as any other state that came before it or after it, including the two most recent incarnations familiar to most of us today: the Republic of China (1912–49) and the People's Republic of China (1949–present), neither of which claimed the same borders. To say that there are some sort of natural territorial boundaries and ethno-cultural content that comprises the present-day state of China is to project current nationalist fantasies backward into history.

What the emergence of the Qin Empire—and the much-longer lived Han Empire (206 B.C.-220 A.D.) that immediately succeeded it—truly portended for later centuries of East Asian history is that they set a new "benchmark" of political aspirations against which any future state-builder would measure his own achievements. In this regard, the Qin and Han play a historical role somewhat analogous to that of the Roman Empire, which everyone from Charlemagne to Napoleon to Hitler claimed themselves capable of "restoring." Much as was the case with their European counterparts, however, most political aspirants throughout East Asian history would fall far short of equaling the Qin's and Han's accomplishments, never ruling over anything any bigger or wealthier than the equivalent of a middling European state. *Unlike in European history*, however, a few would come very close (e.g., the Song, Ming, and Republic of China) to equaling the conquests of their hallowed predecessors, and there were even a select few—namely, the Tang, Yuan, Qing, and People's Republic of China—that would come to surpass them. This is most likely the origin of the myth of a timeless, primordial China. In short, despite the fact that continental East Asia was characterized by a multipolar political order for far longer than it was ever a unipolar one, the fact remains that the pieces *could* occasionally be put back together in a respectably stable fashion, orbiting around a similarly stable agricultural heartland—though with ever shifting peripheral appendages—for about one to two hundred years at a time. Because no other civilizational heartland in world history—including Europe—proved capable of replicating this feat in their own geopolitical arena, even for a far more modest length of time, it is tempting for historians both inside and outside of China to fixate not on East Asia's recurrent—and, in world historical terms, unremarkable—*disunity*, but rather on those brief yet conspicuous

occasions when it bucked global geopolitical trends and actually achieved an even more remarkable *unity*.

So how did the Qin state manage to set the initial benchmark for political success in East Asian? On one level, it enjoyed an extremely favorable geopolitical position: situated in the far northwestern part of the known civilized world at the time—in present-day Shaanxi, Gansu, and Inner Mongolia—the Qin state faced no other organized *huaxia* military rivals on its northern, western, or southern flanks. Strategically, this was a very attractive geographical position. And yet Qin also enjoyed unmediated access to the nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples who held one of the keys to military prowess in the pre-industrial world: horses. Indeed, the Qin began life as a vassal of the early Zhou state, known for supplying the highest quality and quantity of horses for the Zhou kings.

Yet the remarkable rise of Qin is also due in no small part to internal economic and social policies that ultimately helped create one of the largest and most disciplined military forces of any of the Warring States. As a result, most historians typically point to the Legalist reforms of the Qin state during the 4th and 3rd centuries as most responsible for its transformation from an insignificant peripheral Zhou vassal state into a formidable Warring States contender. A Qin minister by the name of Shang Yang is generally credited with introducing the first major Legalist reforms in the year 359 B.C. The hallmarks of Legalism, a school of thought most fully explicated by the Qin advisor Han Feizi and often viewed as sharing ideological affinities with parts of Xunzi's teachings, hold that a system of strict punishments and rewards offer the surest path to political success. In Legalist thought, it is taken as an article of faith that humans will selfishly and cynically look after their own interests before those of anyone else, and that a wise ruler will recognize this fact and implement institutional safeguards designed to protect and strengthen the state above all else. Though highly cynical and undeniably harsh, a Legalist would defend his doctrine by claiming that advocates of more "benevolent" social systems are simply naïve, and that through their naivete they risk creating a world in which evil ultimately prevails. Instead, they argue, we must acknowledge human frailty and guard against it, and the best way to do that is to create a large state with a powerful military, impersonal and well-oiled bureaucracy, and clear system of rewards and punishments.

Indeed, this is precisely how the Qin became so strong—and likely why it failed soon after beating all its rivals. Let's examine the details. The chief source of wealth in the ancient world was agriculture. Shang Yang began to envision a system in which agriculture and the military reinforced and strengthened one another, to the point where no state had a more powerful military or more efficient source of wealth to finance that military. Peasant prosperity was linked to the social hierarchy. In exchange for voluntary and exemplary military service, peasants could gain rank and wealth otherwise denied them. Anyone who gained merit in battle would receive promotion in a twenty-one rank scale that involved titles, land, dwellings, and slaves—the hallmarks of prosperity in the ancient world. This opened up a significant avenue of upward social mobility for the peasant peoples for the first time. And it wasn't merely directed at the peasants: since all social status in the Qin state after Shang Yang was a direct reflection of your military merit, even members of the Qin royal house had to obtain such merit or watch their secular fortunes decline. Legalists may be severe, but no one can accuse them of hypocrisy or inconsistency in the application of their guiding principles.

In agriculture, Shang Yang also moved to maximize the efficiency of the Qin's agriculture-based military regime. Since agricultural is the root of all wealth, the question was how best to squeeze it. Shang Yang came up with the idea of dividing the countryside into

uniform, equal blocks of land, in which each family would receive enough land for a single male adult to work. Upon adulthood, sons were to receive their own land, and families were penalized for retaining a more dense labor force—i.e., their grown sons—on the same plot of land. This meant that the highest possible amount of acreage tillable by humans was in cultivation, and furthermore that the maximum number of adult males was registered and available for military services and agricultural taxes. This is how agriculture and the military reinforced the power of the state. The only way to gain more land than you were allotted in the "one male adult = one unit of land" ratio was to distinguish yourself in the military. Shang Yang was very clear on this point, noting that "any family with more than two adult males who do not divide the household will pay a double military tax. Those who have achievements in the army will receive an increase in rank [the 21-rank system]. Those in the royal family who have no military merit will not be listed in the registers of royal relatives." These measures were largely responsible for the Qin making the most successful transition from a noble-based city-state into a peasant-based state designed for constant warfare and conquest. The Qin army, occupying such a valuable and venerated position within the state, was trained in alignment with a crushing regimen, complete with boot camp, crossbows, heavy armor, helmets, and swords. These were the men that the First Emperor's terracotta army in present-day Xi'an were modeled upon. As for the system of rewards and punishments—elaborated upon in Han Feizi's teachings—it, too, was designed to keep the people in a perpetual state of martial obedience. The Qin was very much a "tattle-tale" state. Again, Shang Yang put it best: "The people shall be divided into tens and fives and will supervise each other and be mutually liable. Anyone who fails to report criminal activity will be chopped in two at the waist, while those who report it will receive the same reward as that for obtaining the head of an enemy in battle."

The problem? In such a system that rewards military and agricultural expansion at the expense of all else—even the ruler's own royal relatives—the state must keep expanding constantly in order to procure the resources necessary to maintain its systems of rewards, if not necessarily its punishments (which are infinitely dispensable!). When the Qin conquered all of its rivals, it ran out of resources to absorb, but the institutions of the state were irrevocably built for constant war. As a result, the Qin continued to try and find massive corvee labor projects for its people, engendering significant resentment when the rewards began to dry up. An uprising by laborers pressed ganged into precisely such service ignited a general widespread spark of discontentment, and the Qin fell after only fifteen years in power. It is important to point out that the Qin was only unique in its unmatched ability to put Legalist principles into practice. All Warring States subscribed to various forms of the same policies that guided the Qin state. But it was the Qin that is generally regarded as having perfected them to the point that it could crush all its rivals—but not make the transition to a peacetime state capable of consolidating its gains.

The Great Wall of China

In February 1931, a popular American magazine called *Modern Mechanics and Inventions* ran an intriguing feature on the Great Wall of China. Claiming to have gained access to exciting new plans by Chiang Kai-shek's new government in Nanjing, the article described Chiang's intent to convert the Great Wall into "one of the greatest and most unusual motor highways on earth." Beneath the headline we find an amusing sketch of what such a highway might look like, with watchtowers turned into gas pumps. This "elevated boulevard" would extend some 1,500 miles west from Beijing. And in order to help its readers conceptualize that number, the article added a map of the Great Wall superimposed on a map of the United States. As you can see, the finished roadway would span the equivalent distance of Denver to Washington. Nor would expense be a problem. According to this article, because the Great Wall remains in "a remarkable state of preservation," the necessary repairs to turn it into a Chinese superhighway would not "be exorbitant."

As you might have already guessed by now, a "Great Wall National Highway" was never built in China. But this did not deter such inventive hyperbole. The Great Wall, it has often been claimed, is the only manmade structure that is visible from the Moon. We are further told that it extends for thousands upon thousands of miles—a marvelous stone caterpillar that crawls up and down the rugged landscape of northern China. And not only that, but this stone caterpillar was first constructed in the 3rd century B.C. and never fallen out of use—so the wall you see today is the same wall built by the notorious First Emperor of the Qin dynasty, the same man who built a terracotta army to accompany him into the afterlife.

The only problem with all of this? Well, none of it is even remotely true. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that the legend of China's Great Wall is one of the biggest historical shams ever concocted by humankind. But don't just take my word for it. In 1987, the year the Great Wall was designated a UNESCO World Heritage site, a team of foreign experts travelled to China in order to gather hard empirical data to support all these incredible tales. Unfortunately, as one Chinese scholar has conceded, this team of experts was "flummoxed by the task, unable to obtain sufficient data to provide a definitive, scientific conclusion regarding the overall length or age of the structures."

Now, you would think that one of the world's most famous monuments, the only one visible from the Moon, would be better documented. But it turns out that this is simply not the case. All those maps you see with their confident illustrations of crenellated walls winding their way continuously across norther China can in fact be traced to a fanciful map drawn up by Jesuit missionaries in the year 1708. And that claim that the wall can be seen from the Moon? That tall tale was first spun in 1893—many decades before advances in rocketry could have verified such a claim one way or the other. And until the past couple of decades, virtually no on-site archaeological research had ever been undertaken on the remains of the wall. In fact, no accurate map of the walls built across northern China has ever been based on actual eyewitness fieldwork.

So does this mean that the Great Wall of China is little more than a figment of our imagination? I wouldn't go that far. As always, the reality is far more complicated, but ultimately much more satisfying and interesting than the myth. After all, no one disputes that the Chinese built a lot of long walls over the course of their even longer history. The question, however, is this: were any of these walls the celebrated Great Wall? Or were there simply many long walls and fortifications, built at different times and places from different materials and for different purposes? In this lesson, we're going to dispel the myth and replace it with a sober-eyed

assessment of the many Great Walls in Chinese history—and explore what they can and can't tell us about Chinese civilization itself.

Like most ancient civilizations, the Chinese have built walls of one sort or another since the beginning of recorded history—and even before. Thousands of years before the Chinese script appeared in 1250 B.C. during the Shang dynasty, Neolithic settlements in northern China were enclosed by prehistoric earthen walls. During the latter half of the first millennium B.C., a time of incessant warfare among tens of independent states (known as the Warring States era), any city that served as an important political base was prudently surrounded by a city wall. Today the only remaining city wall of any size in China is that which surrounds the ancient city of Xi'an. For most of its history, a wall like this would have been built of tamped earth: this is just soil, rocks, and other debris dumped into a wooden frame, pounded down for layer after layer, and then coated with a veneer of lime or sometimes blood. It was only in the last 500 years or so that the Xi'an city wall was faced with more durable stone and brick. As for all those other tamped earth walls, almost nothing remains of them today, and they are often barely distinguishable from the surrounding landscape.

Around the year 500 B.C. or so, Chinese cities began to face a new threat—and it wasn't necessarily from each other. For this was about time at which some brave person figured out how to ride on horseback. Though the horse had already long been domesticated by this point, it was mostly used just to pull things: a chariot or a plough, for instance. But once you could sit on a horse, the entire landscape of war changed overnight. All of a sudden, a small number of people living on the margins of wealthy sedentary societies had the means to turn the strategic tables in their favor. First, these newly empowered nomads could choose the site of every battle, thereby ensuring that fighting conditions were always in their favor. And second, because they were able to move swiftly from pasture to pasture every season, nomads generally lacked a fixed base of subsistence from which they might be attacked and extinguished.

These two simple advantages seriously vexed the Chinese. Now a small number of nomads could defeat armies put forth by states with populations thousands of times their size. They did this by overextending supply lines, strategic border raids, monopolizing the supply of horses bred on the steppe, and the always effective "fake retreat followed by an ambush"! In the 2nd century B.C., a Han Dynasty official named Jia Yi gave voice to Chinese frustrations. "The population of the Xiongnu," he said, referring to the most powerful nomadic confederation of his day, "does not exceed that of a large Chinese prefecture or district. That a great empire has come under the control of the population of a district is something that your minister feels must be a source of shame for those who are in charge of the affairs of the empire." In response, the Chinese began to build walls—not city walls this time, but rather winding frontier walls intended to plug up gaps in the rugged landscape that gave access to the North China Plain. These early walls first appeared during the second half of the first millennium B.C., in the centuries immediately following the mastery of horseback riding. But don't mistake these for the Great Wall, with capital letters: just like those early city walls, these first frontier walls were little more than tamped earth—and only a trained archaeologist could hope to spot their modest remains today.

In the year 221 B.C., the Qin state defeated all its rivals and formed the first unified Chinese empire. Facing more and more attacks from the Xiongnu confederation, the First Emperor of the Qin dynasty built even more frontier walls. Not only that, but he also linked together many of those that had been built by those rival states he had just vanquished. Due to the notorious mythology that later sprung up around the First Emperor, his walls would later be

identified as the origins of the walls we see today, which were supposedly built on top of them. But there is simply no empirical evidence for this—and Chinese historical sources make no references to long walls constructed of brick and stone. It is far more likely, as recent archaeological research has shown, that the Qin walls were also made of tamped earth. A few are still visible today, but they are hardly worth the trouble of visiting: just low mounds of earth covered in scruffy vegetation. If you didn't know it was a wall you'd probably think it was just a natural feature of the landscape.

The first walls that were fundamentally different from those old tamped-earth barriers were built during the next dynasty: the Han Empire. Unlike the Qin dynasty, which only lasted 15 years, the Han would rule from 206 B.C. to 220 A.D.—more than four centuries. This gave them ample time to explore the full range of policy options for dealing with those troublesome Xiongnu nomads. And walls weren't the first choice—or even the second! The first choice was to go to war: in 200 B.C., the first Han emperor embarked on a risky offensive campaign into the northern steppe. The inevitable result, as many future emperors were also to learn, was the emperor's encirclement and near capture outside the present-day city of Datong. Once war was off the table, the Han turned to diplomacy. This took the form of a policy known as *heqin* 和親, or "peace through marriage." It involved sending Chinese princesses to the steppe as brides, opening border markets for trade, bestowing titles of equality upon the nomadic khan, and the provision of annual subsidies.

But to many Chinese officials, the "peace through marriage" policy was humiliating. And it still didn't solve the problem: the Xiongnu simply used all these new resources to recruit more followers, and these new followers in turn demanded more silk, silver, and princesses. To the Chinese, it was a vicious cycle, and one that seemed to defy any easy solution. So at long last, the third and least desirable option was adopted: permanent fortifications along the northern frontiers. Contrary to popular myth and all those maps you've seen before, no dynasty built continuous walls across thousands of miles. Instead, they concentrated their resources on three major passes through which nomadic armies were most likely to invade the rich agricultural heartland. These are Yumenguan in the northwest, Juyongguan in the north, and Shanhaiguan in the east.

For the Han Empire, the chief chokepoint against the Xiongnu was in the Hexi Corridor in the northwest. Here they built Yumenguan 玉門關, or Jade Gate Pass, whose remains were discovered by the British archaeologist Aurel Stein in 1907. The ruins of the Jade Gate Pass complex include a brick fort, a granary, and a few modest walls. The bricks consisted of local materials: grass, reeds, earth, and gravel, all of which were poured into a mold with water, then dried in the desert sun. Archaeological work in the brick fort has revealed the remains of unburnt straw intended for use in signal fires, along with permits that authorized its burning. "One stack of combustible vegetation, three beacon fires, and three torches should be lit," the permit reads, "when more than 500, but less than 1000, enemies assault our tower." Also littering the ground are wooden slips that record the issuing of grain rations to the soldiers stationed out along this lonely frontier post, along with their high mortality rates: one slip notes, in mundane fashion, that fourteen people had died in a single day—and not from wounds suffered in battle.

There are also a handful of ruined walls near Jade Gate Pass. The Majuanwan wall is a good example of the modest materials employed in their construction. Its badly eroded remains consist of up to twenty layers of reeds and tamarisk branches topped with sandy gravel and pounded down on top of the previous layer. When first built, they would have reached nearly 20 feet tall. Today, they are little more than raised stumps struggling to rise above the desert floor.

After the fall of the Han dynasty in the 3rd century A.D., we have to wait a considerable amount of time before we find another dynasty engaged in building frontier walls. For the next thousand years, most of the states that ruled the North China Plain were hybrid empires that were founded by a prudent alliance of nomadic peoples and northern Chinese military families. This includes the Northern Wei dynasty, whose emperors were Tabgatch; the glorious Tang dynasty, whose ruling house was half Turkish; the Liao dynasty, which consisted of Khitan; the Jin dynasty, who were Jurchens; and the Yuan dynasty, which was ruled by Mongols. Needless to say, empires that incorporated nomads into their ruling classes did not need to build walls to defend against themselves! The only significant unmixed Chinese state during this time, the Song dynasty, didn't hold north China long enough to ever get to the point where they would consider the third and final option of wall-building as a viable policy. In the end, it seems that the best approach to defending the northern frontier was not to fight the nomads, but rather to join them!

If we want to find the origins of the Great Wall that you can see in tourist brochures today, then there is only one dynasty worthy of our attention: the Ming. In the year 1368, the founder of the Ming dynasty succeeded in driving the descendants of Genghis Khan out of inner China and back into Mongolia. And there the stalemate held for the next 276 years. This fostered one of the conditions necessary for wall-building to become a viable policy option: a Chinese state that *is* capable of holding the North China Plain, but is *not* capable of taking any part of the northern steppe. But there is more to this picture: the Ming rulers originally came from southern China, far from the nomadic steppe—and they nurtured a particularly conceited view of the superiority of Chinese civilization vis-à-vis the northern nomadic "barbarians," with whom they refused to mix. This made a policy of "peace through marriage" (*heqin*) impossible to consider. But neither was offensive warfare a realistic option: in 1449, one of the Ming emperors was actually captured and taken hostage by the Mongols after leading a foolhardy campaign to the north of Beijing. So what policy options were left? You guessed it: walls!

The vast majority of Ming walls were built during the last 70 years of the dynasty, from the 1570s until 1644. These are the walls that every visitor to China sees today—the ones that everyone thinks of when we think of a supposedly continuous Great Wall stretching back 2,000 years into history. But as long as we resist buying into the exaggerated myths about its antiquity and continuity, we can still admire the Ming walls as truly extraordinary feats of human ingenuity. What makes the Ming walls so distinctive is the material used for their construction: for the first time in Chinese history, frontiers walls would be faced in stone and brick, with expert craftsmanship on display in every inch of construction. Instead of local materials at hand mixed with dirt and covered in lime by peasants called up for corvee labor, these new walls were built with imported stone and brick by skilled masons and soldiers who were paid in silver. The bill was staggering: in 1576, at the height of Ming wall building, projected expenses for new construction and repair of walls totaled three-fourths of Beijing's annual revenue.

So what did the Ming emperors get for all their silver? Once again, they focused on fortifying those three main passes that provided easy routes of attack toward Beijing. The closest pass to the capital was Juyongguan 居庸關. Here we find the famous Badaling 八達嶺 fort just 40 miles north of Beijing. Heavily restored in recent decades, the walls at Badaling are over 20 feet high and 20 feet thick at the base, with a slight narrowing in width at the top. The largest stone bricks are 10 feet long and can weigh more than 1,000 pounds. But if you try to hike the Badaling wall beyond the tourist area, you will soon find that it is not continuous: walls like this were designed to block openings in the mountains—not recreate the mountains themselves. Not

only that, but the quality of materials and general appearance changes quickly as the wall snakes away from showcase passes like Badaling.

If the fort and walls at Badaling defended against entry from the north, then the other two new sets of fortifications were designed to block the flanks. In the northwest, the Ming build a new fort at Jiayuguan 嘉峪關, or Pleasant Valley Pass. Located about 200 miles east of the Han-era fort at Jade Gate Pass, the Jiayuguan castle fortress rises up dramatically from the surrounding desert, with snow-capped mountains in the distance. The complex includes three towers, government offices, and barracks, all within a square walled compound marked by crenellated battlements. A famous plaque once hung above the main gate declaring that Jiayuguan was the "First Fortified Pass under Heaven." To guard the eastern approach to Beijing, the Ming built another fort at Shanhaiguan 山海關, or "Mountain and Sea Pass." Perched on a slim but strategic strip of coastal land about 260 miles east of Beijing, the new Shanhaiguan fort blocked the road connecting North China from Manchuria and Korea. And there is no getting around it: a section of the fort known as Old Dragon's Head actually extends out into the crashing waves and ensures that no one could pass overland to Beijing without permission.

The forts and walls at these three strategic passes are not typical of most Ming walls—they were the showcase military emblems of the emperor's scorn for the Mongols, and each has been heavily restored over the past half century. If you want to visit a more typical wall somewhat off the beaten path, my recommendation would be Jinshanling 金山嶺, or Gold Mountain Ridge. One of the most memorable moments of my life came in the summer of 2001, when I got the opportunity to hike along the top of Jinshanling for several miles. Back then I knew nothing about the history crumbling beneath my feet. But in hindsight, I now realize what a perfect case study it is for a typical Ming wall. For even in its dilapidated state, with shrubs growing out of cracks, missing railings, and crumbling flagstones, Jinshanling still impresses.

The first task for Ming engineers was to lay down a solid stone foundation: unlike those old tamped-earth walls, Jinshanling is built on top of finely cut large stones at the base to stabilize the wall above it. Of course, much of the interior of the wall was still a combination of earth, rocks, and vegetation, but now these are all faced on the outside with large bricks fused together with a mortar consisting of lime and sticky rice paste. In 1985, Chinese archaeologists discovered the remains of a kiln near one of the Ming walls that was capable of firing 500 bricks at a time. On one of the bricks they even found a serial number, "Left Three," that traced its production back to a specific kiln. Some bricks had much wordier imprint, such as this one: "Made by the Valiant Battalion in the Sixth Year of the Wanli Emperor." Such marks made it possible to figure out who was responsible for defective bricks. In all, it is estimated that each meter of wall at Jinshanling required 22 full firings of a kiln—a massive strain on local and imported fuel sources such as wood, coal, and dung. And that was only if the bricks were locally produced: one brick was found stamped with a place of firing that was 50 miles away! Transportation of such heavy materials was no mean feat: in the days before mechanized power, every one of these bricks was carried by human muscle, usually piled into baskets that were attached to a pole slung over the shoulder. In the steepest sections of the Ming wall, such as the gravity-defying heights of Simatai 司馬台, poles and baskets could not be safely balanced. So instead they formed a literal human chain up the ridge to pass bricks hand over hand up the precipitous slopes.

But building a wall was only the first step. In order to be effective, walls had to be manned—and that meant adding watchtowers at regular intervals. In the most vulnerable and strategic passes, watchtowers were often within sight of each other, but elsewhere they could be

spaced up to two and half miles apart. Ming sources tell us that a single watchtower took 400 men about four months to build, or about 48,000 man days of labor. Though some towers had a solid core, most were hollow inside—like one picturesque watchtower at Jinshanling, with the silhouette of one of my hiking companions framed in the doorway. This interior space allowed them to be provisioned for months at a time. When operational, watchtowers like this one were manned by anywhere from 30 to 60 soldiers, who served four-month tours of duty in either the spring or autumn. Everyone knew that tours of duty in the fall were far more dangerous than those in the spring. This is because the nomads preferred to embark on offensive campaigns with horses that had been well-fed from summer pastures—not the skin and bones mounts that had barely survived the winter!

According to Ming reports from the frontier, soldiers stationed at these watchtowers frequently suffered from low morale and a lack of training. And can we blame them? Fighting the Mongols was a hopeless task, and no matter how romantic those sunset panoramas of a Ming wall may appear today, back then frontier duty was grim and lonely. But Ming soldiers weren't just sitting ducks—though it sure could feel like it sometimes! The first line of defense was scouts. The Ming deployed both short-range scouts, who infiltrated frontier lines up to 60 miles away, and long-range scouts, who ventured as far as 200 miles north of the wall. If these scouts failed to anticipate a Mongol attack, the next line of defense were beacon towers. Since beacon towers needed to be within sight of one another, they were spaced no more than ¾ of a mile apart—the distance at which drumbeats could be heard. In addition to drums, the five to ten soldiers who manned a beacon tower also made use of fire, smoke, flags, and cannon signals. One manual from 1466 stipulates the firing of one cannon shot for up to 100 enemies, two for 500, three for 1,000, four for 5,000, and—god help them!—five for 10,000 enemies. The Ming signaling system was highly efficient and sophisticated, allowing for the relaying of simple messages over 600 miles within just three hours.

When all else failed, the fighting began. Crenellated battlements and holes in the wall allowed Ming soldiers to fire from above with relative safety. If the Mongols scaled the wall, however, the defenders would retreat into the watchtowers and then up to its roof. All the while, they made liberal use of a range of creative weapons. Missile projectiles included crossbows, rocket arrows, muskets, and cannon, along with what was referred to as a "magical fire flying crow" that ignited upon impact. One of the most inventive weapons was the stone bomb. Its construction was simple: take a heavy roundish stone and bore out a hollow in its core. Add gunpowder and a fuse, light it, then toss it down over or through a hole in the wall—and watch it explode, sending hard shrapnel everywhere. Ming soldiers could also create stone bombs from rocks small enough to hold in their hand, which was essentially an early version of the hand grenade.

The final battle would be fought in close quarters with melee weapons, such as swords and spears. But historians believe that very few battles actually took place on these walls and towers. After all, nomads had little interest in throwing themselves recklessly against a heavily fortified brick wall. And since the Ming walls were not continuous, why not simply go around them? Last but not least, everyone knew that walls and castles were only as good as the men who manned it. In 1644, when another nomadic group called the Manchus marched their armies toward Beijing from the northeast, a disaffected Ming general simply opened the gates for them at the heavily fortified Shanhaiguan. With the suicide of the last Ming emperor not long after that, the story of great walls in China comes to an end. The new Qing dynasty, ruled by a coalition of Manchus, Mongols, and northern Chinese, once again extended imperial control over

the northern steppe. There was now no point in building any new walls or maintaining the old ones any longer, since the Son of Heaven—who was also the Great Khan—now ruled both sides of it.

When you think about it, the many great walls built throughout Chinese history are not terribly different from walls and fortifications built elsewhere around the world. Just think of Hadrian's wall, Berlin wall, the Maginot line, or even the partially built wall along the U.S.-Mexican border. What is one thing that they all had in common? They were nobody's first choice to solve an intractable political problem. Instead, they represent a political compromise of last resort when all other, less painful options have failed. Those in power feel pressure to be seen doing *something*—even if that something won't actually solve the problem and may even make it worse by diverting resources away from other possible solutions. What the great walls of China tell us about China has nothing to do with some supposed "Chinese mentality" about closing the Middle Kingdom off from the rest of the world. Their meaning, if not their construction, is far more prosaic: for most of its history, China had a nomad problem. And building walls was one way—and by no means the preferred way—of addressing this problem. That these beautifully crumbling emblems of political and economic conflict have come to represent the essence of Chinese civilization itself is one of the great ironies of history.

Chinese Imperial Law

During the Chinese imperial era (221 B.C.-1911), we see the development of a set of general principles and specific measures governing the interpretation of crime and law that every successive state and empire would inherit and adapt to its own place and time. In the most general of terms, criminal acts were viewed by the imperial state as something that disturbed the natural order of the world, and that an appropriate punishment was essential to restore the balance. The role of the state, of course, was essential: political elites wanted to portray themselves as responsible stewards of "all under Heaven," and maintaining social order was central to this enterprise. As such, there were certain criteria to be considered when meting out punishment. In short, retribution must: 1) fit the crime; 2) reflect the social hierarchy; and 3) be in accord with Heaven. The first criterion is fairly straightforward, and the second we will discuss in a moment. As for the third, "being in accord with Heaven" simply meant that there were certain actions that were more in line with Heaven's approval than others, a concept not at all unique to East Asia. In practice, this meant that executions were supposed to take place during autumn and winter, the seasons of death and decay. If bureaucratic procedures for a death sentence could not be completed before the official onset of spring, the likelihood that the execution would be postponed to the autumn—and thus raise the possibility that an imperial pardon would negate the death sentence—became much higher. One biography of an official who lived during the Tang Empire (618-907 A.D.) noted that "when the beginning of spring came, he stomped his foot on the ground and sighed: 'If only I could make the winter last one more month it be enough to finish my work!'"

The second criterion—that punishment must reflect the social hierarchy—tends to be a rather counterintuitive idea to most people living today, but again, it is by no means unique to China nor to the premodern world in general. Simply put, everyone alive today is generally aware that the more powerful and wealthy a person is, the less likely they are to be punished—or at least punished severely—for their crimes. But such preferential treatment today is never codified in law, it is simply what tends to happen in actual practice. The difference with imperial China, however, was that the legal code explicitly enforced legal privileges for those higher or lower on the social ladder. An official of the state, or even just a wealthy landowner who had obtained a civil service degree, were generally exempt from corporeal forms of punishment. In other words, unless their crime was a political crime against the state or the emperor, such men could not be beaten or tortured during the interrogation or punishment process. Furthermore, those who held official rank could choose to accept a lower rank in exchange for a lesser punishment. If you were wealthy but perhaps held no rank, you very likely could simply throw money at the problem, provided you had not killed anyone or committed a political crime: say, contribute a hefty sum of silver to the local charity or government coffers.

Similarly, transgressions across the social hierarchy were also punished more severely than crimes against social equals. For example, in a reflection of the dictum of filial piety, crimes against one's own kin were considered more serious than crimes among strangers. And crimes perpetuated by junior members of the family hierarchy against senior members—a son striking his father or an uncle, for instance—were deemed far worse than the reverse. In fact, unless serious bodily harm or death was the result of the physical beating of a junior member by a senior member of the extended family, such acts would not be considered criminal at all. A patriarch had great leeway to physically punish any junior member of his family. But if a son injured a father, uncle, or grandfather, the state would enforce a substantial punishment on the

perpetrator if the senior member of the family chose to pursue justice. Another example of this regulation was reflected in the courtroom itself: sons were not even legally allowed to testify against their own fathers. Needless to say, the unequal punishments meted out for crimes that transgressed the social hierarchy extended far beyond the family: a man who stole his neighbor's pig would be punished more lightly than a man of equal social station who stole a pig from the local government offices. And God forbid that you should ever commit a crime against the imperial family itself: attempting to climb over the walls of the Forbidden City was tantamount to a death sentence.

The category of gender also had legal implications. Though spousal homicide was likely to result in a death sentence regardless of whether the perpetrator was the husband or the wife, the wife would likely receive a "worse" death sentence (i.e., dismemberment rather than strangulation). In general, women committing crimes against men were punished more severely than the reverse, though some women might be pardoned if they had an older relative or son who was still dependent upon their care. (Note to women who want to kill their husbands: the chances of you evading punishment in imperial China were much higher if you had a young son and no other elderly relatives capable of caring for that son.) A man who murders his wife's secret lover is likely to be treated more leniently. (One famous stipulation that many people were aware of was that a man who killed his wife's lover after inadvertently stumbling upon their affair could be excused for the righteous passions that subsequently led to his murderous acts.) As with the social hierarchy in general, this is largely a reflection of the logic of Confucian filial piety being applied to the courtroom. "Subordinates"—women, younger men, peasants, etc.—were not supposed to commit crimes against "superiors," whom, depending on context, could be defined as older men, men in general, state officials, or simply wealth*ier* men.

For most of the population, there were three general types of punishment: beatings and mutilations, hard labor and exile, and death. (As already noted, if you were considered a member of the political or economic elite, the extent of your punishment could often be commuted to loss of rank, money, or job). The first two categories are relatively straightforward—you'd think death would be, too, but no!—and were common practices of the imperial state well into the twentieth century (the Communist government regularly used convict labor and exile as a form of political punishment well into the 1970s). The motivation behind exile was to send you as far away from familiar surroundings as possible. For most Han criminals, this meant exile to the distant northern or northwestern zones, often to serve in frontier military posts or work on large infrastructure projects.

Having your body mutilated was also considered a fairly severe punishment, for it symbolized your lack of filial devotion to the body your parents gave you. To act in such a way that the state deemed it necessary to cut off your arm, foot, or nose—or tattoo your face—was one of the greatest dishonors you could do to your extended family without actually dying. This is why death, the most severe sentence, was actually more complicated than it appears at first glance. Generally speaking, there were four ways that the state might kill you, in ascending degrees of shame: 1) enforced suicide; 2) strangling; 3) decapitation; and 4) dismemberment. The first death sentence sounds odd at first, but it was actually the most honorable way to go, and as such, was a punishment reserved normally only for officials of the state. The idea behind its benevolence was that no other hand would touch you, and you could arrange and administer your own death. Most officials chose to poison themselves, but there were other ways as well. Contrary to appearances, there was no way to avoid a punishment of "enforced suicide": if you didn't accept the imperial grace and kill yourself in a timely fashion, the state would intervene

and finish the job in a much less honorable and more painful fashion. The remaining three punishments, reserved for the general population, measured their severity and shame in terms of the dictates of filial piety, similar to the rationale behind mutilation. In other words, strangling was the most honorable way to go and considered the "best" death sentence because your body remained intact for burial. Beheading was obviously less respectful to the parents your body gave you, and dismemberment was worst of all.

How was criminal accountability and punishment determined? The justice system in imperial China was one of the most impressive institutions of the premodern world. We can nitpick here and there by comparing certain practices to those in the Western world, but we usually forget in such comparisons that the Western practices we take as normative are actually of a much later date than those in the Chinese imperial legal tradition. But if you compare Chinese justice in the year 1250, for instance, there is simply no other state on Earth at that time that could match the Chinese for attentiveness, thoroughness, and lenience. Most petty cases began when someone hired a professional letter writer (or "petitioner") to present their case in the most favorable light possible. These petitioners were the closest thing we will find to the idea of a "lawyer" in our modern sense. After the case was presented, however, no other person lacking personal involvement with the case could participate in the proceedings, unless called upon explicitly by the local official. The official in charge of arbitrating legal disputes was the county magistrate, who might rule over a population of anywhere from 30,000 to one million people. To help him deal with such a large population, the magistrate relied on an army of clerks and educated legal specialists who listened to complaints, processed the paperwork, arranged inquests, and implemented all punishments except for death (which went up to the imperial capital for the emperor's review). The magistrate was both detective and judge, and was required to visit the scene of a homicide in person, no matter the distance or circumstances. In cases of homicide, the magistrate traveled with a coroner, who was often an amateur doctor or a legal clerk who had learned the coroner's trade on the job. When you read legal cases compiled by the magistrate and his legal team, it quickly becomes apparent that the coroner's inquest and report is quite detailed and sophisticated for its time.

Once a magistrate felt confident that he had determined the general outlines of a case, a series of witnesses and related people would be brought into the courtroom for interrogation, all of which was recorded by clerks. Torture was allowed to be used if the magistrate thought a witness was lying, but many magistrates thought that torture was counterproductive and discouraged its use. (Certain categories of commoners also could not be tortured: pregnant women, the young, the handicapped, and the elderly.) Torture was so important because no crime could be punished without a full confession by the perpetrator. Thus, when all the evidence seemed to clearly point against one person, and the magistrate—with his superior sage-like intelligence—agreed with the evidence, recalcitrant and stubborn criminals were seen as deserving of punishment to get the confession they refused to provide voluntarily. When magistrates resorted to torture, they were obliged to record in their reports to their superiors that they had used torture to gain a confession. Common types of torture included: twisting ears, slapping, beating, kneeling on chains, and squeezing feet or ankles with wooden compressor. In addition, there were legal handbooks advising on when and how to use torture to ensure it achieved its intended result and not a contrary result:

> In all cases of interrogation one should first listen fully to their words and note these down, letting each of them set out his or her statement. Although you know they are lying, there is no need to question each point just yet. When the statement has been taken down and it does not cohere with

> the evidence, question the suspect closely. If the suspect repeatedly lies, changes his testimony, or refuses to confess, then you may whip those whom the law allows you to whip.

Every case involving bodily injury or large amounts of money would be reviewed by officials higher up in the bureaucracy, and inconsistencies would frequently be noted. Often, cases were sent back to the magistrate who had recommended a sentence, asking for further clarification or overruling the sentence altogether. In addition, if it was somehow later revealed that a defendant was wrongly convicted, the magistrate who oversaw his trial could potentially be punished in his stead. Thus, it is clear that while it was certainly possible for the system to fail in the pursuit of justice, it nonetheless contained an impressive number of checks and balances and bureaucratic sophistication for a premodern legal system.

The Great Southern Migration

The "Great Southern Migration" (c. 200-1000 A.D.) was one of the most momentous shifts of people in human history. Not only in sheer numbers—i.e., the colonization of the region that would one day become the most densely populated in the entire world—but also in economic and cultural implications. It is during this migratory period that the political and cultural divide appeared mostly sharply between the northern and southern halves of the East Asia mainland. Beginning in the Tang dynasty and well advanced by the Song dynasty, the southern regions—from the Yangzi Basin down to the South China Sea—would slowly claim the mantle of "Chinese" or *huaxia* culture from the ancestors of the north, where the Shang, Zhou, most of the Warring States, Qin, and Han states were all rooted. Of course, the memory of a Chinese classical civilization that originally evolved in the Yellow River valley would never really be forgotten: even as the fertile southern regions became identified as the flag-bearers of *huaxia* culture, they would still read classical texts produced in the north and still be familiar with all the ancient place names of the Zhou era, much in the way that European elites would be aware of Greek and Roman place names and historical events. In fact, the classical allure of the north was so powerful for southern elites that when the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279) was forced to relocate its capital from the northern metropolis of Kaifeng to the southern city of Hangzhou, the emperor continued to commission maps of the new city that conformed to the classical imperial urban layout of former imperial capitals in Chang'an and Luoyang, the one-time northern capitals of the former and later Han dynasties. This despite the fact that Hangzhou, situated close to the southeastern coast, in no way resembled the wide-open and carefully planned grids of most northern cities, where space was plentiful. In the south, the mountainous topography, combined with stunning agricultural productivity of newly advanced rice-planting techniques, would lead to some of the most densely packed cities in the world, a fact that remains true in our present time.

From this point onward, we see a clear divide between military and political power—which were held in the north—and cultural, economic, and demographic power, which increasingly began to be located in the south. By the late imperial era (Ming-Qing), a loose geographic term began to be used to refer to the cultural heartland of the empire: Jiangnan 江南, or "south of the river" (the Yangzi River), the area generally identified with present-day Shanghai, Nanjing, Yangzhou, and Suzhou. The two halves of the empire were united in logistical terms through the Grand Canal, an artificial waterway that connected the wealthy inland cities of Jiangnan with the politically and militarily powerful cities of the North China Plains. (The East Asian mainland is conspicuous for being one of the few continental landmasses without a major north-south river suitable for commercial transport—thus the need to build an artificial waterway capable of linking the Yellow and Yangzi rivers was long seen as necessary for a united empire).

During the first half of the Great Southern Migration (roughly 200-600 A.D.), there were many tens of mid- and small-sized states of varying importance throughout the former territories of the Han Empire. Think of it as a new Warring States era, with a mirror image of the northern states now firmly established in the south as well. Sometimes they are referred to as the Northern and Southern Dynasties. The states in the south were awash in agricultural wealth gleaned from the unique rice-cropping fertility of the region, proud of their cultural achievements, and populated largely by Sinitic-speaking peasants, gentry, officials, and emperors. They were the ones most inclined to view the hybrid Sino-Steppe States in the north as having been "debased"

by association with nomadic or semi-nomadic "barbarians" from the northern zone. Those states in the northern zone, however, drew their military and political strength from the very northern steppe that the southern states denigrated. These northern Sino-Steppe states were always stronger than those in the south, but also much more liable to fracturing apart due to vagaries in the alliances of the northern allies with whom they allied and intermarried with. They were ethnically mixed, materially impoverished (at least, relative to the new wealthy states and households of the south), and desirousness of recruiting cultural and bureaucratic talent from the south. Ultimately, it was one of these northern states—the short-lived Sui dynasty, evincing a mix of Han and Turkic armies and ethnically mixed emperors—who succeeded in conquering all the other states, both north and south. It was succeeded just three decades later by the much-longer lived Tang dynasty, which largely resembled its Sui predecessor in the multiethnic composition of its ruling elites and military apparatus.

With the rapid colonization of the southern half of the East Asian mainland and the completion of the Grand Canal (the Sui get credit for that), the stage was set for a new imperial economy. In short, prior to the Tang dynasty, long-distance transport was exceedingly onerous and prohibitively expensive. As is obvious from any map, most of the East Asian mainland is inaccessibly by sea, in stark contrast to much of Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia. In comparison with the speed, cost, and increased load-bearing capacities of water routes, overland travel is a real hassle. You have to rely on temperamental caravans of camels, porters, horses, and carts, all of which break down (or have to be slaughtered and eaten) on a distressingly regular basis in the age of dirt and mud roads. But the south, with its abundance of lakes, the Yangzi River, and a host of lesser rivers, was perfectly suited to a long-distance riverine economy. Who from the north wouldn't want to conquer this region? In the south you could grow a billion bushels of rice every single season of the year and then ship it nearly anywhere else in the empire in a relatively cost-effective manner.

In the north, however, it was much more common to grow crops such as millet, sorghum, and legumes. Though it is commonplace to associate all of China with a uniform rice-based cuisine today, much of the north did not eat rice as part of their regular diet until it began to be shipped from the south during this era. It was an oft heard refrain in the south that northerners were cursed with a rustic and coarse cuisine: *mantou* (bread buns) and the products of animal husbandry via association with the northern zone. More importantly, however, we should ask the question of what else becomes possible once you have a stable rice-basket whose considerable surplus crop can easily be shipped a thousand or more miles away? The result is that all but the most remote and inaccessible communities no longer have to grow their own food. Because they can meet their own basic needs by purchasing southern rice at the local market, they are free to use their fields to specialize in more lucrative cash crops. This is the beginning of economic specialization throughout the empire, and it would lead to each region of the empire becoming known for producing its own unique local products and cuisines. One of the more famous of these specialized products was tea, which began to spread throughout the East Asian continent in force only with the appearance of the Grand Canal and the advanced colonization of the southern regions. With their bellies full of southern rice, farmers could now turn their fields to growing things like tea, a cash crop perfectly suited to new riverine economy: light, compact, and lucrative. East Asia—and the world—would never be the same again!

Sacred Mountains of China

A long time ago, back when I was a young man, I found myself on a rickety bus winding its way up narrow dirt roads far in the mountains of southwestern China. Whenever I dared to look out the window, I saw only steep cliffs dropping straight down to a distant ravine below. So I looked straight ahead instead, toward the driver. And it was there that something caught my eye—eight Chinese characters spray-painted just above the dashboard: *kaiche zeren zhong yu Taishan* 开车责任重于泰山. "The driver's responsibility is as heavy as Mt. Tai." Well, that put my mind at ease. For if the driver of that bus cared as much about his passengers as the Chinese people cared about Mt. Tai, then I knew I was in good hands.

Throughout the world, mountains have claimed a special place in the collective imaginations of numerous civilizations. As the tallest features in our landscape, mountains are often viewed as sacred sites where the mundane meets the sublime. The clouds that congregate around their peaks bring reliable rain, while melted winter snowpack feeds into great rivers. Not surprisingly, for dense civilizations that depended on intensive agriculture, this close association with life-giving waters gave mountains a special reverence. So too did their extreme contrast in climate, their forbidding terrain, their unique flora and fauna, and their mysterious, unexplainable phenomena.

In China, there are many mountains that fit these criteria. But two of them stand above the rest: Mt. Tai and Mt. Emei. Though little known in the West, these mountains are renowned within Asia for both their aesthetic beauty and their long association with Chinese civilization. As we'll see, however, they are famous for very different reasons. Mt. Tai casts its shadow over the cradle of civilization on the North China Plains, not far from the Yellow River. By contrast, Mt. Emei rises up from the western highlands of Sichuan, closer to the more southerly Yangzi River. And while it, too, has been a fixture in the annals of Chinese civilization, its fame derives more from its associations with Buddhism. In recognition of their towering stature in Chinese culture, both mountains have been designated UNESCO World Heritage sites: Mt. Tai in 1987, and Mt. Emei in 1996.

Let's start by getting the lay of the land. The landscape of China bears the imprint of a turbulent geological past. About 45 million years, the continental plates of India and Eurasia collided with one another. The resulting impact created the Himalayas: the tallest mountains on our planet. The mountainous terrain of Tibet and western Sichuan—both a part of China today—serve as more humble reminders of this ancient tectonic activity. From here the Yellow and Yangzi rivers both find their source, flowing east from the western highlands through the plains of North China and the Sichuan Basin before emptying into the Pacific Ocean.

Both rivers fostered the rise of some of the earliest civilizations in East Asia. In Sichuan, the excavation of magnificent bronze masks, statues, and other striking artifacts at the site of Sanxingdui has revealed the presence of an advanced metalworking civilization as early as the 12th century B.C. But it was along the Yellow River drainage basin in the North China Plain that the first literate civilization emerged—and at about the same time. As a result, it is Mt. Tai rather than Mt. Emei that enters the historical record first.

Now, judged by its elevation alone, there is nothing particularly special about Mt. Tai—after all, it stands a mere 5,067 feet tall. But because it rises straight up from the flat North China Plains, the sudden contrast of the mountain with the surrounding terrain makes it stand out. We know it certainly stood out to the early prehistoric inhabitants of this region. A large uninscribed megalith known as the Wordless Stele, which stands on the summit, is believed to have served

some sort of ritual purpose long before the invention of Chinese writing. In addition, the discovery of ancient pottery, dated to about 2500 BC, has yielded a striking series of symbols: a mountain, the sun, and an unknown object between them. Despite our imperfect understanding of this motif, it is clear that Mt. Tai was associated with worship of the sun, which, along with water, represents another essential element of life.

In later times, Mt. Tai's relationship with the sun was enshrined as part of a spatial diagram for the spread of early Chinese civilization. In ancient Confucian texts dating back to the first millennium B.C., the boundaries of Chinese culture were defined by five mountains located in each of the five cardinal directions: north, south, west, east, and center. Mt. Tai, the mountain of the east and the one closest to the rising sun, has always been regarded as the most sacred of the five. But in order to gain access to its spiritual powers, the Chinese deemed it necessary to enhance the natural landscape through subtle additions and alterations.

This concept is known as *fengshui* 風水. It is the idea that latent concentrations of energy, or *qi*, can be identified in the natural landscape and then harnessed or balanced for various purposes. The conspicuous rise of mountain slopes and ridges, known as "dragon veins," were viewed as particularly potent concentrations of such energy. On the basis of complex calculations and arcane reasoning, the ancient Chinese adorned mountain landscapes with a vast array of human architecture: arches, temples, shrines, pavilions, inscriptions, ponds, bridges, and staircases, all carefully laid out in alignment with the perceived *qi* 氣 of the terrain. As a result, climbing a sacred mountain in China is not the lonely wilderness experience so often coveted in the West. Instead, it is a knee-pounding ascent up a seemingly endless flight of stone steps, surrounded by a sea of humanity all heading toward the next arch, temple, or shrine.

The earliest records of visits to Mt. Tai all document the activities of elite Chinese men. One of the most famous visitors was said to be Confucius himself, whose home state of Lu bordered the mountain. Around 500 BC or so, it is said that Confucius gained crucial political insights by climbing the mountain: "When he ascended the Eastern Mount," we are told, "Confucius felt that the state of Lu was small. And when he ascended Mt. Tai, he felt that the Empire was small." This idea—that kings and emperors were subordinate to a higher power, and that only Confucius and his followers could properly mediate between these two forces—was a cardinal assumption of Confucian political discourse throughout Chinese history.

Another story about Confucius relates that one day as he passed by Mt. Tai, he encountered a woman crying beside some graves. She told him that her father-in-law, husband, and son were all killed by tigers. And yet she refused to leave the area, because "the government here is not severe." Then the Master spoke: "My disciples, remember this, a tyrannical government is fiercer than tigers." In order to commemorate Confucius' subtle critique of the arrogant pretensions of mortal kings, later visitors to Mt. Tai erected plaques and pavilions in his honor. Thus near the base of the mountain we find the Point Where Confucius Began His Ascent, while the summit contains four more monuments or viewing platforms associated with his visit.

If Confucius' visit to Mt. Tai provided a moral example for future Chinese scholars, the visits of some emperors could serve instead as a counter-example of what not to do. In the year 219 B.C., the first emperor of the Qin dynasty—the same man who commissioned the terracotta warriors to accompany him in the afterlife—undertook what his Confucian advisors regarded as a reckless and presumptuous ascent up the mountain. According to the Han Dynasty historian Sima Qian, the first emperor disregarded the proper procedures for carrying out ritual sacrifices to the God of Mt. Tai. Not only that, but he also opened up a carriage path to the summit in violation of the principles of *fengshui* and refused to cover the wheels of his cart to avoid

injuring the earth. The mountain responded with fierce winds and rains, forcing the emperor to take shelter under a pine tree. In order to spite his Confucian advisors, he enfeoffed the tree as a noble of the fifth rank. On the same site today, located about three-quarters of the way up to the summit, visitors will encounter a latter-day descendant of this Fifth-Rank Pine Tree next to a small terrace and a pavilion.

Now, with these moral anecdotes of Confucius and the first emperor of the Qin Dynasty on their minds, later monarchs took care to ascend Mt. Tai in the "proper" way. Ideally, it was supposed to mark the pinnacle of your reign: the land should be at peace, food abundant, the economy robust, and auspicious signs detected in the cosmos. Then, and only then, was an emperor supposed to make the trek from the imperial capital to receive the Mandate of Heaven from the God of Mt. Tai. The God of Mt. Tai was portrayed as a stern deity. He was known to preside over the seventh court of hell, where his demon assistants inflicted gruesome tortures on the undeserving. On Mt. Tai, he was immortalized in three separate temples, located at the base, mid-section, and summit.

Today only the Dai Temple at the base of the mountain remains intact as a functioning religious site. Its location is deliberate: constructing a temple at the opening of a valley between two ridges of the mountain was regarded as auspicious, in accordance with the rules of *fengshui*. The temple is encircled by a wall nearly one mile long and 13 feet high, encompassing a temple complex that is matched in size only by the Forbidden City in Beijing and the Confucian Temple in Qufu. Inside, visitors will find a statue of the God of Mt. Tai and a massive wall mural showing him on a tour of inspection. Alas, the vibrant depictions of souls undergoing torture in the underworld are no longer visible. In addition to the Dai Temple, any monarch who reached the summit would likely also pay homage at the Jade Emperor Temple. Built in 1483 around the highest peak on the mountain, this temple holds a statue of the Jade Emperor, who serves as the chief deity in the Daoist pantheon—China's premier homegrown religion. The temple is also notable for its roof tiles made of iron, which are essential to resist the extreme wind on the summit.

Before they left the summit, many emperors felt compelled to leave a permanent mark of their visit. On the face of a cliff to the east are carved a series of inscriptions into the rock. The largest inscription appears on the right: gilded in gold, it replicates the calligraphy of the Tang (618–907 A.D.) dynasty emperor Taizong. In it he commemorates the solemn sacrifice he performed to the God of Mt. Tai in the year 726 A.D. On the far left-hand side we find two famous inscriptions of emperors from the last imperial dynasty, the Qing (1644–1911). The two large characters painted in painted are replicas of the Kangxi emperor's calligraphy in the late 17th century. It simply means "Cloud Peak." Below it is a poem composed by his grandson the Qianlong emperor. Apparently not content with his share of the limited space remaining on this cliff, the Qianlong emperor also commissioned a much larger inscription of another one of his poems on a distant rock clearing just below the summit. Known as the Inscription of 100,00 Feet, it is engraved on a rectangular stone surface 65 feet tall and 30 feet wide—each character measures 10 square feet! On a clear day, it is visible from south of the city of Tai'an, which sits at the base of the mountain.

Nearly all of the monumental additions to Mt. Tai were put there by wealthy, educated men. But this doesn't mean that they were the only people who visited the mountain. In fact, it has been estimated that during the late imperial era, from roughly the 14th to 19th century, somewhere around 400,000 people made the annual pilgrimage to Mt. Tai. The vast majority of these pilgrims were illiterate commoners. Many of them joined what were known as "incense

societies": these were groups of local villagers who donated money to a common fund, thereby allowing selected members of their group to undertake the pilgrimage to Mt. Tai on a rotating basis. Their trek to Mt. Tai had a very different agenda than that of the Chinese elites. The emperor and his Confucian officials came to set the world in order and to engage with the literary tracks of their educated predecessors. They traveled by horse and sedan chair, wrote poetry, pointed out where Confucius felt the empire was small, and organized sacrifices to the stern God of Mt. Tai.

By contrast, the illiterate commoners came by foot or handcart and could make little sense of the many inscriptions that decorated the ascent. And since most of them brought very specific grievances to relate to the gods, they did everything they could to accumulate as much spiritual merit as possible. This included the practice of bending down to touch their head on the ground every three steps and giving what little money they had to beggars. Because they were often so poor, many chose to climb to the summit at night so they would not have to pay for food and lodging at one of the temples. The sight of so many lanterns snaking up the mountain led one seventeenth-century traveler to describe the scene as resembling "ten thousand bushels of glow-worms." Still, there were many opportunities to fritter away one's savings: temples sold talismans, incense, and paper money necessary for prayer, while actors, musicians, apothecaries, jugglers, and puppeteers were eager to entertain. It is clear that Mt. Tai's pilgrims generated a good deal of income for local communities: one legend even says that the Daoist nuns in the Mother of the Big Dipper Temple were expelled for running a brothel inside!

One aspect of Mt. Tai pilgrimage that Chinese records leave little account of is the sheer number of poor women who made the arduous trek to the summit. By the late imperial era, so many of the pilgrims were women that the gods themselves began to cater to them. This cultural shift can be seen in the rise of Bixia Yuanjun 碧霞元君: a female deity with the power to answer prayers for a son—which women in a deeply patriarchal society simply had to produce in order to attain any standing or influence within her husband's family. Along with her two assistants, the Goddesses of Eyesight and Conception, Bixia Yuanjun offered a more accessible and genial contrast to the intimidating God of Mt. Tai and his demon lackeys. Often referred to simply as the Goddess of Mt. Tai, the principle site of worship for Bixia Yuanjun was at the Bixia Palace on the summit. By far the largest temple on the summit, its construction dates back to the 14th century during the Ming dynasty. Inside pilgrims will find a statue of Bixia Yuanjuan flanked by her two assistants. It was at this holiest of altars that Chinese women would pray to the Goddess of Mt. Tai for a son, often saying that they were going to have "a chat with grandma."

Now, while the summit of Mt. Tai was supposed to be a place to pray for new life, there was a small minority of pilgrims who believed that the God of Mt. Tai could also grant an extension of life for ailing relatives. In what was intended to be the ultimate act of filial piety toward one's parents, some people actually leapt to their deaths from the summit. The preferred spot for doing so soon became known as Abandon Life Cliff. The rationale was simple: the bureaucracy of the underworld could grant an extension of life to the elderly, but only if its books were balanced by the taking of a young life in return. In 1684, the Kangxi emperor refused to visit the cliff during his ascent, telling his advisors that "ignorant people … do not understand that bodies, including hairs and skin, are received from us from our fathers and mothers, and one dare not destroy or damage them." By then, the local governor had already built a wall 15 feet high to deter would-be jumpers and renamed the spot Love Life Cliff. Unfortunately, the practice has continued up to today, though the impetus to do so now derives from educational, professional, and social setbacks rather than extreme expressions of filial devotion.

The Confucian emphasis on filial piety and the importance of sons has a long tradition, dating back to the first surviving Chinese texts carved onto oracle bones in 1250 B.C., when a Shang king noted his disappointment at the birth of a daughter. By contrast, the arrival of Buddhism from India took place at a much later date, around the first several centuries of the first millennium A.D. But its impact was no less profound. In just a few hundred years, Chinese concepts about the afterlife and the gods who populated it underwent a dramatic shift. Now you were expected to cultivate good karma and direct your prayers to a colorful array of buddhas and bodhisattvas, all in hopes of entering a delightful Buddhist heaven.

Mt. Emei, located about 1,100 miles southwest of Mt. Tai, has long been regarded as China's premier Buddhist mountain. The bold architecture of this imported religion greets visitors long before they reach the mountain. Along the eastern approach, at the confluence of two raging rivers, a giant stone buddha has been carved out of the cliffside. This is the great Maitreya Buddha at Leshan, which was also designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1996. It's easy to see why. Rising 233 feet high, its head alone is 48 ft. tall, while each eye spans 10 feet across. This massive buddha was constructed as a means of taming the turbulent rivers at its feet. A circular stone stairway now allows visitors to get an intimate view of all the moss and weeds that grow out of the buddha's nooks and crannies. When you reach the platform at the bottom, be prepared to be dwarfed by his feet: each one is 29 feet wide! In fact, more than 100 people could stand on just one foot at the same time. From here, you can also take in the same magnificent view west across the river that Maitreya himself enjoys: an unobstructed panorama of heavily wooded Mt. Emei.

Mt. Emei rises much higher and is more spread out than Mt. Tai. Encompassing some 360 square miles, it has four different peaks, the tallest of which tops out at 10,167 feet. Its name, which translates as Silkworm-Moth Eyebrow Mountain, is derived from two of these peaks, which are said to face one another like moth eyebrows on a clear autumn day. Rain and fog, however, are near constants; in fact, Mt. Emei receives the heaviest rainfall in all of China, with an average of 264 days of measurable precipitation and 323 days with fog. The fog in particular provides much of Emei's mystique. In 1935, the Chinese scholar Zhao Xunbo observed that "it is surely insufficient to portray in words the loveliness of Emei's scenery; unless one beholds it personally he will not believe it."

Mt. Emei is also renowned for its steep cliffs and many mysterious grottoes. These, along with its undeniable aesthetic allure, drew many Daoist hermits and ascetics to its ridges and summit. They came not only for its glorious solitude, but also for its rich array of rare flora and fauna. Though rarely seen today, panda bears once roamed its vast forests, munching on the dense bamboo stands that grow along its lower and middle elevations. Medicinal plants, which were essential to the practice of Daoist alchemy, abound at all elevations, with more than 1,600 varieties identified. Chinese histories record that several emperors sent collectors to Mt. Emei to gather ingredients that might be combined into an elixir of immortality.

By the end of the first millennium A.D., however, the early Daoist presence on the mountain had been largely supplanted by newly arrived Buddhist monks. Before long, the slopes of Mt. Emei were covered in Buddhist temples and monasteries, many of which were converted from earlier Daoist structures. One tale relates that the slaying of a dangerous python by a Buddhist monk convinced the Daoist priests to convert their abbey into a monastery. Such stories became a standard convention of Buddhist conversion literature, with the slayed animal sometimes being a tiger that had terrorized nearby villages. Today, the Buddhist monks of Mt. Emei are more likely to help tourists fend off the mountain's several hundred macaques, an

aggressive type of monkey. I remember back when I climbed Mt. Emei back in the year 2000, a tribe of macaques managed to surround me as I approached a Buddhist monastery. Not having any peanuts in my backpack to buy them off, I suddenly grew panicked—until a monk ran out of the monastery and fearlessly chased them all away with a wooden staff!

The ascent of Mt. Emei is not to be taken lightly. Whereas Mt. Tai's summit can be reached in a single day, the same feat on Mt. Emei will require a minimum of two to three days, with lodging provided by monasteries and temples on the mountain. In the 12th century A.D., a Chinese official named Fan Chengda made the ascent in a sedan chair carried by hardy porters; and still the steep and slippery journey made him dizzy, with Fan declaring that "I am like a flopping fish being hoisted up on a long pole." He later concluded that "of all the mountains to be climbed in the whole world, none matches this one in danger and height." Today the dangers of Mt. Emei have been greatly lessened by the more than ten thousand stone steps that scale its ridgeline—though anyone with weak knees should still take note!

Fortunately, for those without the time or inclination to climb the entire mountain, one of Emei's must-see sites sits only a third of the way up the stone path. This is the Wannian, or "Ten Thousand Year" Temple. Dating back to the 10th century A.D., the Ten-Thousand Year Temple was built on the site where the bodhisattva Samantabhadra, or Puxian in Chinese, was said to have taken up residence. Inside the complex you'll find the distinctive Beamless Brick Temple, which was built without the use of any wooden supports. It houses a massive 10th-century bronze statue of Puxian, who sits on a gilded lotus flower on top of a white elephant with six tusks. It is believed that this statue, which was cast in pieces and brought up on the backs of donkeys, is one of only a few ancient relics on Mt. Emei that was not destroyed during China's turbulent twentieth century and then later rebuilt.

If you have the knees for two more days of stone staircases, bold monkeys, and mist-enshrouded greenery, you just might be rewarded with the most spectacular sight on the entire mountain. On the summit, in the midst of numerous temples, shrines, and platforms, is a mysterious natural phenomenon known as the Buddha's Light. The best spot to see it is at the aptly named Observing-the-Light Terrace. Then, if the proper amounts of evaporating precipitation and fog are present in precisely the right conditions, and if the sun is shining at a perfect right angle behind your back, you'll see a rainbow halo form around your own disembodied shadow over the distant valley below. It is estimated that Buddha's Light appears between 70 to 80 times a year. In the old days, it was believed that its arrival was announced by two magical birds that dwelt on one of the peaks on the summit. Just as the rainbow halo appeared, they would squawk out, "Foxian! Foxian," or "The Buddha appears! The Buddha appears!" Just how these birds learned to speak Chinese was another mystery altogether. Unfortunately, just like at the Abandon Life Cliff at Mt. Tai, the rapture that so many Buddhist pilgrims experienced on the appearance of this phenomenon led some to leap off the cliff into the misty abyss some 5,000 feet below, in the belief that they were jumping into the arms of the Buddha.

For at least the past three thousand years, Mt. Tai and Mt. Emei have tested the limits of human endurance, ingenuity, and religious devotion. And though their summits can now be reached with relative ease by bus and cable car, these mountains are no less revered for the diminishment of the challenge. In many parts of the world, climbing a mountain tends to be experienced as a lonely battle between man and nature. But not in China. For as we have seen here with its most sacred Confucian and Buddhist peaks, China instead offers the aspiring pilgrim an intimate walk through Chinese history and culture.

The Mogao Grottoes

Sometime during the last decade of the 19th century, a poor illiterate Daoist priest managed to beg his way to the remote oasis of Dunhuang. Dunhuang lies in the deserts of northwestern China, along a key transport route of the ancient Silk Road. Its name means "blazing beacon"—a reference to the now crumbling watchtowers that once kept watch over the Central Asian frontier. The Daoist priest was named Wang Yuanlu, and he had come to Dunhuang to escape the trials and tribulations of his early life. Now he decided to take up residence at a nearly forgotten collection of some 500 caves located just a few miles outside of town. These were the Mogao Grottoes, or "Peerless Caves." What this humble priest found there would stun the world.

The Mogao Grottoes were all carved out of a soft granite cliff that overlooks a narrow strip of land fed by a small river, about 10 miles from the oasis of Dunhuang. Despite its remote location, this was a popular destination for pilgrims, merchants, and soldiers traveling between China, India, and the Middle East. The wealth that accumulated in Dunhuang from all this long-distance travel and trade was soon invested into ambitious programs of religious patronage. From the 4th to the 14th centuries AD, nearly 500 caves were dug out of the nearby cliffs and filled with one of the most breathtaking collections of Buddhist art anywhere in the world. Designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1987, the Mogao Grottoes preserve a remarkable synthesis of cultural traditions and artistic styles from all of its diverse patrons: Chinese, Indian, Tibetan, Central Asian, and many more. It is thus not without reason that these caves are often referred to as an "art gallery in the desert."

The first cave is said to have been built in the year 366 AD, when a wandering Chinese monk named Lezun arrived at the site—much like Wang Yuanlu would do 1,500 years later. According to a Tang-dynasty inscription, Lezun "had a vision of golden radiance in the form of a thousand buddhas. Thereupon he erected scaffolding and chiseled out the cliff to make a cave." Now, by this time, the act of digging caves out of cliffs was a longstanding Buddhist tradition, with roots that go back to the early days of the religion when it flourished in northern India. The famous cave complexes at Ajanta and Ellora are a case in point: originally built as a temporary shelter for monks during the rainy monsoon season, these caves would eventually become permanent sites of meditation and teaching. They would also become a focal point of nearby kings and merchants, who would show off their piety and influence by paying for the decoration of the caves.

The Mogao Grottoes are laid out on a north-south axis, immediately adjacent to the Daquan River, which flows along its western side. In the old days, caves situated on the ground level used to suffer from occasional flood damage. Now, a good way to get our bearings is to look for the towering Nine-Storey Temple, also known as Cave 96. Located just north of the midpoint of the caves, Cave 96 consists of a series of exterior red roofs built in the style of traditional Chinese architecture. Inside, however, is a 115 ft. tall giant buddha statue, with a series of windows to let light in. This is one of several monumental statues inside the grottoes. In Cave 158, just above a cave containing a smaller standing buddha, is a 49-foot-long Parinirvana Buddha. Reclining on a raised bed with a serene look on his face, this classic pose shows the buddha just before he dies and passes into nirvana. Another Parinirvana Buddha can be found in Cave 148, entombed in a long coffin-shaped chamber, surrounded by 72 stucco followers mourning the passage of their spiritual leader. They kneel beneath a ceiling ornately decorated with what is known as the Thousand Buddha motif.

Aside from those containing giant sculptures, the grottoes at Mogao are of three types: those designed for meditation, those designed for worship, and those designed for assembly. Let's take a look at some examples of each kind. Cave 268, which dates to the 5th century AD, is located smack dab in the middle of the site. Inside is a narrow corridor with four small cells carved out on either side. Each cell could accommodate a single person for the purpose of meditation. Not far to the north is Cave 254. This cave is representative of those designed for worship. Its most distinctive feature is a central pillar representing a stupa: worshippers would conduct rituals in this space as they walked around the pillar in a clockwise direction.

Last but not least is the assembly cave. Most of the grottoes fall into this category. Cave 249, just a few doorways north from our pillar cave, is a good example. Large and spacious and sumptuously decorated from floor to ceiling, these caves could accommodate large gatherings of people for various purposes. Some assembly caves extend up to 33 feet deep into the cliffside. Regardless of their function or size, all of the grottoes are justly famous for the artwork preserved inside. These include both clay statues and lush paintings—nearly 500,000 square feet of them! That's a lot of paint in the middle of the desert. But it wasn't applied directly to the rock surface. Instead, the cave walls were first covered with a makeshift but very effective plaster, using materials at hand. This plaster consisted of a mixture of fine sand, sediment from the river, and locally grown straw and hemp.

Now, when it comes to admiring the artwork of the Mogao Grottoes, we are spoiled for choice. But I say we check out Cave 205, just a stone's throw away from the Nine-Storey Temple. Here, on a sloped ceiling painting during the Tang dynasty in the 7th century A.D., we find what is known as the "thousand-buddha motif." This is a classic expression of the Mahayana brand of Chinese Buddhism. It envisioned not just one buddha and his solitary pursuit of nirvana, but rather an expansive cosmos of billions of buddhas and a series of opulent heavens to which everyone could aspire to enter after death. The thousand-buddha motif is so prevalent throughout the Mogao Grottoes that the caves are often referred to in Chinese simply as *Qianfodong*, or "the Thousand-Buddha Caves."

Let's finish our survey of the art of the grottoes with a couple of my favorites. Cave 45 is justly renowned for an exquisite ensemble of seven painted clay statues in its west niche. It features a serene Buddha seated in the center, flanked on either side with three pairs of pious figures: two disciples, two Buddhist deities known as bodhisattvas, and two heavenly guardians. All of them are shown in dynamic motion, nearly free from the painted wall behind them. Now let's shift our gaze ever so slightly to the south wall of this same cave, just left of the niche with the seven clay figures. Here we find a montage of scenes depicting the powers of the merciful bodhisattva Guanyin. One scene in particular always grabs the attention of visitors: it shows a band of merchants, traveling along the Silk Road, being held up by a menacing bandit holding an enormous sword. The text informs us that Guanyin will intervene to rescue anyone who encounters such misfortune—so long as their faith is sincere.

Other caves serve as a reminder that there is far more than just Buddhist art at the Mogao Grottoes. There are murals that depict more ordinary scenes of secular life, like one of a lively performance of the pipa, a stringed instrument known also as the Chinese lute. It reached its popularity as the principal instrument of courtly music during the Tang Dynasty, when this mural was painted. And then there is my personal favorite: in Cave 150, at the northern end of the site not far from the 85-foot-high buddha statue, we find a charming depiction of two divine Daoist generals. What I love about this painting are not just the vivid colors, but the simple fact that these divine generals are smiling—a rare sight in premodern art in any part of the world.

The Silk Road went into decline in the 15th century, as sea routes began to dominate international trade, and incessant war and instability made the inland route across Eurasia increasingly dangerous. Dunhuang, once a bustling waystation of international trade, declined as well, as its famous cave shrines were largely abandoned and forgotten, known only as a site of local pilgrimage.

They might well have remained a forgotten treasure, if not for our illiterate Daoist priest, Wang Yuanlu. For it was he who made one of the greatest discoveries in the history of archaeology. In the year 1900, Wang took up residence at the caves. He found them full of sand, lacking any sort of scaffolding, and highly vulnerable to the whims of man and nature. Undeterred, Wang set out to beg in the streets of Dunhuang in order to raise funds for the restoration of the caves.

Wang's work was to take on far greater significance that he could imagine. While overseeing repairs to a grotto at the southern end of the complex, Wang noticed a crack in the ceiling that extended down along the wall and plaster. Thinking that something else might lay just beneath the surface, Wang broke through the plaster and discovered a tiny rock cell, one that had been sealed in total darkness for nearly a thousand years. What did he find inside? Well, quite simply, he found the greatest repository of Buddhist literature, Chinese historical texts, and immaculately preserved religious art ever found anywhere in the world.

All in all, the tiny rock cell, now known as Cave 17, contained over forty thousand manuscripts and paintings on paper, silk, and wood. The earliest document, a Buddhist text, has been dated to the year 405 AD, while the latest dates to 1002 AD. Also present in the cave was a statue of an influential ninth-century Buddhist monk named Hongbian, in whose honor the tiny cell was originally excavated from the wall of the adjacent main cave. Over the next century, this cozy little memorial space to Hongbian also began to be used as a storehouse for various collections of documents and paintings. Eventually, they became so numerous that stacks of bundles piled up high around the statue of Hongbian until they nearly reached the ceiling, nine feet above the ground.

And then, for some reason after the turn of the first millennium, Cave 17 was suddenly sealed up. The most likely explanation is that Cave 17 was a local storehouse of sorts, a place where old scriptures, ritual paintings, and administrative records of local monasteries were placed once they could no longer endure the wear and tear of daily use. Then, once the monks of Dunhuang heard tales about the Muslim conquest of Central Asia, they may have decided to seal off this cave library to prevent its desecration at the hands of potential hostile invaders.

Whatever their motivation, their actions left behind an incredible "time capsule" of the ancient Silk Road. Their unparalleled value as historical sources lay in the fact that they were not consciously curated, censored, or otherwise manipulated in order to serve a larger agenda. The contents of Cave 17, unlike public religious art or administrative documents, were simply placed out of sight and then forgotten about. This sort of inadvertent preservation is like catnip for historians, who relish the opportunity to gain insights into the thoughts and actions of people who otherwise rarely appear in the historical record.

So, what sort of insights has the cave library yielded? First and foremost, it tells us that Buddhism was the pre-eminent religion of both Central and East Asia during the entirety of the time period represented by the artifacts stored in Cave 17: that is, from the fifth to eleventh centuries. By this time, Buddhism had spread far beyond its origins in northern India and southern Nepal and had extended its influence throughout Asia. For many pilgrims of this era, China, not India, had become the new center of gravity for the Buddhist world. As Buddhism

declined in South and Central Asia, monks from these regions could find lucrative employment in Chinese monasteries and dynastic courts. Many continued onward to scale Mount Wutai and visit some of its famous monasteries. This was the sacred mountain in Eastern China where Manjusri, the bodhisattva of wisdom, was believed to reside. Regardless of their destination, nearly all of these pilgrims had one thing in common: sooner or later, they would pass through Dunhuang.

Now, the material remains of this cosmopolitan Buddhist intercourse were most fully preserved in the cramped and arid confines of Cave 17. Of the more than forty thousand objects found in the cave library, about ninety percent of them are manuscripts of Buddhist monastic literature of one sort of another. Though most were written in Chinese and Tibetan, other languages survive as well, such as Sanskrit, Uighur, and even Khotanese, a language no longer spoken today. No matter the language, they all purported to record the words and teachings of the Buddha and his disciples. Of course, sometimes they do so with a mind-numbing repetitiveness: for instance, more than a thousand copies of the Lotus Sutra, one of the most popular Buddhist texts, were found in the cave library. We can only imagine the intense hand cramps that the poor Buddhist scribes who created these must have suffered from! To them, however, it was worth it: for merely to copy the words of the Buddha in writing was to generate spiritual merit for oneself or to whomsoever the sutra was dedicated.

Nevertheless, some people sought an easier and less expensive way to generate Buddhist merit. We can see this clearly in the survival in the cave library of one of the oldest printed books in the world: a copy of the Diamond Sutra, dated to the year 868, and paid for by a man named Wang Jie for the express purpose of generating spiritual merit for his parents. The fact that merit could be generated so easily by someone who had not taken the vows of a monk or a nun was a central tenet of the particular brand of Mahayana Buddhism that flourished in Dunhuang, and indeed most of Central and East Asia. The Mahayana creed is that every single person in this world contains within them the seeds of perfect enlightenment. It does not matter if you are a man or a woman, rich or poor, monk or layman, or even good or evil. One day, everyone will become an enlightened buddha and reside in one of the Buddhist heavens, even if it takes tens of millions of rebirths and a hefty print run of the *Diamond Sutra* to do so.

In order to realize one's inner "buddha-hood," however, many lifetimes of virtuous conduct and religious patronage would be necessary. We can see just how such virtuous conduct was envisioned and replicated in some of the sutras found in Cave 17. In the year 958, the wife of a man named Zhai Fengda passed away. In order to ensure the best possible rebirth for his wife, Zhai, then seventy-five years old, decided to follow the instructions set out in a Buddhist text known as *The Scripture on the Ten Kings*. The ten kings refer to the ten judges of the underworld in traditional Chinese belief, each of whom presided over his own court in hell and was responsible for determining whether or not the deceased would pass on to the next court or receive punishment in his own courtroom. It would take nearly three years for Zhai's wife to pass through all ten courts, at which point she would be reborn in her next life.

Fortunately for Zhai, *The Scripture on the Ten Kings* told him exactly which days she would appear before each judge of the underworld. On each of these days, Zhai commissioned copies of various sutras, paintings of the Buddha, or memorial feasts. Three years later, when his wife finally reached the tenth and final court, Zhai submitted a complete inventory of his efforts, lest the judges of the underworld forget how much merit he had accumulated on behalf of his wife. Before he departed this world himself, Zhai also bequeathed another gift to posterity: a

self-portrait. Painted onto the walls of Cave 220 is Zhai Fengda himself—a rare opportunity to match a relatively unknown name on paper with an actual historical face.

Of course, we will never know whether or not Zhai did indeed manage to secure a favorable rebirth for his wife. What we do know, however, is that all of his efforts required the services of Buddhist monks and nuns, who developed incredibly complex and detailed rituals. One paper scroll from the cave library, dated to the late ninth century, depicts forty-nine different poses of the hands and posture required to perform an altar rite for the Eleven-Faced manifestation of the bodhisattva Guanyin. The scroll was intended to serve as a visual guide to ensure the ritual was performed properly. Apparently, even Buddhist monks were afraid of offending the gods and preferred a cheat sheet just in case something went wrong!

But although Buddhism clearly dominated daily life at the Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang was nothing if not cosmopolitan. Indeed, one tattered up piece of paper turned out to contain eighteen lines of Hebrew text. Each line was composed of quotations from various books in the Hebrew Bible, including the Psalms. The shapes of the letters suggest that this document was written in Babylon and was subsequently carried by hand to Dunhuang. Folded up many times over and placed in a pouch, this remarkable document, the one and only Hebrew-language text found in the cave library, likely served as a protective talisman for its bearer.

And there was more to life at the Mogao Grottoes than just religion. Some of the most precious documents from the cave library, often preserved inadvertently as scrap paper for a Buddhist text on the flip side, offer us a rare glimpse at what life was like for everyday people at Dunhuang. Much like you and me, the residents of Dunhuang very much wanted to make friends and influence people. The reason we know this is because Cave 17 includes several manuals on how to navigate through various social relationships believed to be fraught with pitfalls.

One such manual provides letter templates for all sorts of situations, like how to write a proper letter to a friend or a relative, or how to send a letter of condolence or congratulations. My favorite, however, is the form letter provided for someone who drank too much the night before and made a fool of himself in front of his host. It reads as follows: “Yesterday, having drunk too much, I was so intoxicated as to pass all bounds; but none of the rude and coarse language I used was uttered in a conscious state. The next morning, after hearing others speak on the subject, I realized what had happened, whereupon I was overwhelmed with confusion and ready to sink into the earth with shame…I humbly trust that you in your wise benevolence will not condemn me for my transgression. Soon I will come to apologize in person, but meanwhile I beg to send this written communication for your kind inspection. Leaving much unsaid, I am yours respectfully.” Now if that doesn’t get him back in the good graces of his host, I don’t know what will!

All fun aside, some of these manuals alluded to more melancholy situations. A case in point is a model divorce agreement. Evincing a blend of Confucian and Buddhist themes, the agreement begins with the observation that “husband and wife should be like the mandarin ducks that always fly in pairs. When they sit together side by side, their rosy cheeks should glow with deep love and the joy of marital life.” Unfortunately, it continues, “if they are not meant to be together, after three years of marriage they will be enemies.” Declaring that the unhappy couple must have been foes in their previous lives, the template advises the husband to pay for the next three years of his wife’s living expenses and pass along his wishes that she will “marry a high official” the next time she ties the knot. The bottom of the document is purposely left blank, so that any unhappy couple could simply fill in their names.

As with so many of the historical materials found in Cave 17, these manuals offer us only tantalizing glimpses of what life may have been like in a desert oasis more than a thousand years ago. Inevitably, we find ourselves wanting to know more: more about the unhappy couples who used the divorce template, more about the man with a nasty hangover, more about Zhai Fengda and the wife whose death prompted such a remarkable outpouring of devotion. We might console ourselves with the reminder that we are extremely fortunate to have even these small glimpses into their bygone worlds. After all, the story of how the contents of the cave library came to see the light of day at all offers a stark reminder about the random contingencies of history.

Now, you might recall that Wang Yuanlu, the poor Daoist caretaker of the Mogao Grottoes, was largely illiterate, and thus unable to assess the historical value of the treasures he had found. Since his goal was to raise money for the restoration of the several hundred grottoes and works of art within the caves, Wang decided to send the most aesthetically beautiful manuscripts to nearby Chinese officials, in hopes of receiving a donation in return. In this hope, he was severely disappointed. In the first several years after his discovery of Cave 17, Wang received neither money nor interest from Chinese officials. In fact, it wasn't until 1907, seven years after Wang first happened upon the cave library, that an educated scholar finally paid a visit to the Mogao Grottoes in order to determine once and for all the source of these mysterious scrolls.

Unfortunately for the Chinese, that scholar was the British archaeologist Aurel Stein. Stein, while working as a civil servant in the British Raj in India, had heard rumors about a mysterious collection of ancient documents found at Dunhuang. In May 1907, Stein arrived at the Mogao Grottoes and met Wang. With the assistance of his Chinese secretary, Stein told Wang that he was following in the footsteps of Xuanzang, a famous Chinese monk who had lived during the seventh century. In China, Xuanzang was famous for having completed a perilous journey to India to obtain original Sanskrit texts from which more accurate Chinese translations of Buddhist sutras could be obtained. Now, Stein explained to Wang, he was doing Xuanzang's journey in reverse. As such, it would be a pious act, one sure to gain favor with the gods of the Mogao Grottoes, if Wang would agree to allow Stein to take these manuscripts back with him to India.

In the end, Stein got what he wanted: some ten thousand manuscripts, banners, and paintings, and all for a price, Stein later wrote, that "will make our friends at the British Museum chuckle." Other scholars soon followed in Stein's footsteps. Now the contents of Cave 17 are spread across the world, from London and Paris to Tokyo and St. Petersburg. Fortunately, everyone who obtained manuscripts from Wang Yuanlu knew they were getting their hands on priceless historical artifacts, and took steps to preserve and make them accessible to scholars around the world. Today, the field of "Dunhuang studies" is thriving, with the publication of numerous academic journals and the organization of international conferences every year.

The Mogao Grottoes are a UNESCO site precisely because they tell a story not just about Buddhism, or China, but about humanity. From simple stories of love to the most complex of religious scriptures, the caves are an extraordinary time capsule preserving stories from the heyday of the Silk Road, and show that long before flight and telecommunications, even a city at the edge of civilization could play host to the ideas and peoples of the world. But where once the world was indebted to the valiant efforts of one man to protect these treasures, today they are being protected against the ravages of the elements and time by international efforts. As a result, more and more caves have become closed to public viewing, while virtual and physical

reconstructions of the most popular caves have been installed at visitor centers and museums. In fact, in 2016, three full-scale replicas even went on display at the Getty Center in Los Angeles! Just think: if Zhai Fengda's wife really is reborn one day, she just might be able to visit a modern-day replica of the cave mural commissioned by her husband on behalf of her and her descendants.

Northern Hybrid States

Northern Hybrid States (or Sino-Steppe Empires) constitute the largest and most militarily successful of all dynasties in Chinese history. Today's People's Republic of China is so large precisely because it models its borders on the largest and longest-lived of all the premodern northern hybrid states, that of the Manchu Qing dynasty. When we look at the major dynasties of the imperial era, we can classify them in two distinct ways based on whether or not they managed to incorporate elements of the northern steppe or not:

Northern Hybrid Empires

Han (206 B.C.-220 A.D.): Chinese state, becoming Chinese-Xiongnu northern hybrid state
Northern Wei (386-534): Sarbi state, becoming Sarbi-Chinese northern hybrid state
Tang (618-907): Turkic-Sarbi-Chinese northern hybrid state
Yuan (1271-1368): Mongol-Jurchen-Chinese northern hybrid state
Qing (1644-1911): Manchu-Mongol-Chinese northern hybrid state

Southern Chinese Empires

Song (960-1279): Chinese emperors and mostly Chinese subjects, little incorporation of nomadic steppe
Ming (1368-1644): Chinese emperors and mostly Chinese subjects, little incorporation of nomadic steppe

These six major states by no means exhaust the list of important or substantial states throughout East Asian history, but it does list every one of those that managed to conquer a significant chunk of what we currently think of as the Han-dominated, sedentary agricultural heartland of the Yellow and Yangzi River Valleys (in cartographic terms, think of it as stretching from Beijing in the north to Hong Kong in the south). As you can see, those states that also managed to include peoples and territories beyond the agricultural heartland all did so by means of alliances with northern and northwestern peoples. The reason is simple: the sedentary communities of the Han heartland are wealthy and immobile, rather like sitting ducks. They present a very attractive target for any political aspirant, and the tax revenue from the agricultural heartland is essential for financing a large and substantial bureaucratic state of any sort. It is entirely possible for Han combatants to defeat other Han combatants in the south, without ever having anything to do with northern nomadic societies. But it is impossible for any state based in the south to then proceed to conquer the northern and northwestern nomadic steppes and deserts. But the reverse is not true: nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples in the far north and northwest—Turkic, Altaic, and Mongolian peoples—can and do frequently conquer one another ("incorporate" would be a better word) en route to building a nomadic confederation of mobile warriors on horseback, and then they inevitably set their sights on the Han agricultural heartland as well. The heartland isn't easy to conquer—the myriads of lakes and rivers and mountains are not friendly to horses' hooves—but it is *possible* to conquer. More specifically, it has been done exactly four times throughout East Asian history, namely by the Han, Tang, Yuan, and Qing dynasties. Conversely, no East Asian state has ever managed to conquer the north or northwest after arising and consolidating its base of power on the strength of Han infantry in the agricultural heartland. You simply can't march a legion of foot soldiers into the vast expanses of desert and steppe, and expect them to be able to "conquer" a moving target of mobile tribes on

horseback. To use a modern-day analogy, it is like fighting a war against terrorists: there is no "base" to destroy, no single "chief" that you can capture or execute and expect that all of his followers will lay down their arms as a result. Nomadic and semi-nomadic states are far too fluid and adaptable, like a many-headed hydra.

Prior to the establishment of the Han dynasty, the northern-southern dynamic in East Asian history certainly existed—those *huaxia* states better positioned to trade for nomadic horses in the northern zone surely fielded more fearsome armies than those states further south. But it is not until we see the emergence of a unipolar world in the Han dynasty that the nomadic-sedentary dynamic really takes center stage. The Qin and Han states were both positioned immediately south of powerful nomadic peoples, and they both intermarried with them and made alliances with tribal chiefs who then contributed to their military successes on the battlefield against other *huaxia* rivals. Without these alliances and intermixing, the Han leaders of the heartland would not be able to gain a true understanding of the strategic and military value—and threat—of the northern and northwestern steppes. And it is precisely this understanding that leads them to strike out with their armies toward the northern and northwestern regions to nullify this threat before it does their state harm.

Southern states like the Song and Ming simply can't do this. Because they never intermarried or intermixed with the northern nomadic peoples, they are much more vulnerable to the military threat they pose. Indeed, it should come as no surprise that two of the most humiliating military defeats by Chinese-dominated East Asian states came at hands of Song and Ming emperors: the first when the last emperor of the Song dynasty, Huizong, was captured alive by Jurchen forces in his own capital city in 1127 and subsequently exiled and enslaved in the north, and the second when the Ming emperor, Zhengtong, was captured on the battlefield in 1449 by Mongol forces in the fifteenth century. Southern, agriculturally based states do not have the battlefield experience or access to the best and most numerous horse breeds to sustain a military push into the north. This is why the vast majority of wall-building—those structures that later became identified erroneously as the forbears of the Great Wall—was done either by southern states like the Ming, or by northern hybrid states prior to their incorporation of nomadic peoples (as was characteristic of the Han). But if you begin with a loose federation of nomads in the north, conquer a few agricultural Han communities around the Yellow River plains, you can use this sedentary tax base as a foothold to finance ever deeper campaigns in the south, all the while holding on to your strategic military advantages in the northern zone: additional alliances with other tribes who now have an interest in partaking of your growing success in obtaining material resources, the cross-Eurasian trade in commerce and technology, and horses (the tanks of the pre-modern world).

This is why, if you look at maps of the Han, Tang, Yuan, and Qing dynasties, they all incorporated vast swaths of territories located in present-day Manchuria, Mongolia, Xinjiang, and sometimes even Tibet. Yet no Han-dominated state anchored in the south ever managed to do so. So how do these "northern hybrid states" come about, and how do they function? And, of no less importance, why do they so often appear to casual outside observers as just another "Chinese" dynasty, indistinguishable from every other dynasty?

Common to the first two of these northern hybrid empires—the Han and Tang—are strategic military alliances struck between prominent Han families in the Yellow River valley and the chiefs of the strongest non-Han tribes immediately to their north. Once these alliances allowed the Han rulers to defeat all their rivals and set up their own state, they immediately embarked on an ambitious mission to neutralize the same nomadic threat to their own state that

they witnessed during their association with the nomads that originally facilitated their rise to power. In practice, this meant military scouting missions to present-day Xinjiang and Mongolia, often in search of access to horse markets not monopolized by hostile nomadic peoples. Frequent warfare between northern/northwestern peoples and the central Yellow River state then takes place over many years, before finally a large element of the nomadic force is persuaded—either by material incentives, military defeats, or both—to stop fighting against the empire and instead fight for it. During the Han and Tang, large numbers of nomadic peoples known as the Xiongnu (often referred to as cousins of the Huns in early Western accounts) and Turks (originally from present-day Mongolia) took up military positions along the northern and northwestern fringes of the empire, defending the heartland from outside incursions. Eventually, however, once the internal peace of the empire began to break down and salaries and resources to frontier nomadic forces dried up, they turned their swords back toward the heartland and plundered it for themselves. This is precisely what happened during the final days of the Han and Tang dynasties.

Why has the Xiongnu, Turkic, and other non-Chinese character of these states been so often erased from the historical record? The answer is actually quite simple. Much like 19th and early 20th century immigrants to America, the moment a non-Chinese person of wealth and power began to work for the empire in the sedentary heartland, they almost invariably proceeded to adopt the hallmarks of a *huaxia* cultural identity: a surname written in Chinese characters, a largely fictional family genealogy that traced its ancestors back to a mythical Yellow Emperor or Zhou king, and the introduction of many material comforts common to the sedentary urban cities of the heartland. It is with the adoption of Chinese names, however, that the role of non-Chinese peoples in East Asian history is most commonly obscured. It works like this. The first generation patriarch of a powerful non-Chinese family adopts a literal transcription of his name in Chinese characters after he begins to work for a *huaxia* state. For instance, a Xiongnu chieftain whose name was Turlinga would likely adopt a close Chinese approximation of his name—let's say, Tu-er-lin-guo 土爾林果—once he accepted a title and salary from the imperial capital. If his own children were raised in the agricultural heartland, they would probably be given a shortened, more Chinese-looking version of the name, i.e., Tu Guodong 土國棟, retaining the initial first syllable "Tu" from his father's transliterated name, but otherwise adopting a standard Chinese one-character surname and one- or two-character given name. After one more generation of acculturation, the names would hardly be distinguishable from other Chinese names, tinged only slightly by the distant and vague memory that the surname "Tu" was somehow once associated with peoples from a faraway land. Indeed, this was the exact process by which a famous Turkish general of the Tang era became known. In Chinese, his name appears as An Lushan, and he is credited with leading a massive rebellion in the year 755 A.D. against the very emperor who invested him with power and troops. But his Turkish name, Rokshan, is far less known, because he had already been acculturated to the Tang empire for several generations, and thus already had a Chinese-looking name. When you only know his Chinese name, it is easy to gloss over his ethnocultural background, particularly if all the records about his career are written in Chinese. The analogy with American surnames is actually quite apt: names that now appear as American as apple pie are nearly always traceable to some European language, and ultimately to ancestors who chose—or were obligated—to Anglicize their name as they settled into the new land. And yet few Americans whose ancestors settled here more than one or two generations ago still retain the linguistic and cultural knowledge necessary to access any information about the lives of our forbears that is not written in English.

One last important feature to mention about northern hybrid states is that they were always responsible for the creation of expansive empires incorporating numerous peoples from diverse ethnocultural and ecological backgrounds. Unlike the Song and Ming dynasties, these states had to come to terms with the diversity of their empire. This is why the cultural ideal of *huaxia* civilization has proven so attractive over the millennia, and why we should not think of it as synonymous with "Chinese civilization"—at least, not if we take "Chinese" to mean "Han people" in a racial sense. In short, from Turks to Xiongnu to Mongols to Manchus, the *huaxia* ideal was open to anyone and everyone who proved themselves willing to study the Confucian classics and the *huaxia* rituals described therein. The regent for the first Manchu emperor of the Qing dynasty famously declared, upon his conquest of Beijing in 1644, that "the empire is not the possession of any one group or single person. Whosoever possesses virtue may hold it." There is that enigmatic concept of "virtue" again, invoked over and over again by our *shi* philosophers as the guiding cultural ideal of the morally perfected ruler. This is why Chinese officials were willing to serve Manchu emperors in droves: because, as they understood it, they were not necessarily serving a "Manchu" emperor per se; rather, they were serving a ritually and culturally orthodox "Confucian" emperor who just happened to be Manchu. The distinction is small but important.

Northern hybrid states habitually set up institutions of "dual administration." This meant that they had institutions designed to treat subjects of different ethnocultural backgrounds differently. Most often, due to their minority status amid a sea of Chinese subjects, this meant in practice the favoring and sheltering of non-Chinese peoples against assimilation or domination from the majority Chinese populace. In other words, they set up "affirmative action" institutions that guaranteed the placement of a large number of non-Chinese peoples in positions of official authority that was far out of proportion to their actual numberes in the empire. Thus, Turkish officials served disproportionately in the Tang military; Manchus and Mongols occupied roughly half of the most important positions in the Qing bureaucracy (despite making up just 1-2% of the population); and Uighurs, Arabs, Persians, Mongols, and Jurchens dominated the Mongol Yuan bureaucracy. Clear distinctions were always made between the northern "homelands" of the nomadic non-Chinese peoples—which were to be protected from Chinese immigration and ruled in accordance with tribal law—and the wealthy agricultural Chinese heartland of the interior, which was to be ruled mostly by Chinese officials via the standard jurisdictions of counties and provinces. Military and political power was always—always—located in the north, while cultural, economic, and demographic power was increasingly (especially after the Tang) located in the south. The solution that was devised for keeping these two distinct parts of the empire connected—and complementary—to one another was the construction of a Grand Canal in the 7th century, under Sui and Tang auspices. The Grand Canal was an artificial waterway that allowed the booming riverine economy of the south to flow directly up to the nomadic power bases of the north, without having to traverse the sea. Without it, it would have proven impossible for northern hybrid states to expand into northern hybrid empires that included the south. With it, the recurrent conquest of the south by northerners on horseback became a distinct possibility, one achieved every four hundred years or so, all the way up until industrial warfare negated the strategic advantages of the north, and ensured that the source of wealth in East Asia—the agricultural Chinese heartland—also produced all of its political leaders. This transition, however—and the perception that China is and always has been "Chinese"—did not occur until the 19th and 20th centuries.

Sacred Sites of Tibet

On February 7, 1959, Tenzin Gyatso, better known as the 14th Dalai Lama, attended a performance of a Tibetan religious dance at the Potala Palace. The Potala, towering high above the city of Lhasa, had served as the winter residence of ten consecutive Dalai Lamas over the past 300 years. On this particular day, however, Tenzin Gyatso was joined by a pair of Chinese Communist officials. They told him that a new dance troupe had just arrived in Lhasa after having trained in China. The Dalai Lama asked to see a performance, and a date was set for the following month. There was only one problem: he didn't tell anyone else about this conversation. So when the Chinese suddenly announced that the Dalai Lama would attend a performance at a newly built military auditorium, rumors began to swirl: surely this was a plot to abduct the spiritual and political leader of Tibet?

By then, the Tibetan court had relocated to the pleasant parklands of the Norbulingka, where the Dalai Lama passed much of the spring, summer, and fall. On March 9, Tibet's top officials spent the morning participating in a ritual tea ceremony: in Tibet, that means tea mixed with yak milk and a little bit of butter and salt—it's an acquired taste. There they heard about the recent pronouncement of a respected oracle, which said: "It is time to tell the all-knowing Guru not to venture outside." Word spread that the Dalai Lama must be protected at all costs. As thousands of ordinary Tibetans began to throng the streets outside the garden retreat of the Norbulingka, tensions soared and misunderstandings abounded. Finally, on March 17, the Dalai Lama's advisors convinced him that his life was in danger: so he donned the clothes of a Tibetan peasant, slipped through the crowd, and fled. He would never see his homeland again.

The drama of the Dalai Lama's final days in Tibet played out against the backdrop of some of the most iconic and sacred sites of this long mysterious land. And they continue to give meaning to the lives not only of those Tibetans who remained behind, but also to the millions of pious pilgrims and curious tourists who make the distant trek to Lhasa every year. In this lesson, we will venture into three of the most revered sites in all of Tibet: the Jokhang Temple, the Potala Palace, and the Norbulingka. Collectively, they constitute a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and tell us much about the history and culture of civilization on the rooftop of the world.

It is remarkable that anyone could eke out a living in this part of the world, much less flourish. After all, the Tibetan Plateau is the highest inhabited region on Earth: most of it rises above 16,000 feet, with altitude extremes on either side. In the south, Mt. Everest tops out at just over 29,000 feet, while the Tarim Basin lies to the north, where the Turfan Depression, one of the hottest places on the planet, sits at 500 feet *below* sea level. Most Tibetans, however, live somewhere in between these extremes, at around 12,000 feet. But that's still an eye-popping number: and it's why the city of Lhasa, located at roughly the same latitude as Orlando, Florida, experiences a far cooler climate.

And yet, also similar to Orlando, the Tibetan Plateau *does* get an inordinate amount of sun—about 3,000 hours per year. This surprisingly sunny climate has enabled two types of livelihoods. There are the tough nomadic yak herders, who roam around all those vast empty expanses which are unsuitable for agriculture. And then there are small sedentary communities, who populate river valleys and subsist chiefly on the barley crop, which can be grown up to 15,000 feet. Water for irrigation usually isn't a problem. After all, nearly every single one of the great rivers of Asia originates in Tibet: the Yellow and Yangzi rivers flow to the east, while the Indus, Ganges, Mekong, and Brahmaputra flow to the south.

Today, there are a little more than 6 million Tibetans in the world. They are spread out thinly and unevenly across nearly one million square miles of the Tibetan Plateau. That comes out to just 6 or 7 people per square mile. Compare that to Hong Kong, with more than 18,000 people per square mile! Tibetans are concentrated in three main regions. The first, and the more politically powerful, consists of the southern valleys of central Tibet. The Tibetans calls this region U-Tsang, and it is where we find the most populous cities, such as Lhasa and Shigatze. About half of all Tibetans, or 3 million people, live in this region. Since 1965, the Chinese have called it the Tibetan Autonomous Region. The two other areas are the eastern highlands of Amdo and Kham, which are today divided across four different Chinese provinces. Along with small parts of Nepal and northern India, these three regions collectively comprise the Tibetan cultural sphere.

Despite their frigid isolation and limited numbers, the Tibetan people regularly influenced the course of history in the more populous and wealthy countries around them. And in doing so, they brought back with them into Tibet diverse cultural influences that we can see in the art and architecture of Lhasa's most important monuments. The Jokhang Temple has displayed these influences longer than any other site in the city. Located in the heart of old town Lhasa, the Jokhang is the most sacred Buddhist temple in the Tibetan world, and is therefore often simply referred to as "the Great Temple." Pilgrims travel for weeks or even months to reach it, sometimes prostrating their bodies every step of the way. Evidence of this piety is etched into the flagstones adjacent to the main entrance: centuries of prostrations have actually eroded a central depression into these stones.

The Jokhang temple is laid out on a west-east axis, with several distinctive features that we'll also see in the Potala Palace. These include a plaster exterior painted in white and maroon, with four golden roofs raised over the most important interior rooms. The main part of the complex—as well as the earliest—dates to the 7th century AD. It consists of a square-shaped building composed of three stories and the rooftop. Inside is what is known as the Central Inner Sanctum. Immediately adjacent to it on the west is the Great Courtyard. Over the centuries, ancillary buildings grew up around the site in order to accommodate offices, residences, and storage rooms. But the holiest, and most accessible parts, have always been the Great Courtyard and the Central Inner Sanctum.

The Jokhang Temple is also surrounded by a circular ring road known as the Barkhor. Designed for the Buddhist ritual of circumambulation, the Barkhor provides a convenient path for residents and pilgrims to contemplate Buddhist doctrine and history while walking in a clockwise direction around a holy monument. A much larger circumambulation path known as the Lingkhor also encloses the Potala Palace to the west and most of the old town. In the old days, the Jokhang could be accessed from any one of the four gates positioned at each of the cardinal directions. This made it easy for city residents to begin their circumambulation of the temple at the most convenient point, enter the temple from any side, then perform their rituals of worship and exit back on to the Barkhor.

The chief entrance, however—and the only entrance today—was always through the western gate. This is because it faces in the direction of Nepal, which played an important role in the early history of Tibet. Our story begins in the 7th century AD, with a king named Songtsen Gampo. He is depicted in the Chapel of the Religious King on the west side of the second floor of the Jokhang temple. Believed to be one of the oldest statues in the complex, it shows the king sitting in the center, flanked on either side by two women, all of whom are gilded in copper. The king's right hand is posed in what is known as the "earth-touching gesture." This is a reference to

a famous moment in the life Siddhartha Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha, who is said to have defeated the evil demon Mara by calling upon the Earth Goddess to show her support for him by shaking the ground. The middle finger of this statue is even said to be the king's actual finger.

But how did Buddhism come to Tibet? Well, the answer to that question can be found in the identities of the two women sitting beside the king. The woman on the left is Princess Bhrikuti. In the 630s, King Songtsen Gampo sent a delegation to nearby Nepal to procure a queen. With her arrival came a host of Nepalese engineers and artisans, along with an influx of Indian culture and religion.

Their influence is evident in the Central Inner Sanctum. The Nepalese artisans are thought to be responsible for the construction of many of the doorways on the ground level. These feature multiple, progressively recessed jambs, the majority unpainted and carved with intricate narrative scenes. Most are *jataka* tales: simple stories of the Buddha's past lives, which provide moral lessons on how to accumulate good karma. The plan of the ground floor itself was built to resemble a *vihara*, or Indian monastery. This means a central hall with small cells branching off on all four sides, the shape of which is oriented to resemble a Buddhist swastika. In India, many of the most famous *vihara* were built out of stone or even cut out of the inside a cave. In Tibet wood replaced stone, but the essential design remains. Over the centuries, these single-room cells, or chapels, were filled with statues of Buddhist deities, scriptures, precious metals, jewelry, and other treasures—all ready to be worshipped by the faithful.

One of these chapels on the ground floor contains another clue as to just how much Indian influence made its way to Tibet in the 7th century. In a niche above the entrance of the Chapel of the Bathing Maitreya we find a wooden plaque known as the "Inscription of the Six-Syllable Mantra of Avalokitesvara"—a famous Buddhist deity. The script carved into the plaque is said to be the first historical specimen of Tibetan writing. It was allegedly done by King Songtsen Gampo himself, who ordered one of his officials to travel to India and find a script that could be adapted to the sounds of the Tibetan language. This wooden plaque showcases that new script. It was adapted from Gupta, which was originally used to write the Indo-European language of Sanskrit. It would now be tweaked to write Tibetan, which is more closely related to Burmese and Chinese.

Lest we think all cultural influences came from the south, however, a quick glance at the woman on the other side of the king's statue reminds us that China also played a significant role in Tibetan history. In the year 640, the king sent an emissary by the name of Gar Tongtsen to the Tang court in China to procure yet another princess for marriage. That daughter was Princess Wencheng. Later legends say that it was Wencheng who divined the proper site for the Jokhang Temple by drawing on the arts of Chinese geomancy (of which *fengshui* is one manifestation). Under her direction, so the legend goes, Milk Lake Plain was drained and filled in. But malevolent earth spirits continued to lurk beneath the ground. In order to placate these spirits with offerings, an access point was built into the floor inside the Chapel of Milk Lake Plain in the northeastern corner of the ground floor. It is said that the waters of the lake can still be reached underneath a stone slab.

But Princess Wencheng did much more than simply identify an auspicious construction site. Just south of the Chapel of Milk Lake Plain, at the center of the eastern side of the ground floor, is the Chapel of Jowo Shakyamuni. This is the sacred centerpiece of the entire temple complex. In fact, the legends say that the chief purpose of building the Jokhang was to house the precious Buddhist images brought to Tibet in the dowries of the king's two wives. And by far the most important of these images was the one brought by his Chinese wife. It is considered so

sacred that the entire Jokhang is named after it: after all, Jokhang simply means "the house of Jowo." The statue purports to depict the Buddha Shakyamuni at twelve years old. The story goes that it was carved from life by a heavenly artist in India, then sent to China along with the transmission of Buddhism.

As such, it occupies pride of place on the ground floor, facing the western entrance through which all pilgrims and monks must pass. The chapel itself is protected by four guardian deities, also sculpted in the Chinese style, with threatening, haughty demeanors. Once past them, the pious visitor beholds Jowo himself: about 5 feet tall, sitting on a three-tiered stone platform, and adorned in a magnificent golden headdress and an ever-changing assemblage of jewelry and precious stones donated by the faithful. Jowo's face is regularly refreshed with golden gilding: supposedly, anyone who looks upon it with faith will be released from the endless cycle of birth and death, or *samsara*. Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama, once recalled that he used to dream about the golden, resplendent face of this statue. Today, it continues to serve as the primary destination for all Buddhist pilgrims to Lhasa: a popular saying urges all visitors to make their way to the Jokhang and prostrate their bodies in front of Jowo before the sweat on their foreheads has dried. After that, you are supposed to circumambulate his tiny chapel, followed by a second circumambulation on a specially constructed corridor on the second floor known as the Nangkor.

Now let's make our way back out the western entrance of the Jokhang and exit through the Great Courtyard. As we do, the sounds and smells and sights of the temple are all around us: the pungent aroma of thousands of rancid butter lamps, the smoke of countless incense burners, the bang of drums and gongs, the soothing chanting of monks, and everywhere statues and paintings of Buddhist deities, both benevolent and wrathful. Despite all the lamps, candles, and color, however, the interior of the Jokhang is generally a very dark place. The Dalai Lama himself recalled that in some of the darkest chapels, with images of menacing gods above him and the squeaks of mice below him, he was "very frightened."

That fear stayed with him during rituals held in the Great Courtyard. Despite the bright outdoor setting, the Dalai Lama said that he was terrified of forgetting his lines during the prayer session he was supposed to lead. And it was a grand stage, to be sure. Constructed in the year 1409 for the first annual Great Prayer Festival, the Great Courtyard encloses a little more than 13,000 square feet. Along with the surrounding corridors, it was capable of hosting more than 20,000 monks while they prayed for the masses, performed ritual offerings, and received alms and donations. In more recent times, it served as the backdrop for more profane activities. During the Cultural Revolution, the Great Courtyard became a slaughterhouse for pigs and also witnessed the mass execution of so-called "counter-revolutionaries." As for the rest of the Jokhang, with the exception of the original Nepalese woodwork and those four ancient statues, nearly everything was destroyed and later reproduced in replica.

Now, the Dalai Lama seems to have a lot of memories of the Jokhang Temple. But he didn't actually spend much time there, coming mostly to participate in various rituals and ceremonies. In order to get a better sense of his daily surroundings, we must head northwest about a mile to reach the Potala Palace. Though the Jokhang Temple may be the oldest and most sacred site in Lhasa, the Potala dominates its skyline and serves as its most recognizable architectural icon. Built on top of Red Hill, the Potala was likely constructed on top of earlier royal palaces that also dated back to the 7th century. At 12,000 feet, it is the highest palace in the world. Rising thirteen stories high and stretching 1,200 feet wide, the Potala is said to contain some 1,000 rooms inside. In front are four long-winding staircases that stretch over 1,000 feet,

while behind the palace is an artificial lake and picturesque temple. Once again, the name itself reminds us of Indian influence: the Potala is named after mythical Mount Potaraka in southern India, which is home to Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva of compassion.

The Potala Palace is divided into two portions: the White and Red Palaces. Together, they feature the same color scheme and structural design as the Jokhang Temple: a stone and wood frame overlaid with plaster and painted in solid colors of white and maroon. Built to serve as the winter residence of the Dalai Lama, the Potala also played a role in major religious festivals. Nineteenth-century paintings show enormous *thangkas* hanging from its exterior walls. *Thangkas* are Tibetan paintings or embroidery applied to unbleached cotton and framed in Chinese brocade. They can be rolled up when not in use. Those hung from the Potala are enormous, up to 75 feet tall and 40 feet wide, and depict various Buddhist deities and heavens. Despite all this visual grandeur, however, the 14th Dalai Lama never enjoyed living in the Potala. In the 1950s, Heinrich Harrer, author of the bestselling book *Seven Years in Tibet*, described the interior of the Potala as "miserably dark and uncomfortable as a dwelling place."

But its function as a winter residence was far less important than the Potala's political and religious symbolism. For the construction of the Potala represented the rise in the 17th century of the Gelug, or "Yellow Hat" church of Tibetan Buddhism. One of four major Buddhist sects in Tibet, the Yellow Hats came to power with the aid of Mongol allies just north of the Tibetan Plateau near Amdo. In the year 1578, a Mongol chief named Altan Khan conferred the title of "Dalai Lama" upon his ally in the Yellow Hat church—this man styled himself as the 3rd Dalai Lama, retroactively applying the title to two of his predecessors. The title itself combines the Mongol word for "ocean"—or *dalai*—with the Tibetan word for a spiritual guru. In other words, the Dalai Lama is a spiritual advisor whose wisdom is as vast as the ocean—a curious metaphor for land-locked Mongols and Tibetans!

The Dalai Lama represents a unique innovation within the Tibetan interpretation of Buddhist doctrine. Instead of your next rebirth being determined indirectly through your accumulation of negative or positive karma, certain enlightened beings were believed to be able to control their next "emanation" and even choose the specific body in which their spirit would be reborn. This is known as the *trülku* system, or "controlled reincarnation." There are hundreds of reborn lamas throughout Tibet and Mongolia: the Dalai Lama is believed to be a recurring emanation of Avalokitesvara, while his chief rival the Panchen Lama is said to be an emanation of Amitabha Buddha.

Now, why does all this matter? Because the mortal vessels of each successive Dalai Lama were quite literally inscribed into the architecture of the Potala Palace. The White Palace was built first, in 1648, by the 5th Dalai Lama, who consolidated the authority of the Yellow Hat church with the help of his Mongol allies. This part of the Potala is mostly functional, befitting its original role as a marker of political ascendancy for the newly installed Dalai Lamas of the Yellow Hat church. It includes great halls for meetings, receptions, and political ceremonies, along with residences for the Dalai Lama and his entourage. Since outside access to these rooms has always been heavily restricted and photography is not allowed, the interior is not well documented—though it is said to be covered by Buddhist murals and paintings over every square inch.

By contrast, we have a somewhat better idea of what the interior of the Red Palace looks like. Built about 50 years after the White Palace following the death of the 5th Dalai Lama, the Red Palace was constructed in order to house his mortal remains. Over the next two and a half centuries, it would gradually expand to accommodate the remains of all but one of the next eight

Dalai Lamas to pass away. Their final resting places are indicated by the seven golden roofs that rise above the Red Palace, each one placed over a funerary chapel inside. Like the Jokhang rooftops, which are also placed over the most sacred interior chapels, these are built in the Chinese style, with three-foot high gilded stone lions on their tips.

The most lavish funerary chapel is the one that was built for Thubten Gyatso, the 13th Dalai Lama, who died in 1933. Completed in 1936, it consists of three floors, each of which is smothered in brightly colored banners, murals, and *thangkas*. The centerpiece of this chapel is the stupa. Built in the half-dome, half-pagoda style typical of the Himalayan region, the 13th Dalai Lama's stupa is 42 feet tall—so tall that the golden roof above had to be raised to accommodate it! It is said to be covered in one ton of gilded gold and adorned with more than 10,000 precious stones. Perhaps it was stupas like these that inspired the old Chinese name for Tibet: *Xizang*, or "Western Treasury." Inside the stupa, like all stupas throughout Asia, are the remains of a sacred figure. In this case, it is the mummified remains of the 13th Dalai Lama himself, desiccated with salts and covered in gold. Though most Tibetans once practiced a form of sky burial—exposing a corpse to be picked clean by scavengers—the bodies of the Dalai Lama held far too much political and religious symbolism to be consigned to the elements, and are thus preserved inside the Potala Palace.

Now, despite the fact that the 13th Dalai Lama is literally enshrined inside the Potala Palace, he and his living successor actually felt far more at home in their summer residence: the Norbulingka, or "Jewel Park." Spread out over about 100 acres, the Norbulingka is located a little over a mile southwest from the Potala Palace. In 1755, the 7th Dalai Lama commissioned its first buildings after a dip in one of its springs cured his foot disease. Ever since then, the Dalai Lama and his court would relocate here sometime in mid-March, before returning to the Potala in October. The grounds were pleasant: they included ponds, pavilions, gardens, palaces, temples, and flora and fauna from throughout the Himalayas. According to a 19th century British visitor, the park even had a Bengal tiger! Though today a public park, the Norbulingka was originally restricted to the Dalai Lama's inner circle, and it was protected by two sets of walls—the innermost one reaching up to 12 feet high. Once inside, however, the Tibetan elite could gather nuts and pick fruit, feed the fish, enjoy an opera performance, admire peacocks, and drink yak butter tea—all the while still managing to attend to affairs of state.

They could also play games. The Tibet Museum, which opened its doors in 1999, preserves a remarkable *thangka* from the early 20th century that was once used as a game board inside the Norbulingka. Known as the *Salam Namshak*, or "Exhibition of Grounds and Paths," it was one of the few games that Buddhist monks were allowed to play. Four feet tall and two and half feet wide, it features a map of the Buddhist cosmos and the steps one must take to reach enlightenment. Using a six-sided die, the player navigates through 84 circles or squares, each of which represents a horrific underworld, a pleasurable heaven, or one of the various paths that lead to spiritual liberation. Not surprisingly, enlightenment is hard to reach, and the game can last for hours on end, with raucous applause and groans from spectator monks. The first monk to reach enlightenment receives a prize of sweets—a very worldly analogy for the otherworldly delights of the Buddhist heavens.

The Norbulingka provided the backdrop for some of the most enjoyable moments in the life of the Dalai Lama and his entourage. But it was also a place of tragedy. After all, it was here, in March 1959, that the 14th Dalai Lama became convinced that he was about to be abducted by Chinese Communist authorities. In the ensuing chaos surrounding his flight from Tibet, the Norbulingka was severely damaged by artillery and gunfire. Like all three of our sacred sites of

Tibet, it has been heavily restored in recent decades and most of its surviving antiquities removed to the Tibet Museum downtown. But none of this seems to deter the tens of thousands of wide-eyed pilgrims and tourists who make the distant journey into Lhasa each year. Though the political identity of modern Tibet may be a hotly contested subject, the temples and palaces of Tibetan Buddhism continue to inspire both piety and admiration among those lucky enough to see them. Much like our oversized board game for monks, once we pass through the gates of the Jokhang, Potala, or Norbulingka, the politics of the mundane world give way to the promise of a brighter future.

Late Imperial Officialdom

You've just placed first in the imperial exams in Beijing and earned a *jinshi* 進士 degree. You are eagerly awaiting your audience with the emperor and wondering where in the empire you will be posted. Very likely you represent the crowning achievement of several generations of upward social mobility first begun by your grandfather or great-grandfather, who was likely no stranger to the fields. But you were privileged, even if the rest of your family suffered for the sake of the privilege you enjoyed. All the family resources were funneled toward your education. Almost certainly you were the eldest son of your parents, though there is a faint possibility that you outperformed your older brothers. If your own parents were not fabulously wealthy, then all your sisters probably worked from a very young age to contribute to your education. If your parents were somewhat well off, however, your sisters likely had their feet bound at age five and were subsequently groomed to secure a desirable marriage partner that would further the family's ambitions. The ideal son-in-law that your parents had in mind for your sister's husband was someone like you: a recent successful graduate of the civil service exams, entitled to an official post and lifetime employment in the empire. Because several generations of your family and ancestors have toiled and sacrificed for you to have the opportunity to succeed, you will not neglect your filial duties to redirect all your future wealth back to them. You are now the golden goose of the family and will wield immeasurable power and influence over the fate of all of its members.

You may never see your hometown again, unless your parents remain there and you are obliged to return for the two years of mourning upon their deaths (very likely, however, your newfound wealth has enabled you to move them to a larger home in the provincial capital or even to a townhouse in Beijing). The "law of avoidance" (*huibi* 迴避) stipulates that no official can ever be posted to their home province, or even within several hundred miles of the border of that province. This is designed to ensure that officials cannot collaborate with local gentry back home to further their own economic and political interests at the expense of the throne. Part of becoming a member of the political elite is subscribing to an imperial ethos of impartiality and cosmopolitanism. You will work alongside people who come from all regions of the empire and speak different languages than you. You can only communicate with one another through the standardized version of northern Chinese spoken in Beijing, which is very likely a second language for you. If you are serving one of the larger northern hybrid states (Tang, Yuan, or Qing), you will frequently bump shoulders with men from other ethnic backgrounds, such as Mongols and Manchus, who serve in the bureaucracy far out of proportion to their demographic numbers. You will work with eunuchs as well, who, like Mongols and Manchus, did not need to take the same competitive examination system that you did in order to obtain government service. You probably resent and look down upon the eunuchs, but accept the Manchus and Mongols as social and intellectual equals, provided they have some familiarity with the Chinese classics and subscribe to the same civilizational and cultural ideals as do you. Because of the law of avoidance, you will be a stranger and outsider in every single job you will ever hold, unless you eventually succeed in obtaining a coveted central government post in Beijing and decide to relocate your entire family there. As a magistrate posted to the provinces, you oversee a large staff of clerks and runners of various educational backgrounds, who manage the day-to-day affairs of the locality. You probably distrust your underlings, since they are natives to the region and have every incentive to pursue their own organizational and financial interests without the interference of the central government authority which you represent. But since you will only

remain in any given post for no more than the maximum allotted span of three years—usually far less, perhaps one to two years—there is only limited time to leave your mark on local administration.

You identify much more closely with other men like you: the rulers of the empire. For that is the chief distinction made by most political elites in East Asian states: not necessarily among a finely graded hierarchy of economic classes, but more simply between the rulers and the ruled. In your writings, you often refer to your own exclusive club of "rulers" with the phrase "people like us" (*wubei* 吾輩 or *wobei* 我輩), understood to be a class apart from everyone else. Though you have very little opportunity to interact with your professional equals—unless, of course, you are posted to Beijing or a provincial capital—you all partake of a common elite culture, rooted in the language of the Confucian classics (akin to Biblical references in the West), the Warring States philosophers (think of the Greek and Roman classics), and other canonical texts. You all read the *Beijing Gazette*, a bulletin published by officials in the capital with the goal of distributing important policy decisions, political debates, and gossip to other officials throughout the empire. You live a relatively lonely life, cut off from people like yourself, and often working at great distances from your family. As one famous official from the eighteenth century, Chen Hongmou, described his situation: "I have been in active official service now for twenty years, during which time I have hardly ever enjoyed the warm affection of home and family. This is, unfortunately, the way it must be; those like us who are determined to make something of themselves inevitably face such a situation."

Nevertheless, you seize every opportunity you have to further the interests of your own family. You finance the creation and codification of a fictive genealogy linking your ancestors to some august personality of the distant past, create generational Chinese characters for future generations of children to follow (e.g., all boys born in the next generation will contain as one of two characters in their given name *bing* 炳, and all boys from the next generation will likewise adopt the character *xiong* 雄, etc.), and finance the construction and maintenance of an ancestral temple in your home province. Though your first and only legal marriage was arranged by your parents to further the family interests as they were perceived at the time, you will still arrange strategic unions with concubines from lesser families whose resources may prove useful. And, in the end, you feel that you rightly deserve such rewards and honors. Despite your belief, rooted in Mencian optimism, that all people contain within them an "innate goodness" (*tianliang* 天良) and the potential to one day become like you, the fact is that you are convinced that your current success is the result of two things: 1) the labor and virtuous hard work of your ancestors, which is rightly your inheritance and yours alone; and 2) your own virtue and perseverance. Much like the Mandate of Heaven concept, your very success has validated your view of whether you deserve that success or not. If the peasants are virtuous and work hard like you and your ancestors presumably did, then they too can one day raise a son who may become an official.

As a county magistrate—the post destined for most graduates of the exams—you are overwhelmed with the amount of work assigned to you. You have responsibility for anywhere from tens of thousands to a million people, but little formal government support for carrying out your duties. This is government on the cheap, which every state throughout history attempted to perfect prior to the Industrial Revolution and subsequent impetus to squeeze unprecedented amounts of resources from the people. By the late imperial era in East Asia (the Ming and Qing dynasties), the central problem was an explosion in population overtaking the pace at which the central government was willing to create additional magistrate posts to administer this population. This forced local magistrates like yourself to implement an unwritten code of "fees"

at nearly every single intersection of state and society. Most people rightly feared contact with the government, because it usually meant "fees" of some sort would be charged. And this was in addition to taxes, which the state always strived to secure.

Practically speaking, one the most common jobs that a magistrate would devote himself to was reclamation or expansion of cultivable agricultural land (*kaiken* 開墾). Officials saw it as a fundamental duty both to increase the population at every turn (something that would be taken as an article of faith well into the Mao years) and to find new sources of food for that very same population. Reclamation accomplished both of these aims. By the late imperial era, in the absence of technological advances, the new targets for reclamation were upland regions and areas on the margin of *huaxia* culture. Reclamation had the added bonus not only of providing more food and tax revenue for local governments, but could also lure large amounts of Chinese migrants from the heartland for settlement projects in frontier regions. In finding the labor and capital to finance initial reclamation projects, magistrates had to work closely with the local gentry of his jurisdiction. Most of the gentry were like miniature and less impressive versions of the magistrate himself: families of some means who employed their own army of servants and tenants and were actively trying to raise their sons and daughters to either pass the civil service exams or secure a favorable marriage to an even more prominent family—however, they haven't yet been as successful as your family in obtaining such things! There was a large degree of common literary vocabulary among the magistrate and the local gentry, and they probably both harbored some of the elite cosmopolitan ethos that comes with being widely traveled (gentry families would travel often due to their commercial interests, though perhaps not as widely as the magistrate himself, who traversed the entire empire). Good relations with the local gentry were essential: without them, almost nothing could get done in an age of small government and light taxes. It was the gentry who owned the surplus amounts of grain that needed to be dumped onto the market in times of high prices or famine, it was they who held the local capital and property necessary to facilitate public works projects, and it was they who could cobble together the human labor necessary to do the dirty work for any number of construction works. Consider the legal cases in "Lan Dingyuan's Casebook:" remember how the magistrate, Lan Dingyuan, declines to prosecute the perpetrators in one case after he realizes the culprits are actually the sons of prominent gentry families in his jurisdiction? Maintaining good relations with their fathers was far more important than bringing their playboy sons to justice.

An enormous amount of the magistrate's time would be consumed by the local court system. Every magistrate deplored the "excessive litigation" that the courts seem to encourage among their subjects, but no magistrate ever moved to limit the function or roles of the courts. They were deemed far too useful in three critical respects:

1. The alternative to having petty disputes arbitrated by the state was resort by the locals to private force and communal vendettas, something that would quickly undermine the stability of the state.

2. Meditation of local disputes was a political act—it offered a viable presence of the state in the daily lives of its subjects (again, no small feat in the era before big government) and showed that the state was responsive to its people's concerns. Also, it was a hegemonizing act: by filing a complaint with the state, such plaintiff implicitly acknowledges the legitimacy of the state and its power to arbitrate the people's affairs.

3. It was an opportunity to instruct the people on the preferred moral orthodoxy of the state: popular understandings of right and wrong, legal and illegal, were molded by participation (and subsequent street talk) in the courtroom. It was a teachable moment in which the state imparted its desired civic values in its subjects. Due to the costs involved in every court case, every verdict and its reverberations were known and felt throughout the district.

As an official agent of the state, your role is far more lofty than that assigned to lowly clerks. You are to bring about the moral enlightenment of the people by improving their levels of civilization and material wealth. All "rulers" thought of "the ruled" as "stupid people" (*yumin* 愚民) who were trapped in an unreflective cycle of material desires, uninhibited impulses, and profligate tendencies. The customs of these "stupid people" were always viewed as heterodox and in need of correction by officials, who attempted to implement cultural conformity across the empire. It was the job of self-proclaimed reflective, rational, and restrained "gentlemen" (*junzi* 君子) to show them the light and reform their immoral and unorthodox ways. This process was captured by the idea of "transformation" (*hua* 化), with the goal being transformation toward "civilization" or "culture" (*wenhua* 文化). One of the best ways to do this was through the construction and maintenance of schools, which most magistrates attempted to control. Schools were invaluable emblems of your commitment to much more than mere utilitarian administration: they showed that you cared about the people's moral character as well, the sort of thing that separated "us" from beasts and barbarians. As one official put it when discussing the function of schools, "Only by educating the people on a routine basis can we officials avoid having to subject them to criminal punishments when they err. Is this not why we are called 'the fathers and mothers' of the people?"

One of the final tasks of a local official was to attend to the spiritual well-being of his district. In practice, this meant he needed to perform sacrifices and rituals to all the local nature gods and city gods, which would vary with each location. Very often this "Confucian gentleman," raised to see himself as "rational" in a way that the common people were not, would look down on these popular beliefs and criticize the "canine" devotion of the masses toward them. But he still saw it as his duty to "appease" the people by speaking on their behalf to their own gods. Thus magistrates often had to travel to local mountains and lakes and make offerings to the animistic gods of those natural features—mumbling all the while about how he was only doing this because the "stupid people" had not yet been reformed and educated. Many Confucian officials also looked down on Buddhist and Daoist ideas, but not all of them. More likely, each official subscribed to an eclectic mix of particular Confucian philosophers and texts, and certain metaphysical or cosmic ideas in Buddhist and Daoist ideologists. It is difficult to generalize, however, as many officials also found much to be admired in Buddhism and Daoism. Of the ancient Confucian philosophers, however, almost everyone favored Mencian ideas to some extent—and it was Mencius' interpretation of Confucius that was enshrined as ideological orthodoxy in the civil service examinations.

The Forbidden City

In the spring of the year 1644, the emperor of China hiked up a hill just north of the Forbidden City in Beijing. As he reached the summit of Prospect Hill, he had a clear view of the imperial city beneath him. But on this day, his gaze would have been fixed on the smoke and fire that rose up from distant quarters of the capital. It was April 24, and all that smoke and fire was the handiwork of peasant rebels who were about to breach the walls of the Forbidden City. Zhu Youjian, the seventeenth and soon-to-be last emperor of the Ming dynasty, climbed back down the hill and gathered the women of his harem around him. Unwilling to let any of them be captured alive, Zhu made a clumsy attempt to slice them to death. Having failed to kill his family, the emperor then climbed back up the hill and hung himself from the rafters of the Pavilion of Imperial Longevity. It was an ironic place for an emperor to die, much less witness the end of an entire dynasty.

Surprisingly, though, this would not be the last time that Prospect Hill would serve as the backdrop for a dramatic fall from political grace. On October 6, 1976, more than three centuries later, Jiang Qing, the widow of Communist revolutionary Mao Zedong, decided to spend the day picking fruit on Prospect Hill, when she was arrested and put on trial for her role in the Cultural Revolution. If it was any solace, both Jiang Qing and Zhu Youjian enjoyed the best view in all of Beijing before the end came—and it is a vantage point still enjoyed by millions of exhausted tourists who make the hike up Prospect Hill each year. From the summit, you can see the defining features of the Forbidden City below: a series of rectangular walled enclosures laid out on a north-south axis, all surrounded by a moat that is 13 feet deep and 175 feet across. Spread out over 178 acres are more than a hundred buildings containing some 900 rooms, nearly all of which conform to a standard exterior color scheme: grey cobblestone courtyards, vermilion walls, and golden-tiled roofs.

Now, it's easy to get lured into complacency by the architectural uniformity of the Forbidden City. Many visitors, including myself many years ago, come away from their visit a little bit disappointed. At first—and second and third—glance, the buildings all look superficially alike, and the rich history behind them can be overwhelming for the casual tourist to digest. Unlike other great monuments or natural wonders that wear their beauty and history on their sleeves, the Forbidden City doesn't express its majesty by reaching for the stars. Its halls and palaces aren't larger than life—you won't feel like an ant walking through its courtyards and gateways! Instead, the architects of the Forbidden City pursued a vision in which Chinese models of cultural harmony are endlessly replicated, with the goal of placing the emperor at the center of the cosmos, between Heaven and Earth. According to Liang Sicheng, a prominent Chinese architect, "the individual buildings, especially from a structural view … are unremarkable. But as a composition of the grand plan, there is nothing comparable to it in the world: it is a grand plan on the grandest scale."

It's also really old. In fact, the Forbidden City just celebrated its 600-year anniversary in 2020—a remarkable feat for densely packed wooden structures; though, as you might expect, many of them have burnt down and been rebuilt multiple times. In 1987, in recognition of its status as the pre-eminent architectural symbol of imperial China, the Forbidden City was designated a UNESCO World Heritage site. With such great milestones come great expectations—and our goal for this lesson is to chart a unique path through the Forbidden City, one that allows us to appreciate its complex history and design on a more intimate scale.

But first, let's orient ourselves geographically. There are two major rivers in China: the Yellow River in the north, and the Yangtze River in the south. In more than 3,000 years of recorded history in China, the capital of every single significant empire has been based somewhere near the Yellow River in the north, even after the majority of the population migrated south to the Yangtze River delta during the first millennium AD. There is a simple reason for this: the generally flat terrain of northern China is what some historians call an exposed zone. Exposed to what? Well, the nomads of Inner Asia. In fact, most Chinese dynasties weren't nearly as "Chinese" as you might think. Roughly half the time, China was ruled wholly or in part by northern nomadic peoples such as the Mongols and Manchus, who used their military advantages on horseback to roam over vast distances and conquer the fertile agricultural regions to the south. It is also why many dynasties in China kept trying to build imposing walls along their northern peripheries: to provide a man-made barrier where the terrain had *not* provided a natural barrier.

So the capitals of major dynasties in China tended to be based in the north: this is because Chinese dynasties needed to keep a close watch on the northern frontier, while conquering nomads wanted to retain close ties to their homeland. But why Beijing specifically? After all, the founder of the Ming dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang, had decreed that the capital should be in Nanjing—in the south. But when the emperor died in 1398, his fourth son, Zhu Di, contested the succession and seized the throne from his nephew. Significantly, Zhu Di's base of power was in Beijing, where his father had ordered him to keep a vigilant watch over the Mongol threat. Now emperor, Zhu Di embarked on an ambitious program to erase all memory of the old capital in Nanjing as well as his own bloody ascent to power. To seal the deal, he commissioned a new palace in the new capital: the Forbidden City.

Completed in the year 1420, the Forbidden City served as the primary residence for 24 emperors over two different dynasties. For more than five hundred years, it was the backdrop for imperial ceremonies and rituals, palace intrigue, and the routine business of government. But don't be fooled by its impressive moat or forbidding walls—for the Forbidden City was no fortress. In fact, over the course of its lengthy history, the Forbidden City has been broached by invading armies on numerous occasions. The most important breach occurred in 1644, when Manchu armies from the north took advantage of the suicide of the last Ming emperor to establish their own dynasty: the Qing. This means that the history of the Forbidden City is split almost evenly between two very different types of dynasties: a Chinese one with ancestral roots in the south, and a Manchu one with ancestral roots in the Inner Asian steppe to the north. And we will see this change in leadership reflected in the evolving function of many of the buildings inside the Forbidden City. It is also reflected in its plaques and signs, with many important inscriptions written in both Chinese and Manchu.

And the Ming-Qing transition of 1644 was by no means the last assault on the gates of the Forbidden City. As we hike down Prospect Hill and cross the moat from the north, we find ourselves face to face with the Gate of Divine Prowess. It was here, during the turbulent decade known as the Cultural Revolution, that several groups of young Red Guards responded to Chairman Mao's call to "bombard the headquarters" of the Chinese Communist Party. One particularly zealous group of teenagers attempted to ram through the Gate of Divine Prowess with a truck. When that failed, they decided to hoist a banner over the gate that read: "Palace of Blood and Tears." A few Red Guards did manage to make it inside, where they subjected resident staff to struggle sessions and replaced old plaques with Mao portraits and quotes from his "Little Red Book."

But once we pass through the Gate of Divine Prowess, all that recent upheaval is quickly forgotten—for we have entered the Imperial Garden. Sharing space with the garden is a Daoist temple with a statue of a powerful god inside. This is the Hall of Imperial Peace. Together, this garden and its Daoist temple represent some of the quintessential elements of Chinese culture. Daoism, for instance, is China's only major indigenous religion, with a focus on achieving harmony with the natural world and learning how to harness its mysterious powers for the pursuit of health and longevity. In the attics of several buildings in the Forbidden City, for instance, we find evidence of Daoist rituals intended to neutralize the ever-present threat of fire: these include tablets inscribed with the names of various Daoist deities, along with a rare fungus, the *lingzhi* mushroom, which was believed to aid the pursuit of immortality when ingested.

The Imperial Garden was also inspired by interactions between the Chinese and nature—particularly when millions fled the war-torn and overpopulated lands of the Yellow River valley during the second half of the first millennium and took refuge in the south. Instead of the arid plains and dusty plateaus of the North China Plain, Chinese migrants to the south found a humid wonderland of lakes, rivers, mountains, wetlands, and tropical flora. Wealthy landlords and officials began to demonstrate their knowledge and appreciation of this unfamiliar landscape by recreating it in enclosed artificial gardens. Similarly, the Imperial Garden in the Forbidden City is filled with imitation hills, miniature streams, manicured plants, elegant kiosks, and pavilions—the perfect place for cultivated gentlemen to drink tea, write poetry, and reflect on man's place in the cosmos.

Other elements of the Forbidden City also draw upon the philosophical and cultural foundations of Chinese civilization. The most obvious is in the very name of the palace itself: *Zijincheng* literally means "the Forbidden Walled City of the Pole Star." This is a reference to the ancient ideal of a virtuous monarch. According to the 6th century BC philosopher Confucius, a virtuous monarch is like the Pole Star, which remains constant as all the other celestial bodies revolve around it. Then we also have the concept of *fengshui*, or the harmonious alignment of man with the latent powers of nature as embodied in the landscape. In fact, *fengshui* is directly responsible for the construction of Prospect Hill, where we started our tour. That's right, I said *construction*. For Prospect Hill is an artificial mound that is composed of the dirt and rock dug up from the moat. According to the guiding precepts of *fengshui*, a manmade structure such as the Forbidden City will only be safe if it has water in front and a protective mountain behind it. Prospect Hill is that mountain, while an artificial canal known as the River of Golden Waters in the southernmost courtyard provides the water.

From the Imperial Garden, let's exit to the southwest and make our way through what is known as the Inner Court. Now, the most fundamental spatial division in the Forbidden City is between the Inner and Outer Court. The Outer Court is more or less the southern half of the precinct, while the Inner Court covers most of the northern half. The chief difference between the two lies not in appearance, but rather in scale and function. The halls of the Outer Court are much more grandiose and imposing, with vast courtyards surrounding them on all sides. But no one lived in the Outer Court—and women were a rare site there. This is because the Outer Court served as the backdrop for most of the formal rituals and imperial audiences of the empire—as we'll see when we reach the southern half of the Forbidden City.

The Inner Court in the northern half, however, was much more intimate and personalized: here, among narrow walkways, tiny courtyards, private gardens, and even multistory opera theaters lived the emperor, his women, and an army of eunuchs to serve them.

As we stroll through the dense living quarters of the northwestern section of the Inner Court, we'll catch a glimpse of the Western Six Palaces. Along with the Eastern Six Palaces, these residences would have served as the homes of high-ranking consorts and empress dowagers. There were eight ranks of imperial consorts, and these ranks determined every aspect of their lives in the Forbidden City—the size of their residence, their number of servants, the quality of their food, and many other markers of status. Most exalted of all, however, were the empress dowagers, who were either mothers or widows of emperors. They outranked even the emperor himself, who kowtowed only to her and Heaven.

The Palace of Compassion and Tranquility, just southwest of the Western Six Palaces, was home to one of these powerful women in the middle of the seventeenth century. Her name was Bumbutai, and she was the Mongol consort of the founding emperor of the Qing dynasty. As the mother of the second emperor and grandmother of the third, she wielded enormous influence at court. But in a deeply patriarchal society, this power had to be exercised in subtle ways. So Bumbutai, like most imperial women in a position of influence, chose to funnel her resources into religious patronage. For instance, she transformed the building just behind the Palace of Compassion and Tranquility into a Great Buddha Hall, and it remained a center of Buddhist worship for centuries after her death.

In addition to Chinese Buddhism, the architecture of the Inner Court also found room to accommodate the worship of Tibetan Buddhism. In a courtyard just north of the Palace of Compassion and Tranquility is the Pavilion of Rain and Flowers. Now the most complete Tibetan tantric temple in China, the Pavilion of Rain and Flowers can be identified by its distinctive bronze roof. Though the Ming imperial court was an eager patron of Tibetan Buddhism, they were unable to extend their political influence into Tibet. But the Pavilion of Rain and Flowers did serve as a religious symbol of Chinese imperial ambition to control Tibet—an ambition that was largely realized in the 20th century.

So far, we've visited three of the most important religious shrines in the Forbidden City. But there are some 26 of them in all, each once filled with incense, candles, and incantations. Perhaps the most unique religious monument, however, was a building that was never intended to serve a religious function. To get there, let's head back through the Western Six Palaces to a large courtyard just south of the Imperial Garden. This courtyard contains the Three Rear Palaces, which mirror on a smaller scale the three grand halls of the Outer Court to the south. The furthest north of the Three Rear Palaces is the Palace of Earthly Tranquility. During the Ming dynasty, this palace was the primary residence of the empress, but under the Qing it was transformed into a space for worshipping the unique Manchu gods of the royal family. From the late 17th century onward, it would have been adorned with bows, quivers, and drums. Not only that, but it would have been staffed by Manchu shamans who ritually roasted a boar in specially made pits. But you need to be careful when roasting boars in the Forbidden City: the Palace of Earthly Tranquility burnt down and had to be rebuilt a total of four times.

Now let's head to the next building in this courtyard: the Hall of Union. A small square structure, the Hall of Union was where the empress and top consorts assembled once every year to perform the rites of sericulture, or silk production. This was the feminine counterpart to the masculine rites of rice agriculture. And as usual, the activities undertaken by women are confined to the Inner Court. So what about the men? Well, the only "real man" who could live in the Inner Court was the emperor himself. He was, of course, attended by thousands of eunuchs who also spent their days and nights throughout the Forbidden City. In fact, historians estimate that the Ming court employed as many as 20,000 eunuchs! The Qing, who overthrew the Ming

and regarded eunuch interference in politics as one of their downfalls, reduced the number of eunuchs to 1/10th that of their predecessor.

As for the Son of Heaven himself, the first thirteen emperors of the Ming dynasty lived just south of the Hall of Union—in the Hall of Heavenly Purity. Then, early in the morning on November 27, 1542, more than a dozen women succeeded in tying up the sadistic Jiajing emperor and attempted to strangle him. They failed, and suffered the ultimate punishment: *lingchi* 凌遲, also known as "the death of a thousand cuts." The emperor, badly shaken, vowed never to sleep in the Hall of Heavenly Purity again. But it was still used for some formal ceremonies involving the emperor. Perhaps the most famous was that of the Yongzheng emperor, who reigned in the middle of the 18th century. In an attempt to prevent endless scheming over the succession process, the Yongzheng emperor wrote down the name of his chosen heir on two separate pieces of paper: one was kept on his own person, and the other was hidden in the Hall of Heavenly Purity.

So if Ming and Qing emperors no longer felt safe in the Hall of Heavenly Purity, where did they live? For the answer, let's head southwest to the adjacent Hall of Mental Cultivation. A small, underwhelming building, this hall was chosen mostly for its strategic location. Nestled on the eastern edge of the Inner Court, it afforded easy access to both the women's quarters to the west and north as well as to the grand halls of the Outer Court to the southeast. These destinations were served by three gates, each with a very specific purpose. One southern gate led to the Outer Court and the formal business of the empire, which we'll see in a second. Two northern gates, however, granted access to the women's quarters: one to the Empress Dowager, and one to the emperor's consorts. These separate passageways were purposely segregated so that the Empress Dowager could not keep tabs on which consort the emperor had chosen to favor.

Now I think we're ready to walk in the footsteps of the emperor himself. Let's recreate a day in the life of one of the longest reigning emperors in Chinese history: the Qianlong emperor, who ruled for more than 60 years from the 1730s to the 1790s. On any given day, he likely would have woken up around four in the morning, after having spent the night alone in his bed—any consort or concubine he had chosen to spend the previous evening with would have returned to her own quarters before bedtime. Once awake, the emperor lit a candle—this was a signal to the eunuchs outside that the curfew had ended and that the emperor was ready for a tub of hot water. After cleaning himself up, the emperor made his first stop at the Palace of Earthly Tranquility. There he listened to the shamanic dirges of his Manchu ancestors and witnessed the roasting of a boar, before being carried in a sedan chair to the West Flourishing Gate in the far southwestern corner of the palace. Here he exited the Forbidden City and entered what are today known as the Lake Palaces. First built by the Mongol Yuan dynasty in the 13th century, the Lake Palaces are a series of pavilions and halls situated along the scenic shores of Zhongnanhai—the Central and Southern Lakes. Here, in the Studio of Convivial Delights, Qianlong ate his breakfast: some 18 dishes spread out over four tables, with four eunuchs attending to his every need.

After breakfast, the rest of the day was devoted to work. First, the emperor would probably return to the Hall of Mental Cultivation or the Palace of Heavenly Purity in the Inner Court, where he would read government documents and meet with his top military and civil officials. But sooner or later, he would make his way to the Hall of Supreme Harmony in the Outer Court. This is where the formal and most solemn business of the empire took place. With the largest dimensions of any building in the empire, the Hall of Supreme Harmony is the most

impressive and imposing structure in the Forbidden City. It stands about 114 feet tall and spans a width of nearly 200 feet. Along with two other smaller halls behind it, the Hall of Supreme Harmony sits on a three-tiered marble platform that symbolizes Mt. Sumeru—the Buddhist mountain at the center of the cosmos. The emperor had his own special stairway for this platform, one that only he could cross over in a sedan chair. Known as the "cinnabar stairway," it is a single block of inclined marble that weighs 250 tons. Carvings of dragons playing with pearls decorate its surface. Scholars estimate that nearly 6,000 soldiers and 10,000 laborers were required to transport this slab of marble from a quarry about 30 miles away.

Now, the Hall of Supreme Harmony was the primary venue for all major imperial rituals and ceremonies: these included the emperor's birthday, his enthronement, audiences with foreign delegations, and the final round of the civil service examination. The setting was ideal for mass assembly. The courtyard just south of the Hall of Supreme Harmony covers seven and a half acres, or just a little more than two baseball fields. But the Hall of Supreme Harmony, while impressive, is not the only building in this courtyard. Immediately behind it to the north is the smaller Hall of Central Harmony, where the emperor could rest or change his clothing between audiences. And behind that is the somewhat larger Hall of Preserved Harmony, which hosted large banquets for foreign dignitaries and various other celebrations.

Sometime in the late afternoon or early evening, the never-ending business of tending to the empire finally came to an end. When the workday was over, the emperor would likely retire to one of his pleasure gardens back inside the Inner Court. We know that Qianlong favored the Studio of Exhausted Diligence in the northeastern corner. The name of the garden says it all: this is where you go after a long day of exhausting diligence at work! This particular garden complex has been extensively renovated in recent years, so it gives visitors a pretty good idea of how the emperor spent his leisure hours. It includes picturesque pavilions, manmade ponds, manicured trees and hills, and even an indoor theater.

But we're going to pretend that today is a special day, so we're not going to let Qianlong retire to his gardens. For on March 12, 1760, there was still some state business he had to attend to. That was the day when Qianlong reviewed a parade of soldiers who had just returned from a grand military conquest on the northwestern frontiers of the empire. The preferred staging grounds for such occasions was just south of the Meridian Gate. Now the starting point for most tourists who enter the complex, the Meridian Gate is the tallest structure in the Forbidden City, with three passageways at ground level. On this particular day, Qianlong would have assumed his place at the center of the parapets on top of the gate and taken in the sight below. His troops had just returned from the Muslim lands of Central Asia, and placed by the emperor's side was a casket containing two left ears of the final Muslim belligerents. And with these grisly trophies in hand, Qianlong could finally retire to the Inner Court, having unknowingly laid the foundations for the modern-day boundaries of the People's Republic of China.

The twentieth century was not kind to the Forbidden City. In the year 1900, it was invaded and plundered by eight foreign empires, who auctioned off many of its treasures. After the 1911 revolution and abdication of the last Qing emperor, most modern Chinese statesmen viewed it as an unwelcome reminder of feudal China and the political and cultural stagnation that they blamed for China's repeated defeats at the hands of foreign powers.

After the Chinese Communists came to power in 1949, Chairman Mao even considered various proposals to demolish the Forbidden City and replace it with modern highways or Stalinist-style architecture. But none of these rulers could ever quite bring themselves to tear its ancient buildings down. Instead, China's new leaders took up residence in Zhongnanhai, or the

Lake Palaces located just outside the western walls where the Qianlong emperor used to eat his daily breakfast. Today, Zhongnanhai is practically a synonym for the highest levels of Communist Party leadership. This seems to be a metaphor for China's newfound embrace of its imperial past: wary of following directly in the footsteps of the emperors, they instead founded new organs of government in the shadow of their greatest imperial palace. Today the Forbidden City is a national museum. As such, it serves a very different purpose than before. That is, once quite literally forbidden to the Chinese people, today the Forbidden City is held up as the very emblem of the Chinese nation. No doubt the Qianlong emperor is rolling in his grave! But such is the inevitable fate of any building that manages to survive two dynasties, endless wars, a host of termites, endless roasting of boars, and a Communist revolution. To paraphrase the emperor's eunuchs when they greeted him each morning, "Long live the Forbidden City!"

Late Imperial Government

There were three main governing elements to the late imperial state. In this lesson we will focus on the Qing Empire (officially "The Great Qing," *da Qing guo* 大清國). The Qing (1644-1911) was the largest land empire in East Asian history, and its breadth and size constituted the benchmark by which its twentieth-century successors have measured their own geopolitical achievements. The Qing also formed the immediate model for the governments that exist in mainland China and Taiwan today, and every political elite of the twentieth and twenty-first century has had to deal with its geopolitical legacy.

The three components of the Qing state were: 1) the central government (*zhonggyang* 中央); 2) the inner provinces (*neisheng* 內省); and 3) the outer dependencies (*guanwai* 關外, literally "beyond the pass"). The central government, located in Beijing ever since the Yongle emperor moved the capital there during the early years of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) so he could better address the Mongol threat, oversaw an expansive empire characterized by a "dual administration." In short, the empire was conceptually and administratively divided between the second and third elements noted above: the eighteen or so "inner provinces" that constituted the agricultural heartland and provided nearly all of the material wealth, administrative expertise, and cultural knowledge necessary to run the rest of the empire; and the "outer dependencies" such as Manchuria (the homeland of the Manchu conquerors, today referred to as *dongbei san sheng* 東北三省, or the "three northeastern provinces"), Mongolia (divided into Inner and Outer Mongolia, the latter of which is now an independent state), Xinjiang (home to a large sedentary population of Turkic Uighurs and semi-nomadic Kazaks), and Tibet (loosely incorporated by the Qing state during the course of the eighteenth century, but never directly administered by Qing officials on the ground).

The central government was the political entity responsible for uniting these diverse realms together. In short, from a financial perspective, the outer dependencies were not a winning proposition. The reason they were conquered or otherwise incorporated into the Qing state was for strategic geopolitical concerns: first the Manchus allied with some of the eastern Mongol tribes to conquer the northern Han heartland, then they decided to continue westward to conquer all of Mongolia and Xinjiang once it was apparent that another federation of Mongols—the Jungar Empire—was hostile to the Qing state. As for Tibet? The Qing only sent its armies to Lhasa when the Jungar Mongols, adherents of Tibetan Yellow Hat Buddhism, attempted to seek refuge there. Thus, unless the emperors in Beijing perceived a geopolitical threat to their state there was no logical reason to expend armies and resources in bringing the non-Chinese peripheries to heel. Quite the contrary: well into the twentieth century and in some respects continuing on down to today, the regions of Xinjiang and Tibet have always constituted a net drain on central government resources. The financing of the Chinese state in these regions was undertaken via silver subsidies (*xiexiang* 協餉, literally "shared funds") redirected from the wealthier inner provinces. Furthermore, the types of civil and military servants sent to govern the outer dependencies were cut from a different ethnopolitical cloth as well: up until the late nineteenth century, it was customary only to send Manchu and Mongol officials to oversee these regions. Chinese officials, generally speaking, would only visit these regions if they were sent there in exile as punishment. The rationale behind this system was that Chinese officials, raised in the agricultural heartland, did not possess first-hand experience of the drastically different ecological, economic, and political norms that obtained outside the Chinese heartland. But Manchus and Mongols, presumably, did. As a result, the bureaucratic paperwork dealing with

the non-Chinese borderlands was—until the nineteenth century—often written in Manchu or Mongol, a fact that historians of late imperial China have only come to appreciate during the last two decades or so.

The disproportionate role of the numerically insignificant Manchus and Mongols in the late imperial state draws our attention to a crucial occupational category common to most states throughout the premodern world: dependent intermediaries. The people who comprise this category exhibit characteristics that reflect these two words precisely: they are at once utterly "dependent" on the state and sovereign they serve (a result of being cut off from their ethnocultural homeland and unlikely to return), and, as a result of this dependency, are uniquely suited to serve as an "intermediary" of the emperor to carry out sensitive tasks that the emperor would not trust to his regular officials. Dependent intermediaries are of generally of two types: 1) educated ethnocultural aliens; or 2) eunuchs. Educated ethnocultural aliens meant Manchus and Mongols during the late imperial state in East Asia, but in other contexts—say, the Russian Empire—they could be Germans, Jews, Tatars, or Armenians. These are usually a sort of diaspora population originally from an economically developed heartland who have emigrated far away from their home communities for whatever reason. Precisely because they can be assumed to harbor no particular loyalties to anyone in their new environment—and also because it will be very difficult for them to return to where they came from—they are deemed particularly useful by the rulers of various states. They carry out certain functions of government with exemplary aptitude, but are not viewed as posing the same sort of threat that a well-connected native of the region might pose.

The other type of dependent intermediary, common to many empires throughout world history, are eunuchs. Eunuchs, who underwent a painful and traumatic transformation discussed in one of our class lectures, serve a similar purpose as the educated ethnocultural outsiders, but obtain their position by a very different route, and usually serve a different type of ruler. The Manchus and Mongols were often affiliated with the ruling house that conquered the inner provinces, and irrevocably attached to the ruling house. Eunuchs were usually prisoners of war or destitute urbanites taken from the margins of society, who, after undergoing the necessary operation, could serve the emperor. Again, like the Manchus and Mongols, their entire livelihood depended upon the emperor's grace and goodwill, and if they lost that goodwill, they would have nowhere else to go. Thus they were considered unusually trustworthy and capable of carrying out sensitive tasks, much like the eunuch Zheng He was entrusted with during the sea voyages of the Yongle emperor. The last distinction between eunuchs and educated ethnocultural outsiders is that eunuchs tended to be far more numerous during Chinese-dominated states such as the Ming. This is because the smaller Chinese-dominated states did not contain many ethnocultural outsiders like the Manchus and Mongols. Thus if the emperor wanted a trustworthy counterweight to the Chinese officials who came through the civil service examination system, he turned to eunuchs. During the Ming, some historians estimate that as many as 20,000 eunuchs served the imperial state. The Qing, however, claiming as it did a vast array of ethnocultural human resources outside of the Chinese heartland, had far less need to employ eunuchs, and instead relied more on Manchus and Mongols. As a result, during the Qing, there were probably no more than 2,000 eunuchs in the imperial bureaucracy.

Working alongside, and often in considerable tension with, the dependent intermediaries were the civil service graduates, almost all of whom were the sons of Chinese gentry in the inner provinces (and among them, most were from the wealthy Jiangnan region, a fact that a few emperors tried to counterbalance with various affirmative action policies directed at some of the

poorer and more peripheral inner provinces). Civil service graduates were a much more homogenous interest group, coming as they did from similar social and cultural backgrounds. As a result, few emperors entirely trusted their corps of civil servants, assuming that they would champion local parochial interests over that of the throne. In all, there were approximately eighteen provinces in the Chinese heartland, each of which perhaps contained 7-13 prefectures, which in turn contained 5-6 counties. This meant that there were about 2,000 counties in the inner provinces at any given time, each of which was overseen by a single magistrate and his unofficial shadow bureaucracy of clerks and other underlings. In all, they oversaw the overwhelming majority of agricultural wealth in the empire, without which no government could operate. In order to keep tabs on this mass of officials, the emperor regularly adhered to the law of avoidance, and gave his provincial governors and governors-general (i.e., someone who oversees the governors of two provinces) the right to send memorials (communications to the emperor) directly to Beijing without any bureaucratic middlemen being allowed to read its contents. This "secret memorial system" (*zouzhe* 奏摺) provided the emperor and his exclusive "club" of some sixty governors and governors-general with the ability to shake up the lower levels of the civil bureaucracy whenever he deemed they were getting too complacent or unresponsive. These memorials now provide great entertainment for the historians who study them, as is evident in the following memorial from the famous mid-Qing emperor Qianlong:

> When you were serving the Board of Punishments you were an outstanding official. As soon as you were posted to the provinces, however, you take on the disgusting habits of indecisiveness and decadence. It is really detestable. You take your sweet time about sending in memorials, and there isn't a word of truth in them! You have really disappointed my trust in you, you ingrate of a thing!

The central government in Beijing was an enormous entity, and just as many officials served in its Boards (= departments) and other institutions as did in the provinces. These positions, which constituted the most important and influential posts in government, were often split between a Manchu or Mongol and his Han counterpart. There were also unofficial organizations condoned by the emperor, such as the famous Hanlin Academy, a sort of temporary holding pool for *jinshi* graduates of the exams for whom no appropriate government post had yet been found. While in the Hanlin Academy, one had free reign to debate and critique official government policy without any repercussions. Such scholars cherished their stay in the Hanlin Academy, for after they became ensconced in government positions they could no longer air their unfiltered opinions without fear of repercussions. The most important government organ during the Qing was the Grand Council (*junjichu* 軍機處), which was an informal military advisory group—off the books until the nineteenth century—composed of trusted Manchus and Mongols who advised the emperor on every matter of import.

There was no real equivalent to what diplomats in western Europe might think of as a "foreign affairs" department. This was because the guiding ideology of foreign affairs in East Asia was that, since the imperial state acknowledged no other political equals during times of unipolar rule, there was no need to manage foreign relations. Instead, relations with other political entities deemed inferior to the Chinese state were managed by what is often called "the tributary system," overseen by the Board of Rites (on the premise that subordinate political figures "paying tribute" to a superior political patriarch would do so according to established rites). This, of course, was simply an ideological gloss for a much more pragmatic reality. Peoples from Central Asia, Southeast Asia, Japan, Korea, and elsewhere agreed to kowtow to the emperor and acknowledge an inferior political status in exchange for the tax-free trade

opportunities that their caravans were granted and the political prestige that recognition by the emperor of China might bring back in their own home states. It was only in the late nineteenth century, under pressure from European states that were militarily superior to China, that the Qing finally did away with this tribute system and adopted a department of foreign affairs modeled on that of Western governments. In this as in so many other areas, it is no longer possible by the late nineteenth century to view the Chinese state in isolation from global developments in Europe.