From Yao to Mao: A Thematic Overview of Chinese History

CHINESE CULTURE AND THE HUMANITIES: A FACULTY DEVELOPMENT SEMINAR FOR WABASH COLLEGE AND DEPAUW UNIVERSITY

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Themes in *longue durée* Chinese history & historiography

- History: Geography and language: how to rule a landmass (history);
- Historiography: how to define a diverse historical experience
- The myth of “eternal China” versus continual adaptation, political arguments over correct economic, diplomatic, cultural policies
Structural conditions of empire

- Size of landmass, diversity of peoples
- Military designed to protect North & Western frontiers—only transforms to coastal orientation in 19th c.
- Politics focused on person of the emperor, but bureaucracy often held more practical power
- Elite families desired to join the bureaucracy and gain political power
- Required to accept state-supported cultural practices
Pre-Imperial Period
early “Chinese” societies
• What is the difference between a “culture” and a “dynasty”? 
• How are early cultures / dynasties defined as Chinese? 
• “Xia-Shang-Zhou Chronology Project,” 1996-2000: trying to find scholarly consensus on dating and attribution issues; largely fails
Yao 堯, Shun 舜, Yu 禹

- Cosmological creation myths (Nuwa & Fuxi; Pangeng; Jade Emperor) overshadowed by legendary sage kings
- Identification of political power with language, religion, economic practices
Shang (1600-1046 BC)
Zhou (1122-221 BC)

- Zhou invade Shang, claim “mandate of heaven”
- Duke of Zhou establishes proto-Confucian ethical principals
- Warring States Period sees rise of philosophers
Pre-imperial societies

- Feudal societies: land held by hereditary aristocrats, farmed by hereditary serfs
- Warfare epitomized by chariots: driven by aristocrats
- Ancestor cults established key lineages, provided significant political legitimacy
- Philosophers: guide policies of kingly states, provide advice to attract population, build wealth and power
Early Imperial Period

Qin, Han,
Northern & Southern Dynasties
Qin empire: rises in the West, conquers East. State gains power by eliminating feudal land ownership, allowing peasants to own land, in exchange for military service. State also places local districts under bureaucratic rule, rather than hereditary control.
Cult of *huangdi* (emperor)

- Supplants Shang & Zhou ancestral cults
- Qin *di*: four high sages or deities
- *Huang*: “shining” or “splendid”
- Qin emperor performs new sacrifices on Mt. Tai

“The state was the emperor, along with his servants, and without him there could be no state.” Mark Edward Lewis, *The Early Chinese Empires: Qin and Han* (2010)
Qin conquest & imperial culture

- reforms create new economic, military, legal system
- Qin conquer rival states, each with own cultural practices
- Heterodox texts sequestered in imperial library

Terracotta warriors depict Qin infantry; establishment of standardized script
Han (206 bce- 220 ce)

- Han first revives feudalism, then adopts Qin system, continues cult of emperor; maintains Qin capital in West
- After usurpation by Wang Mang, new rulers move capital east to Luoyang
- By 135 c.e., Confucianism is orthodoxy

Confucius Visits Laozi. Detail of a nineteenth-century woodblock copy of a stone relief from the Wu shrines in Jiaxiang county, Shandong province. 2nd century c.e.
War and taxation

- Pastoralist vie with agriculturalists
- “use barbarians to control barbarians”
- Costs of war prompts nationalization of salt and iron monopolies (“Salt and Iron Debates”)

Xiongnu empire; Han coins and pottery figure of cavalryman. For more on early steppe empires, see (Nicola di Cosmo, *Ancient China and its Enemies*)
Fall of Han

- Daoist Yellow Turban Rebellion (184 AD) essentially destroys dynasty
- "It is a general truism of this world that anything long divided will surely unite, and anything long united will surely divide." 話說天下大勢，分久必合，合久必分 (14th century novel Romance of the Three Kingdoms)

Qing Dynasty depiction of the three blood-brothers Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei fighting the Yellow Turbans, part of the classic novel Romance of the Three Kingdoms
“Peach Blossom Spring”
桃花源记

- By Tao Qian (376-427)
- Humble fisherman loses his way and finds a hidden valley, where people are peaceful, well-provided for, and self-governing
- Often retold, referenced, depicted in paintings, etc.

Detail of “Peach Blossom Spring” handscroll by Shen Shichong, c. 1610
Six Dynasties (220-581)

- Ruling houses often non-Han Chinese lineages
- Buddhism & Daoism
- Han Chinese settlement south of Yangzi
- Rise of landed gentry as economic, political, cultural force

Yungang Caves, built starting in 5th century during Northern Wei (386-584). Ethnically Tuoba rulers previously suppressed Buddhist monasteries; temple complex was constructed as amends.
Silk Roads

• Trade routes linking Mediterranean and Central Asian economies with China, Northeast Asia.

Left: Sogdian merchants bring tribute to the Buddha, Xinjiang, 8th c.; Right: 9th c. image of Silk Road travelers, Dunhuang
Middle Period China

Sui, Tang, Song
Sixth century dynasties. Late in the 6th century, a short-lived consolidation was accomplished by Yang family, which established the Sui Dynasty; this soon overthrown by aristocratic, Tuoba Li family, who establish the Tang
Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE)

- Largest empire before 18th c. Qing
- Still revered for cosmopolitanism, literature

“Pleasures of the Tang Court,” c. 8th c. original
Conquest of the East

- After 587, network of public waterways connect Yellow and Yangtze Rivers
- By 608, canal system reached Beijing area
Economic shifts

• Trade escapes walled markets
• Rice-growing regions south of Yangzi (Jiangnan) become wealthy, commercialized
• Maritime commerce grows with Japan, Korea, Southeast Asia, India & Persian Gulf

The gated wards of the Tang capital city, Chang’an, near present-day Xi’an. Red denotes markets; green denotes the *huangcheng* or imperial city, where officials worked
Tang Women

- Power of imperial consorts, autonomy of female artists and courtesans
- Wu Zhao (624-705) ruled own dynasty for almost twenty years; reviled by Confucians, but able and effective leader
Problems of empire

• After fall of Tang, chaotic and bloody interregnum (Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms)

• By 10th century, consensus that the integrity of the state was harmed by foreign influence, lapse of Confucian values, excessive pursuit of art and pleasure, powerful role of women, allocation of strength to military rather than civilian powers
Northern Song (960-1127)

- Bureaucratic, activist empire
- Growing use of civil examination system to select officials
- By “New Policies” of Chancellor Wang Anshi (1021–1086), bureaucratic elites in control

Song Taizu, founding emperor of the dynasty, dressed as a Confucian scholar
Print culture

• Woodblock print technologies by 10th century
• Inexpensive, flexible technology

Song woodblock edition of the Lotus Sutra; printing blocks
Unlike Tang Chang’an, Song Kaifeng had no curfew; shops and workshops set up all over the city on important streets, not separated into wards; heavily commercialized economy with highly specialized industries, sophisticated handicrafts and national markets; monetary economy; government revenues increasingly derived from tax on trade, not land / agriculture. Detail from "Riverside Scene at Qingming Festival" by Northern Song painter Zhang Zeduan (Ming copy)
Neo-Confucianism

- Movement to purify, invigorate the canon
- “This culture of ours” elevated over Daoism or Buddhism…
- …while borrowing heavily from both traditions

Confucius presenting the young Gautama Buddha to Laozi
Examination system

- Three-levels (county, provincial, national)
- 200-300 candidates rose through the system each year—only 3000-4000 officials governed a population of 30 million

Song Dynasty examinations
Significance of the institution

- In theory, social mobility
- Acceptance of state-promoted values by local elites

Man peering from within examination cell, photo James Ricalton, c. 1900. During the Qing, only 1 in 10,000 county-level candidates earned national degree.
Night Revels of Han Xizai

Court painter Gu Hongzhong (937-975) was assigned by emperor to document bawdy parties held by official Han Xizai. 12th century copy, collection Palace Museum, Beijing.

Jacques Gernet, Daily Life in China on the Eve of the Mongol Invasion, 1250-1276
Southern Song (1127-1279) and Jin (1115–1234)

- Northern Song falls to invading Jurchen conquerors, court flees south
Late Imperial China

Yuan, Ming, Qing
Yuan (1271-1368)

- Mongols discriminate against Han Chinese, but revive key aspects of Song system (taxation, examinations)
- Promote Neo-Confucianism
- Impoverishment as a result of protracted warfare

Genghis Khan, conqueror of the world
Ming (1308-1644)

- Peasant rebellion against the Mongols led by Daoist adept
- Vast bureaucracy, sophisticated taxation system
- Examination system feeds gentry ambitions; Neo-Confucian texts orthodox

Founder of the Ming Dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhong or Hongwu Emperor
Ming social programs

- Dynastic goal: waterworks, restore agriculture, reforestation
- Taxes paid in paper currency, copper coins; gov’t limits gold & silver in circulation

Page from a *Yulin tuce 魚鱗圖冊* or “Register Accompanied by Maps in the Shape of Fish Scales,” used in Song and particularly Ming to aid in tax collection
Ming bureaucracy

- Ming capital moved to Beijing, 1408
- Center for imperial cults, and complicated administrative system
- Secret police & eunuchs vied with Confucian bureaucracy
Zheng He’s voyages (1405-1444)

- 7 voyages for diplomacy, trade
- “treasure ships” carried porcelain, silk, lacquer for export
- Voyages ceased as domestic trade & politics stabilized

Zheng He at prow; wondrous animals brought back from Madagascar
Ming & the West

• 1607: Matteo Ricci and Xu Guangqi translate parts of Euclid's *Elements* into Chinese

• Enlightenment philosophers looked to China as inspiration for humanist government

• Chinoiserie: craze for Chinese art and design
Ming economic growth

- New World crops (tobacco, cotton, indigo, sugar-cane, vegetable oils)
- Maritime trade, coastal urbanization
- Ming economy: 30% of global GDP
- Government permitted silver as currency, imported from Japan, Americas

Ming iron workers: puddling (left); blast furnace (right). Industrialization led to highly specialized wage-labor sectors in weaving, porcelain, metallurgy
Trade and instability

- Silver influx like printing paper money
- Inflation, devaluing of currency
- 17th century European wars led to instability of silver inflows, shocks to economy
- Increased taxation took more silver out of economy, encouraged hoarding... without silver to pay military, Ming lost ability to maintain northern boarders
Qing (1644-1911)

Armies of the Manchu khan Nurhaci (1558-1626) capture Liaoyang (1621). The rise of a Manchu state, aided by Confucian counselors, meant that a well-equipped and highly organized military force was poised on the northern borders just as Beijing was sacked by an upstart Ming official and the last Ming emperor committed suicide.
“Monarchical rule becomes ministerial administration”

- First Qing reigns: strong emperors held tight rein on state
- By early 19th century, control superseded to ministers and central organs

Kangxi Emperor, consolidator of Qing rule and subject of excellent Jonathan Spence biography
Qianlong and heterodoxy

• Emperor is guardian of state orthodoxy
• Compilation of imperial libraries
• “literary inquisitions” prohibit treasonous texts

During the Qianlong period (1736-1795), mendicant monks were accused of clipping queues and stealing souls, a supernatural crime wave zealously investigated by Qianlong and his ministers. See Philip Kuhn, *Soulstealers: The Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1768.*
Ruling a vast empire

The Qianlong Emperor in some of his many guises: as the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, a European aristocrat, conquering military leader
Early diplomacy with the West

Adam Brand, In the Presence of the Qing Emperor in Beijing, 1706
Tea Road & northern merchants

Chang family residence, 40 km northeast of Pingyao, Shanxi
Tea trade makes England & Russia prominent trading partners

European tea tasters evaluate quality; boxed tea ready for shipping. Unknown location, c. 1885.
First Opium War, 1839-1942

British attempt to balance trade with opium; Chinese resistance leads to armed conflict

Subsequent Treaty of Nanjing is first of unequal treaties, compromises Qing sovereignty
Taiping, Nian Rebellions, Boxers

- Nineteenth century rebellions sparked by religious sentiment (Islam, Christianity, millenarianism)
- Qing protected by foreign powers

Taiping government conducting business. Led by a failed examination candidate and self-proclaimed Christian, Hong Xiuquan, the Taipings (rebellion dated 1851-1864) came to control much of south China and almost toppled the Qing.
The last emperor

- Empress Dowager Cixi, widow of Xianfeng Emperor, reigned 1861-1908
- Known for conservatism and anti-foreign attitudes, but more open to foreign influence and political reform after 1900 Boxer Rebellion
Regional power-holders

- Provincial governors and high military leaders
- Build modern armies, establish factories and Western-style educational institutions

Political rivals Zhang Zhidong (left) and Li Hongzhang: their vying ideas on diplomatic relations, internal economic development shaped last four decades of Qing rule
Foreign presence

• Concessions & extraterritoriality
• By early 20th century, several hundred thousand foreigners reside in China
• Many concessions returned to China
• Foreigners significant source of technology transfer & investment

Vanity Fair caricature of Robert Hart (1835–1911), Inspector General of Maritime Custom Service, 1863 to 1911
Qing officials surrendering to Japanese naval officers, First Sino-Japanese War, 1895
How would China modernize?

- “Wealthy nation, strong military” (fuguo qiangbin)
- Goal of modernizing within tradition – preserve Confucianism, but adopt technology
Late-Qing reforms

- 1898 reform movement
- By 1901, Qing begins ambitious program to overhaul education system, government administration, establish new judiciary, military systems
- Elections held for provincial assemblies, which elected national assembly; began to draft constitution

Late-Qing reformer Liang Qichao (1873-1929), holder of highest imperial degree, later journalist, historian. With his mentor Kang Youwei, he became known for advocating political and cultural reform.
Principles of Han revolution

• Revolutionaries claim Manchu rulers illegitimate
• Only overthrow of Qing, restoration of Han Chinese government could avenge national pride

Zou Rong (1885-1905). Inspired by the French and American revolutions, his pamphlet *The Revolutionary Army* established a new discourse: Han Chinese ethnic pride as justification for revolution.
Sun Yat-sen’s secret societies

• Revolutionary cells in Hong Kong, Hawaii
• Establishes first party, Tongmenhui, in Japan
• Early members: Chiang Kai-shek, young female revolutionary, Qiu Jin

Sun Yatsen and young revolutionary friends, Hong Kong, early 1890’s. Left to right: Yang Heling, Sun Yat-sen, Chen Shaobai, Guan Jingliang, You Lie.
End of the imperial era, 1912

Nanjing Road, Shanghai, showing new revolutionary “Five Races” flag
Nanjing Road, after 1932
Nanjing Road, 2009
China in the Modern Period
Could the center hold? Should it?

- 1911: independence declared in Fujian, Guangdong, Shandong, Ningxia, Sichuan, Mongolia, Tibet
- Revolutionary leaders emphasize unity of “Han races”

Sun Yatsen in 1912, under crossed “Five Races Under One Union” flag and the earlier revolutionary Blue Sky with White Sun flag
Does the revolution succeed?

- Failure of republican government
- Retreat to “strong-man” regime
- No constitution established
- No viable central government for more than a decade (1912-1928)

Yuan Shikai – Former Qing official, President of the Republic, 1912-1916
Japanese colonialism

• 1895 war: Taiwan ceded to Japan; Korea soon becomes Japanese colony
• 1919: 21 Demands
• Spur Chinese nationalists, political reformers
Student activism

Protesting the Treaty of Versailles and the rise of Japanese imperialism, national weakness, Beijing, 1919
Founding of the CCP, May 1921

• Marxism opposes imperialism, social inequalities

Chen Duxiu, first Chairman and General Secretary of the CCP, with Hu Shi
Mao’s China

• Born Hunan, 1893; died 1976
• Credited with tapping into strength of peasant forces in fighting Japanese and Nationalists
• Not paramount leader until 1940’s, often lacked operational control
Time magazine covers, 1945 and 1949
Concluding thoughts

• China’s long history suggests a pattern of political innovation, adaptation to new economic realities, porous and flexible national boundaries.

• Key indicators of political allegiance established by culture and economic integration, not force.

• While political figure-heads (emperors) establish key ideologies, institutions like bureaucracy, parties, local religious authorities are more likely to articulate and implement critical forms of change & policy.