

Chinese Cultural Studies:
A Brief Chinese Chronology

The traditional way of dividing Chinese history is in terms of dynasties. The use of this system is so widespread that it is the usual way to refer to the Chinese past (people refer to "Tang poetry" or "Ming vases" for instance.) But this system of periodization presents several problems:-

1. Dynastic chronology seems to suggest that there were changes in Chinese life at times when change was not evident on a widespread basis;

2. Paradoxically dynastic chronology suggests a degree of continuity that was not present either. Thus common statements that the "fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911" represented the end of over 2000 years of imperial rule is severely misleading. Although at all times China had a socially stratified society and, compared to the rest of world, large state formations, the nature of these social stratifications and states underwent fundamental changes. Furthermore, within the time periods dominated by a particular dynasty quite dramatic changes took place.

3. Finally, the system, which stresses the history of the political elite, overlooks the importance of economic and agricultural life.

Here then I give three alternate ways of viewing Chinese historical periods.

First, the traditional dynastic chronology,
Second, the "framework of political forms" outlined by Jacques Gernet in his *A History of Chinese Civilization*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 22-25, and
Third, the an economically based chronology derived from Mark Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*, (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1973)

Note: The abbreviations BCE and CE stand for "Before the Common Era" and "Common Era". Chinese dating systems usually went by the year of a ruler's reign, which is not a useful system for modern historians. But since China was not a Christian country, the use of BC ("Before Christ") and AD ("in the year of our Lord") are inappropriate, therefore the more neutral term

"Common Era", first used in Biblical studies, is used here.

1. Traditional Dynastic Chronology

Derived here from several sources. Note a number of the earlier dates will vary slightly from author to author. I have given variations in square brackets. The second form of any dynasty name is the Wade-Giles form.

PRE-IMPERIAL CHINA

Emperor Yao (legendary) 3rd Millennium BCE

Emperor Shun (legendary) 3rd Millennium BCE

Xia [Hsia] Dynasty 21 C. BCE ~ 16 C. BCE [or 2183-1752 BCE?]

Shang Dynasty 16 C. BCE ~ 1066 BCE [or 1751-1112 BCE?]

Zhou [Chou] Dynasty 1111 BCE ~ 249 BCE [or 1027-249 BCE?]

Western Zhou [Chou] 1066-771 BCE

Eastern Zhou [Chou] 771-221 BCE

Spring and Autumn 722-481 BCE

Warring States 480-222 BCE

THE EARLY EMPIRE

Qin [Ch'in] Dynasty (255-) 221 BCE ~ 206 BCE

Capital city at Changan Ch'ang-an [mod Xian Sian]

Han Dynasty 206 BCE ~ 220 CE

Capital cities at Changan Ch'ang-an [mod Xian Sian], Luoyang Loyang

Western [Former] Han 206 BCE-23 CE

Jin [Hsin] 9-23 CE

Eastern [Later] Han 25-220

Three Kingdoms

Wei 220-265

Shu Han 221-263

Wu 222-280

Jin [Chin] Dynasty 265 ~ 420

Western Jin [Chin] 265-316
Eastern Jin [Chin] 317-420
Sixteen Kingdoms 304 ~ 420

Southern & Northern Dynasties 420 ~ 589

South

Liu Song [Sung] 420-479
Southern Qi [Ch'i] 479-502
Liang 502-557
Qen [Ch'enI] 557-589

North

Later [North] Wei 386-535
Eastern Wei 534-550
Western Wei 535-556
Northern Qi [Ch'i] 550-577
Northern Zhou [Chou] 557-581

THE MIDDLE EMPIRE

Sui Dynasty 581 ~ 618

Tang [T'ang] Dynasty 618 ~ 907
Capital City at Changan Ch'ang-an [mod Xian Sian]

Five Dynasties 907 ~ 979

Later Liang 907-923
Later Tang [T'ang] 923-936
Later Jin [Chin] 936-47
Later Han 947-950
Later Zhou [Chou] 951-960

THE LATER EMPIRE

Liao (907-) 947-1125

Song [Sung] Dynasty 960 ~ 1279

Northern Song [Sung] 960-1127
Capital city at Kaifeng
Southern Song [Sung] 1127-1279

Capital city at Hangzhou Hangchow

Western Xia [Hsi-hsia] Dynasty (990)-1032-1227

Jin [Chin] Dynasty 1115-1234

Yüan [Mongol] Dynasty 1279 ~ 1368

Capital city at Beijing Peking

[The term "Late Traditional China" is sometimes used to refer to the period of the Ming and Qing dynasties]

Ming Dynasty 1368 ~ 1644

Capital city at Nanjing Nanking, Beijing Peking

Qing [Ching] [Manchu] Dynasty 1644 ~ 1911

Capital city at Beijing Peking

POST IMPERIAL CHINA

Republic of China 1912 ~ [still in Taiwan]

Capital city at Nanjing Nanking

People's Republic of China 1949.10 ~ [still in mainland China]

Capital city at Beijing Peking

2. Framework of Transformations in Chinese Political Forms

Derived entirely from Jacques Gernet, *A History of Chinese Civilization*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 22-25

c. 1600-900 BCE.

This is the epoch of a palace civilization of which the Middle East provides analogous examples during the same period. The king, leading member of the noble class whose exclusive activities are making sacrifices and waging war, is head of the armies and chief priest. All activities are dependent on the royal palace, which vaguely assumes functions which are simultaneously political, religious, military, and economic.

c. 900-500 BCE.

A system of aristocratic cities, sometimes allies, sometimes rivals, replaces this form of archaic royalty. The leaders of the principalities are united

among themselves within a hierarchy based on kinship and privileges in the field of worship, by family, religious, political, military, and economic ties.

But the system declines at the end of this period simultaneously with the establishment of big kingdoms which come into conflict with each other.

c. 500-220 BCE.

This crisis in the aristocratic society was resolved by the development of monarchical institutions and ended in the creation of a type of centralized state which leaned directly, thanks to the suppression of the chiefs and the elimination of the upper ranks of the nobility, on the peasantry, a source of economic and military power.

220 BCE -190 CE.

This kind of state was extended by the general conquest of all the former kingdoms. But it evolved fairly rapidly. The centralization of power

favoured the palace at the expense of the civil service and this provoked two successive crises, the second of which ended in complete political anarchy.

190-310 CE.

The leaders of independent armies which contended for power ended by sharing all the Chinese lands: North China, the lower Yangtze and

Szechwan. A military dictatorship was set up in China but came up against the growing power of the rich landed families with autarchic estates and dependents, the development of which went back to the first and second centuries CE.

310-590 CE.

The non-Chinese peoples who had been settling in North China since the beginning of the Christian era founded kingdoms with institutions which

were a mixture of the governmental and military institutions of the Chinese world and those of the nomads of the steppe or those of the

mountain-dwellers of the Sino-Tibetan borders. However, in the valley of the Yangtze the big landed families with manors and dependencies gradually

began to form an endogamous aristocracy which dominated the fairly weak central power. Becoming more and more sinicized and leaning on a military

aristocracy of mixed blood, the kingdoms and empires of the North finally gave birth to a unified empire which seemed in its early stages like a prolongation of these kingdoms and empires.

590-755 CE.

The Sino-barbarian autocracy which was dominant at the start of the new empire came into conflict with a new class of civil servant

created to reinforce the administrative framework of the state system of allotment of land to the peasantry and of supervision of the properties which

had persisted in North China since the formation of the centralized state was in decline and was to be replaced, at the end eighth century, by a system

of taxes on harvests; rights over men and their work were replaced by rights over cultivated lands. In a similar fashion, conscription for a specified period was soon to give way to permanent mercenary forces.

755-960 CE.

The warlike aristocracy which had reunited the Chinese lands was eliminated simultaneously with the new class of civil servant which had grown up in the course of the preceding period. Military adventurers enrolled armies of mercenaries and divided the Chinese lands between them.

960-1280 CE.

Reunification was the work of one of these army leaders. But the need for an administrative apparatus and the upsurge of the state's economy caused the rapid development of the civil service and the perfecting of the political and administrative machinery. A new class of scholarly families living off agricultural rents - a class very different from the medieval aristocracies-grew up and was to dominate Chinese political life until the present century.

But from the end of the fourteenth century onward it was to come up against the absolutism of the central power.

1280-1370 CE

Big non-Chinese empires which borrowed their institutions had come into being on the northern borders during the course of the previous period.

They were eliminated from the beginning of the thirteenth century onwards by the growing power of the Mongols whose authoritarian and feudal regime presents special characteristics, and rested largely non-Chinese personnel. This regime was extended by the conquest of the whole of China at the end of the thirteenth century, but it was swept away by popular uprisings which began in the middle of the following century.

1370-1520 CE.

The empire which grew out of the popular revolts of the end of the Mongol period displayed from the start very strong autocratic tendencies. The

central power distrusted its own agents and supervised them by means of a secret police.

1520-1650 CE.

Tension grew sharper as the result of a new economic and intellectual upsurge. The contradiction between the rigidity of the political institutions and the profound social and economic changes of the sixteenth century caused from about 1600 onwards a serious social and political crisis which was soon followed by insurrections of mercenaries and peasants.

1650-1800 CE.

Sinicized peoples who had taken possession of the north-eastern territories (Manchuria) in the course of the first half of the seventeenth century took

advantage of the anarchy prevailing in China to overcome the old Chinese governing classes and take their place. The military and feudal regime established immediately after the invasion was progressively relaxed as the new rulers adopted in all essentials the institutions of the preceding dynasty, seeking at the same time to win over the old scholarly classes. Through the collaboration of these classes the new dynasty was enabled to avoid the dangerous tensions which had arisen in the first half of the seventeenth century. An unprecedented prosperity contributed to social peace.

1800-1900 CE.

But a financial crisis, the development of corruption, and an economic recession caused the situation to worsen from about 1800 onwards. This deterioration, which continued during the first half of the nineteenth century, ended in a fearsome social explosion between 1850 and 1870. In the last thirty years of the nineteenth century the economic and military pressure of the Western nations, soon to be joined by Japan, caused the decomposition of the state and society, the collapse of the economy, and the loss of national independence.

1900-1950 CE.

New political currents appeared, the most important of them represented by the commercial middle class which had grown up as a result of the foreign settlements in the big ports and in South-East Asia. But real power lay in the hands of leaders of new armies supported by the foreign powers. This long crisis was partially resolved by the creation of a military dictatorship which was to be finally swept away through the development of peasant militias, whose leaders founded in 1949 the People's Republic of China.

Gernet adds:

This much-simplified outline of the political history of the Chinese world does not take account of other important aspects of its evolution; for example, the expansion of peoples of Chinese language and culture, the enlargement of the political units, periods of military expansion and colonization. The little Chinese cities of remote antiquity were only enclaves in the midst of vast extents of uncultivated land and did not extend beyond the limits of the lower basin of the Yellow River. The exploitation of the plains of North China dates only from the fourth to first centuries BCE.. The colonization of the southern provinces was a long-lasting affair which began at the end of the third century BCE.

The warlike, China of the sixth to eighth centuries turned towards central Asia and succeeded in extending its authority to the regions beyond the Pamirs, while China of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was a maritime, trading land threatened by the advance of the empires of the steppe. The Sino-Manchu empire which in the eighteenth century dominated the major part of China attached more

importance to continental problems than to the very active commerce which occupied its maritime provinces in the south and south-east.

3. Chinese Periodization in Light of Economic Developments

Derived from Mark Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*, (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1973)

Elvin begins by asking the question "why did the Chinese Empire stay together when the Roman Empire, and every other empire of antiquity or the middle ages, ultimately collapse?" His basic response is that large political units are not stable over long periods of time since "in order to maintain itself intact an empire must be continually improving its technology at a pace sufficient to counter-balance the improvements made by its hostile neighbors" (pp. 18-19) and that "the Chinese must on the whole have managed to keep one step ahead of their neighbors in the relevant technical skills, military, economic and organizational; or more precisely, since strength in one of these sectors could at least be partially offset weakness in another, in the complex of such skills considered as a whole" (p.20). The Chinese were not immune to political conquest "but in the last resort [they were] immune to political fragmentation" (p. 20). From this perspective, Elvin sees the economic and technological periods of Chinese history as fundamental to understanding the Chinese past.

Early Origins - in Yellow River Valley

Origins of Chinese Culture in lower valley of Yellow River

Burn and clear agriculture

7th Century BCE on- Permanent Agriculture

Permanent agriculture. Fields take the place of clearances. A free peasantry

3rd Century CE - State Administration of Land Holdings

Establishment of state colonies and hereditary military households in Wei. In other areas distribution of large land-holdings.

7th Century CE - Expansion into Yangtze River Valley

Expansion of population and administrative base to Yangtze valley. Building of the Grand Canal under the Sui dynasty to link the "two

Chinas" [North China and Yangtze China]. The Yangtze River valley becomes the chief rice surplus area of China and the basis of

imperial power. Large private manors grew up as in Europe of this period, but there was no "feudal" overstructure. Bondage to the soil is first found in the 10th century.

8th-12th Centuries - Revolutions in Farming Methods, Transportation, and the Money Economy

This was a matter of new techniques. Some came from the North (e.g. millet farming), but the main impetus was from the south. This involved new types of rice, but above all the development and expansion of wet-farming (using paddy-fields). The significance of the manor was that it alone had the resources to coordinate the work requires to establish the requisite dams, sluices and irrigation machinery.

Woodblock printing, invented in the 9th century [500 years earlier than commercially exploitable printing in Europe] contributed to the rapid spread of new methods. Multiple cropping became possible. The same period sees a revolution in Water transportation, allowing for an expansion in trade and commerce. There was also an expansion in the availability of money, including paper money, which also enabled the economic expansion of the period. The period also saw, up to the fourteenth century, a vast study of nature and science, including the development of machinery.

14th Century on - Failure to Maintain Economic Advantages

From about 1350 on, China's economy declined. There was economic development but it took place without the significant technological change which had marked earlier periods. The period sees the disappearance of serfdom by the eighteenth century, the rapid expansion in the sixteenth century of small market towns. There were also increasingly large co-ordinations of manufactures. But this economic activity took place without technological change, and, Elvin concludes, was not a prelude to an industrial revolution. (p. 284). He sums it up with the phrase "quantitative growth, qualitative standstill". In other words China got caught in a "high level equilibrium trap".

1800 on - China's Economic Subjugation By the West

As China did not break through, the expanding Western world-economy swamped China, which had difficulty adjusting.