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Understanding China

A History Institute Report

Vol. 12, No.1
February 2007

Trudy Kuehner, Reporter

On October 21-22, 2006, FPRI's [Marvin Wachman Fund for International Education](#) hosted 46 teachers from 26 states across the country for a weekend of discussion on [teaching about China](#). The Institute, held in Kenosha, Wis., was co-sponsored by the Clausen Center for World Business and School of Professional Studies, both at Carthage College. It was webcast to registrants worldwide ([videocasts available](#)).

The History Institute for Teachers is co-chaired by [David Eisenhower](#) and [Walter A. McDougall](#) and made possible by a grant from the Annenberg Foundation. Future history weekends include [Teaching American Military History](#), to be held at the First Division Museum in Wheaton, Ill. in cooperation with the Cantigny First Division Foundation, Mar. 24-25, 2007.

Classical Chinese Thought and Culture and Early Chinese History

Victor Mair, professor of Chinese language and literature at the University of Pennsylvania, noted that China's great social variety has always made it hard to keep the country together, necessitating heavy-handed government from the center. Whenever the central government has relaxed control, the nation rapidly dissolved into warring factions and states.

Chinese politics is inextricably linked with Chinese thought, and a thorough apparatus is in place to ensure "correct" thinking. The foundations of classical Chinese thought were laid during the Warring States period, 475-221 BCE. Early Chinese thought was a practical affair. The Dao De Jing advised that the most effective way to govern was through "disinterested action." The Confucians and the Taoists were at odds on how humans should relate to each other, the Confucians stressing principles like ritual, justice, and righteousness, while the Taoists would permit people to behave more naturally. Between the two were the Mohists, the Egoists, the Technicians, and the Legalists. In the end, the

Legalists won out. The Legalist-influenced Qin Dynasty (221-206 BCE) established the bureaucratic institutions by means of which China was governed for the next 2,200 years.

The first Qin emperor “made the trains run on time.” He unified axle widths, weights and measures, and the writing system, and tried to shape thought into a single system. In the end, his totalitarianism was too harsh, and the Qin Dynasty was soon replaced by the Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE), which operated under a mixed Confucian-Legalist-Taoist system of thought. The Han gradually ran out of steam, experiencing a brief interregnum when a renegade named Wang Mang (r. 9-23 CE) tried to institute radical policies. Still today, the majority of the Chinese people call themselves “Han people” and their language “Han.” (The Cantonese speak a very different version of the language and refer to themselves as “people of the Tang” dynasty (618-907).

By the first century CE, Buddhism had arrived via Central Asia (the Silk Road), the southwest, and the ocean (Southeast Asia). Its influences were enormous. It encountered tremendous opposition from Chinese intellectuals and from time to time was persecuted. Ultimately, however, it became an essential part of China’s cultural landscape, stimulating the growth of Taoism as an institutionalized religion.

Chinese history has witnessed a seemingly endless succession of dynasties and rulers, many of whom were wholly or partially non-Sinitic (e.g., Manchus, Mongols, Turks). It was under these that China expanded to its greatest geographical extent. What persisted throughout was a mode of governing premised upon a combination of Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism, with a significant subsequent overlay of Buddhism. The coming decades will tell whether this mode is compatible with democracy, especially now that it has been reinforced by Marxism..

State and Society in Late Imperial China

Matthew Sommer, associate professor of Chinese history at Stanford University, explained that while periodization is arbitrary, China’s history can be said to start with the imperial era, which can be divided into the early (221 BCE-CE 1000) and late (ca. 1000-1912) periods. Late imperial China refers mainly to the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1912) (Manchu) dynasties.

The later dynasties had a political system in which the emperor, the son of heaven, ruled through centralized bureaucracy that was recruited through examinations that tested literacy in the Confucian classics and conformity to orthodox interpretation of these. Nobody outside the imperial family had any hereditary birthright to status or power, so there was a great deal of social mobility. There was no European-style aristocracy.

The early imperial period had been dominated by a landed aristocracy. The emperors of this period were the scions of large aristocratic clans, ruling essentially as first among equals. The principal means of entry into the elite was through official recommendations or kinship relations, which enabled aristocratic families to maintain a monopoly on office-holding, which was and still is very lucrative. This kept the emperors relatively weak vis-à-vis the autonomous clans.

The transition from the Tang to the Song (960-1279) dynasty was key to the creation of the institutions and social structures of the late imperial period. The long-term solution to the problem of aristocratic power was recruitment to office based on merit instead of birth. This was instituted through an expanded system of exams reinvented in the late Tang and perfected by the Ming (1368-1644) dynasty.

The real challenge to the aristocratic hold on government began with Empress Wu (r. 690-705), the only woman ever to rule China as empress in her own right. She came to power first as a consort and then as the mother of ruling emperors. In 684 her own son became emperor; she deposed him in favor of a younger son. In 690 she got rid of that son too and declared herself empress; in 691 she established her own Zhou (a reference to the formative period of Confucius) dynasty.

Wu expanded eligibility for taking the exams, which became the fast-track to high office, with the goal of creating new office holders loyal to Wu. Eventually she was deposed and the Tang dynasty was reestablished. But she had had a brilliant idea, and subsequent emperors expanded these exams to strengthen their own grip on the bureaucracy.

The Song dynasty used exams on an even wider scale and promoted education to broaden the pool of exam candidates.

By the Ming/Qing era, practically all government officials gained their positions through this system. Regular rotation of officials institutionalized paranoia and checked the development of parochial loyalties and power bases. The system fostered an empire-wide elite with shared Confucian ideology and permitted the rise of a gentry the foundation of whose wealth was land ownership.

The exams lasted until 1905, when the falling Qing court abolished the exam system, part of its last-ditch reforms aimed at modernizing and thereby saving the dynasty. The gentry, who had long criticized the exams, were shocked at their abolishment and didn't know what to do with their lives. They turned against the dynasty, which collapsed in 1912. Many of the revolutionary intelligentsia of the 20th century came from families who would have been in the civil service under the late imperial system.

China's Long Revolution(s): from Mao to Deng and Beyond

Melanie Frances Manion, professor of political science and public affairs at University of Wisconsin-Madison, offered "never forget class struggle" as the phrase that best characterizes the Maoist era, which ended in 1978, two years after Mao's death, with the Party's official rejection of Maoism. The CCP's most recent mantra, "harmonious society," is not only unMaoist, but even somewhat Confucian.

The Maoist era was characterized by policy oscillations from left to right, from control to liberalization, from the reach for a communist utopia to a focus on economic growth. Mao's successors have promoted a "socialist market economy," with a place for foreign investors, private entrepreneurs, and stock markets. Yet China has experienced no second political revolution. Chinese policymakers have promoted limited liberalization, but they have also suppressed organized challenges to the Party. A "harmonious society" seems to be an ever more distant goal as the government deals with political corruption, rural unrest, a growing wealth gap, and pollution.

To address these challenges, economic power has been significantly decentralized. Politically, the cult of personality has been repudiated and collective leadership promoted. There is greater transparency in policymaking. The media is no longer the slavish party instrument of the Maoist era. Still, media openness has been severely constrained in recent years, and mechanisms of public accountability remain weak. Post-Mao leaders have good reason to fear unleashing mass emotions, as they no longer have the power to control them.

China's Democratic Prospects

Edward Friedman, professor of political science at University of Wisconsin-Madison, explained why China, with its \$1 trillion in foreign exchange, has already risen to be a great power and yet is unlikely to democratize in the near future. China is an authoritarian system, and to live in it requires complicity in the system. This causes great problems of conscience.

Even if the halo effect around China's success hides the cruelty of its "harmonious" system, we may be moving into an age where China can effectively legitimate its authoritarianism as superior to Western democracy, with its perceived problems. Already, a Confucian nationalism is being promoted. But China is not harmonious. It is a polarized, brutal world. The concentration of wealth is not unlike in the old gentry system of the late imperial period. Of 3,220 individuals in China with assets of at least 100 million yen, 2,932 are relatives of senior party and government officials. Despite the new nationalism's being defined in ostensibly Confucian terms, Confucianism is not really strong in China today. Nor is democracy. The Chinese have been struggling for democracy since at least 1898, and in 1989 there was a nation-wide democracy movement. Participants in democracy movements have paid terrible costs.

Some Chinese say that China already is a democracy, pointing to citizens' expanded freedom and physical mobility. Another set of arguments says that China must become a democracy in the near future, given the supposed conflict between economic freedom and not having political freedom. But many middle-class Chinese profess disinterest in democracy, which they think would empower the rural poor. So there are extraordinary tensions. The outcome of any political rupture would likely be a red-brown, fascist coalition. China already is a glorious country for some, so those in politically important positions feel fortunate and fear change, including democratic change. For the prospects for democracy, not just in China but in world, this is not good.

China's Economy: Problems and Prospects

Nicholas Lardy, senior fellow of the Institute for International Economics, noted that China's economy is now ten times larger than it was in 1978. It is three times that of India and the gap is growing. This has resulted in the emergence of a large middle class, a rising income gap and a growing urban-rural gap. Also increasing are gaps between the coastal areas and the inland, with the coastal areas doing well because of the new importance of foreign trade; and between skilled and unskilled workers. In addition to the large emerging middle class, China has a small number of super-rich. Overall, income inequality has increased.

China is now the third-largest global trader, with total foreign trade in 2005 of \$1.4 trillion. In 2007 China will overtake the U.S. in exports, and in 2007 or 2008 it is expected to become the second-largest trading economy. China has recently ranked in the top three in terms of foreign direct investment, with cumulative FDI into China now about \$650 billion. Chinese companies are also starting to invest outward.

China has become predominantly a market-driven economy. Virtually everything in China is now sold at a market-determined price, and most markets are extremely competitive. One reason is the openness of the Chinese economy. Imports are very large relative to the size of the domestic economy. This has disciplined domestic prices, most of which have converged toward international prices. Another aspect of openness goes back to FDI. Foreign-invested companies in China produce roughly 33 percent of national output, compared to 25 percent for EU countries and 20 percent in the U.S. This means that Chinese companies have had to compete successfully not only with imports, but also with foreign firms that have moved their operations to China.

China has a very high investment rate. Not just households but also companies and the government save a lot. Adding these together one gets the national savings rate, and China saves about 50 percent of what is produced, the highest of any country in the world, several times the rate in the U.S. So China is able to build its capital stock. But beginning about 2015, China's population will begin to age fairly rapidly. If what has happened in most other economies happens there, a lot of people who have been saving a lot will retire and spend down, so even if the savings rate at every age stays the same, the national savings rate will fall.

China has grown more rapidly for a longer period than even its most successful East Asian predecessors. It will increasingly be a market economy. In coming into the WTO, it committed to open up its services sector. This means increased competition in banking, insurance, securities, asset management, and telecommunications. So the role of the market will be enhanced as openness spreads from manufacturing into services.

On balance, the opportunity China presents to the U.S. outweighs the challenge. The challenge is that huge pools of skilled labor that have not been participating in the global economy are now entering it, causing downward price and wage pressure. The opportunity is the Chinese market for high value added U.S. exports like semiconductors, airplanes, and microprocessors. China is now the fourth largest U.S. export market. In sum, it is a complicated picture. Our best strategy is to enforce China's WTO commitments and enhance its role in international bodies that promote cooperation on international economic policy issues.

Panel: China and the World

June Teufel Dreyer, department chair of political science at the University of Miami and FPRI senior fellow, explained that China has had many foreign policies since 1949. In 1949-54, it was the "lean to one side policy." This meant "whoever is not with us is against us" and leaning toward the Soviet Union. Then from 1955-57 there was the "Bandung spirit" of making nice with a range of states. China began, along with the post-Stalinist USSR, to feel "If we keep up this policy of everyone who isn't with us is against us, everyone may wind up against us."

From 1958-70 was a period of semi-isolation from "normal" international relations. The Bandung line hadn't worked for China, which had suffered bad splits with, among others, Cuba and Cameroon. Mao moved into an ideological phase, one that included isolationism in foreign policy, during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution.

In 1970 China began to reenter normal international relations and an era of foreign policies more oriented toward

balance of power. The Chinese military had slipped badly during the Cultural Revolution, and the USSR seemed increasingly menacing. So China effected a rapprochement with the U.S. as the lesser of two evils. It began adeptly playing the U.S. against the USSR, which the Chinese did very successfully until the USSR's disintegration. The collapse of the Soviet Union left Beijing facing a unipolar world that has proved very difficult for China to deal with. Washington said harsh things about China after the 1989 Tiananmen incident; it invaded Iraq in 1991; it bombed Yugoslavia, a close friend of China's, at the end of the 1990s. Beijing worried that it was seeing the handwriting on the wall and that China was the U.S.'s ultimate target. There is a Chinese saying that you kill the chicken to scare the monkey. In this sense, the chicken was the former republic of Yugoslavia, and it was being "killed" in order to scare China.

China has not been strong enough to challenge the U.S. directly. It has wanted to concentrate on building up its economy, and the U.S. has been useful in this regard. It can buy Chinese products, train Chinese students, and sell China technology.

The first model, one that China's foreign policy spokespeople frequently mention, is the PRC's commitment to the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence. These are five Buddhist-sounding principles like mutual respect among countries, non-interference in each other's domestic politics, and peaceful co-existence. Views differ on how well China fulfills this rhetorical commitment to multipolarism and peaceful co-existence. After all, the Chinese military budget has been steadily rising since 1989, even though China faces no external threat and even though most other countries were cutting defense expenditures with the end of the Cold War.

The second, or benign view, which Beijing pushes, is that China wants only to be left alone so it can continue to create a prosperous society for its 1.3 billion population. Beijing has been touting China's "soft power"—setting up Confucius institutes that teach people about a type of Confucianism that the great sage himself might not recognize. The regime's variation on the Confucian doctrine of the "great harmony" is politically useful abroad and also at home, given China's disharmonious society. It asserts that the rising tide of China's economy will lift the boats of all countries that cooperate with it.

The third view can be called the "past is the future" model. This harkens to the imperial past and its tribute system. In the imperial Chinese worldview, China equaled civilization; all other states were barbarians. The luckier barbarians got to present tribute at court and perform the *ketou*. China's recent behavior is reminiscent of this. The leaders of Singapore, Mongolia, and Japan have been lectured on numerous issues. While China professes non-interference in other countries' affairs, its actions look a lot like interfering in other countries' business.

These three models of Chinese foreign policy have one thing in common: the assumption that China is or will soon become a superpower. China is not, however, a superpower yet. It cannot project its soft or hard power globally. It is a regional power. Its economic gains of the past 25 years have been impressive, but there seems to be an unwritten law of economic gravity that a country can grow quickly for a long time, but cannot do so indefinitely. And the faster economic growth occurs, the more severe the strains in society. The CCP is aware that China has a rapidly growing income gap, badly underfunded educational and healthcare systems, and increasing social disturbances.

It is not easy for China to persuade other countries that China is rising peacefully when it has such high economic and military growth rates. Also, China has territorial disputes with several of its Asian neighbors. Those states are responding by hedging, improving their own militaries and arranging joint military exercises with other countries. Many countries are also concerned that the Chinese economy is so huge that it may swallow their own economies. Cumulatively, these factors are going to inhibit China's rise to great-power status.

Jacques deLisle, director of FPRI's Asia Program and professor of law at the University of Pennsylvania, saw significant continuity in China's long-term engagement with the outside world. China's conduct of foreign affairs involves a mixture of power calculations and moral agendas, and significant connections between international and domestic politics. Some legacies of this type from the classical period linger to this day. China in ancient and early imperial times was often internally fragmented, and even when it was unified it had to deal with the barbarians around its periphery. The Confucian view of how to cope with these challenges was that one could maintain close and dense relations and perhaps achieve united rule within the civilized, culturally Chinese world, but that civilized states had to deal with the barbarians at arm's length or, ideally, to transform them into civilized peoples. The rival, Legalist view was that there was a science of wealth and power that the able ruler followed at home and abroad. The distinction

between dealing with the external and internal realms was the sovereign's power to make and enforce rules at home but not abroad.

The tribute system of the late imperial period embraced a worldview that took power very seriously. It depended on a strong Chinese state to provide order within China's borders, to make the states on its periphery conform to the tributary structures, and to keep more remote barbarians at bay. This late imperial view had no space for the nation-state and its rigid distinction between domestic and international affairs. The nation-state as we think of it showed up with Western gunboats and imperialism in the 19th century. That encounter changed China's mode of interacting with the outside world. What followed was a Chinese quest to adopt and adapt the tools that the West had developed so successfully—its secrets for wealth and power. Those “tools” included both international relations techniques and domestic institutions such as law and constitutional governance. While this was an amoral quest for what worked, Chinese also saw the issues in moral terms, chastising foreign powers for a double standard that denied China equal dignity as a sovereign, and debating domestic reforms in terms of good and correct governance that echoed Confucian discourse.

During the Mao era, the PRC shifted from alignment with Moscow, to a brief flirtation with solidarity with the post-colonial world, to a fleeting desire to become the capital of world revolution, to rapprochement with the U.S. and engagement with the wider world. These periodic realignments in the PRC's approach to international relations made sense in terms of calculations about China's actual or potential power and influence and the severity and source of external threats. But such shifts in foreign policy also tracked Mao's oscillating visions of the proper ideology and political order at home.

In the reform era that began in the late 1970s, economic openness has driven Chinese foreign policy. The most high-profile example of this in recent years has been China's ultimately (in 2001) successful quest to enter the WTO. The pattern has gone beyond the WTO and international economic regimes more broadly. China has joined almost every international organization it can and has become much more accommodating of status quo international norms, with the exceptions of the international human rights regime and issues of state sovereignty. The latter comes up in its most prickly form over Taiwan and increasingly over military intervention in other states (which China often loudly opposes). In this era too, international and domestic issues have been deeply entwined. International economic integration and domestic market-oriented reforms reinforced each other. Engagement with other international regimes would have been inconceivable without the political liberalization and reform within China that fueled and drew upon such “global” norms.

Are we turning another corner within the reform era? As China's capacity to influence the world around it has risen with its economic clout and military capacity, the U.S. does not push China as hard as it used to on many issues. Will China shift from accommodation toward confrontation? One international relations theory holds that when one power (China) rises, there will be friction with the prior dominant power (the U.S.). A more sanguine view is that China is now so deeply economically engaged with the outside world that its stake in interdependence has made the PRC a status quo power. Which scenario comes nearer the mark likely will depend in part on Beijing's level of confidence and comfort. Here, the evidence is mixed. China is on the short end of a unipolar world order, but it is still in a much better position than it has been since the nineteenth century.

What Every American Needs To Know about Taiwan

Shelley Rigger, associate professor of East Asian Politics at Davidson College and an FPRI senior fellow, outlined Taiwan's history. Taiwan was first mapped for Europeans by Portuguese explorers, who called it the Ilha Formosa, the beautiful island. It is only 244 miles from north to south, 94 miles at the widest east-west point, but has a population of 23 million. It is crowded, especially because most of the central mountain chain is uninhabitable. The population is concentrated on the western coastal plain. At the closest, the island is only 95 miles from the PRC.

From the end of the 1500s until 1895, Taiwan was a place that Chinese from neighboring Fujian Province drifted to, fishing, farming the coastal plain, or hiding their pirate ships. It was only loosely incorporated into the Chinese empire until the 1800s, when it became a Chinese province for about ten years. The settlers of Taiwan are nearly all Chinese in origin. There is only a small population of aboriginal people whose ancestors drifted to Taiwan from South Pacific islands.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, China experienced a revolutionary period, including the fall of the Qing dynasty and the founding of the Republic of China under the guidance of Dr. Sun Yatsen. From 1912 to 1945, there was an effort by the ROC to build a state with at least the aspiration of becoming democratic. This is a crucial period for the development of Chinese nationalism. But Taiwan beginning in 1895 was pulled away from that evolving Chinese world and grafted onto the empire of Japan. In 1895 Japan and China fought a war that started in Korea and which Japan won, to everyone's amazement. One of the spoils it demanded was Taiwan, which the Qing dynasty was willing to relinquish. For so long as Japan was able to concentrate on its imperial holdings before it began to concentrate on homeland defense near the end of WWII, Taiwan was the pearl of the Japanese empire. It was to be the place where Japan would demonstrate to the Western world that it was as good as any nation at colonizing the world's "virgin territories." So for fifty years, Taiwan was disconnected from its Chinese roots.

In 1945, when Japan was defeated in WWII, Taiwan returned to China. The KMT-ruled ROC government, under the leadership of Chiang Kaishek, replaced the Japanese authorities. Initially, the transfer of power looked like it was going to go well, because many Taiwanese still thought of themselves as ethnically Chinese. But there were many tensions between the Chinese who moved in from the mainland to administer Taiwan and the Taiwanese. Finally in February 1947 there was an uprising by native Taiwanese. The rebellion was crushed by the ROC, which created an undercurrent of tension between the native Taiwanese and the newcomers. Then in 1949, the CCP defeated the nationalists and expelled the ROC from mainland China. The ROC moved its capital to Taiwan, where it began planning how it would return to mainland China and recover it someday.

Meanwhile, the communists were still waiting to finish the job of vanquishing the ROC. From the 1950s to the 1980s, Taiwan was in an uneasy political situation under Chiang's leadership. On the one hand, there was a considerable amount of political repression and dissatisfaction. But there was also an economic miracle. After 1950, the ROC's economic development policies began to have amazingly fruitful results, so that by the late 1980s Taiwan had surpassed the world average and China and was converging with Japanese and Western European per capita GDP.

The 1980s-90s saw rapid political change. After President Nixon's 1972 visit to China, many countries established relations with the PRC and broke relations with the ROC. Taiwan left the UN that year and became isolated internationally. It had to figure out what to do with itself. One answer was democratization. Both President Chiang Ching-kuo, Chiang Kaishek's son, and his successor, Lee Teng-hui, saw democratization as one way to build legitimacy for Taiwan. There had been elections before 1983, but that year they began to be really competitive. With the rise of democracy in Taiwan came the increasing feeling among Taiwanese that Taiwan did not really need China and was truly separate from China.

For China, the idea has always been that Taiwan would become some kind of special region like Hong Kong, enjoying extraordinary autonomy and privileges but still a part of the PRC state. In 1995, after President Lee visited Cornell University, where he had received his Ph.D., China moved from hostile rhetoric to military action aimed at intimidating Taiwan. This created a backlash in Taiwan, where more and more Taiwanese say "Why should we think about becoming part of China if they think of us as a military target?" However, there is little enthusiasm in Taiwan for formal independence. Most people just want to keep things the way they are.

Despite its political isolation internationally, Taiwan has an important global economic presence in many industries, particularly in high-tech. So there are contradictions: international political isolation vs. impressive global economic presence, also political conflict and polarization vs. a huge silent majority in Taiwan that is uninterested in conflict. The last contradiction is between the rising sense of Taiwanese identity and the increasing integration of Taiwan's economy with the mainland's.

In Dr. Rigger's opinion, the only reason we might encounter a crisis in the Taiwan strait would be if Beijing decided that it could no longer wait for economic integration and the softening of hostilities to work their magic and tries to compel Taiwan to accept unification before Taiwan is ready. But this is unlikely given the costs of doing so and because the trend to seek formal independence has already peaked in Taiwan. The prospects for accommodation between the two are actually improving.

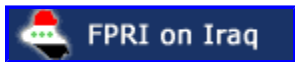
A Taste of China: the Language

Mimi Yang, associate professor of modern languages at Carthage College, gave an overview of the Mandarin Chinese language, China's official language (there are numerous other dialects). Chinese is difficult for many Westerners to conceptualize because it is among those languages that do not have an alphabet system or verb tenses. She familiarized the group with the pictorial qualities of Chinese characters and the commonalities among them that constitute their phonetics. Chinese is also a tonal language, and Dr. Yang explained how different tones govern whether Ma, for instance, means mother, horse, cloth, or "to scold."

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