

CHINA ON THE EVE OF EUROPEAN AGGRESSION

PROLOGUE: CHANGE AND MODERNIZATION

The beginnings of revolutionary change and modernization in China have to be understood in the context of Western expansion in the nineteenth century, which created a West-centered world order. Regardless of how critically one views the nature of “imperialism” or the activities of Western men and Western governments during the period of Western dominance, the fact remains that the non-Western world was transformed by these activities.

During the Western century, as the period 1850—1950 may well be labeled, Western ideas, techniques, and institutions were either imposed on colonial peoples or accepted under pressure by the few non-Western countries that still retained their “independence”; this acceptance was based on the recognition that the only hope for survival lay in Westernization.

Today, although the term *Westernization* has been discarded in favor of *modernization*, Westernization remains an important component of modernization. As a supposedly universal phenomenon, modernization implies that all peoples sooner or later undergo similar processes of change to reach similar universal goals. The concept of modernization

tends to bring a sense of dignity to non-Western people, who have been humiliated for so long and made to feel racially inferior. But one should not forget that the political ideologies (such as Western-style democracy, socialism, and communism) that have been accepted as the framework for modernization in Third World countries are Western in origin. These ideologies and associated political practices and institutions (written constitutions, elections, legislative assemblies, etc.) are the product of European political thought and development and, to a lesser or greater extent, still remain foreign implants in many non-Western societies.

Therefore the story of change in non-Western societies concerns how and why the need arose to reappraise indigenous political cultures; what in Western ideas and institutions was found valuable for acceptance; and what process led to the rejection, modification, or retention of traditional elements to achieve the goals of modernization. Indeed, the quest for modernization may be a common challenge, but the fact that there is no single model of a “modern” society, that there is no single path to “modernization,” that the advanced modern societies themselves now reject some elements that have been generally considered characteristics of modernization, and that the indigenous pre-modern cultures tend to react differently to

the challenge makes the quest historically unique for each people.

At the broadest level, modernization implies the transformation of rural agrarian cultures into urban industrial cultures. The process—and modernization is a process—affects the entire life of a country: its society, its political framework, and its economic system. At the heart of the process is a conscious desire to acquire the knowledge and the technology that will enrich the people, strengthen the nation and put it on par with the most advanced countries. For the latecomers it is a revolutionary process in the sense that it discards much that is known and has existed for centuries with much that is new and unknown. The process often does give birth to a troublesome contradiction when faith in “progress” and willingness to accept change clash with the need to preserve cultural identity which is rooted in the country’s historical past.

True success in modernization, as may be the case with Japan, results only when what is borrowed is fully absorbed into the indigenous system and when modern science and technology become rooted in the native society. But sometimes what a country attempts to borrow is so alien to the native genius that it must be rejected. It is unfair, if not culturally parochial, to look on this as a failure of modernization. In China, for example, attempts to implant a liberal democratic system have, so far, met with little success. This should not lead one to condemn China; rather, it should inspire a greater effort to comprehend the complex interaction between the Chinese cultural tradition and the forces of change released by the Western impact. The resulting synthesis makes the Chinese polity what it is.

The collapse of the Chinese traditional order resulted from two major phenomena: internal decay and external aggression. Internal decay reflected a dynastic decline that was, to a considerable extent, traditional. External aggression, however, brought new forces into play that demanded nontraditional responses, which China found difficult to develop because it was in the throes of dynas-

tic decline. Even if there had been no Western aggression, the Qing dynasty no doubt would have collapsed soon, perhaps even more quickly than it did, to be replaced by another traditional dynasty that would have brought new vigor to the administration. At one level the foreign impact aided in the death of the dynasty, but at another it undermined the entire traditional system. The result was that within 70 years of the First Opium War (or the first Anglo-Chinese War, 1839–1842), China saw the establishment of a modern republican form of government, and within 110 years, the present Communist government.

A youthful, vigorous, post-Industrial Revolution West may have been impatient to see quicker, or different, results. But societies are not blank sheets of paper on which new designs can be made at will. Indeed, it is only by keeping in mind the great Chinese tradition that we can comprehend both the time scale of change in China and the nature of its contemporary political developments, which have undeniable links with the past.

CHINA’S TRADITIONAL POLITICAL CULTURE

The Geographical Setting

Around 1800 the Chinese empire comprised of two distinct parts: China “proper” and Chinese dependencies in the outlying regions in Inner Asia. China proper lies south of the Mongolian desert and east of the Tibetan mountains and is cut off from Southeast Asia by virtually impassable mountains, rivers, and forests. In the East it is bounded by the Pacific Ocean. Chinese dependencies, broadly speaking, covered Manchuria (shown in modern maps as the three northeastern provinces of China: Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning), Mongolia (today the People’s Republic of Mongolia and Inner Mongolia), Central Asia (now the province of Xinjiang), Qinghai, and Tibet. These areas are contiguous to China proper and, in a manner of speaking, surround it.

China proper was densely populated by the Han people, the bulk of the Chinese population (somewhere around 95 percent), who gained their livelihood largely through settled agriculture; the dependencies were sparsely populated by nomadic or semiagricultural tribes who lived mostly by hunting and raising cattle, sheep, and horses. China proper was directly governed by Beijing through a tiered system of local government; the dependencies were “controlled” by various devices, such as appointing Han officials as “agents” of Beijing to advise local governments; giving official ranks to local rulers; helping friendly tribal leaders to gain power; and where necessary, encouraging wars between hostile tribes.

The non-Han “barbarians,” particularly those from across the northern and northeastern borders, had posed a threat to China proper since the dawn of Chinese history. At the best of times, they could be expected to raid border settlements for booty; at the worst, when the tribes managed to unify, they even succeeded in conquering and ruling the whole of China. Conversely, when the Han governments were strong enough, they would strengthen their control over the outlying regions and keep the tribals “pacified.” It was only in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that these areas were fully incorporated into the empire. Ironically this was achieved by the alien, “barbarian” Manchu dynasty, the Qing (1644–1912). From the end of the nineteenth century, voluntary or forced internal migration of Han Chinese to these territories began to change the demographic balance there; today the population of Manchuria is overwhelmingly Han, and the Han have also begun to outnumber the indigenous peoples in Xinjiang. Incidentally, the non-Han communities are now designated by the more respectable term *minority communities*.

The geopolitical interplay between the desert (or the steppe) and the arable land has left a lasting imprint on the Chinese psyche. It was this constant threat from the “northern barbarians” that had led to the building of the massive Great Wall in the third century BCE. The Wall, a tremendously impressive

engineering feat, failed to provide the security the Chinese were seeking, with the result that Chinese attention has, historically, been focused landward. This, coupled with the fact that until the nineteenth century the ocean frontier had never posed a similar threat, is one important reason for China’s not becoming a true sea power.

Although the northern barbarians periodically disturbed the peace and tranquility of the Chinese empire, they were never a menace to Chinese civilization. On the contrary, the invaders, with rare exception, were converted to Chinese culture and, in due course, assimilated into the Chinese population, thus proving to the Chinese that their culture was, indeed, superior to all others. Of even greater significance, the inhospitable regions of outer China, by providing a geographical buffer between China and other advanced civilizations, furnished the Chinese an environment of relative isolation in which they could “sinicize” any foreign influences that crept into the country.

Such isolation was also possible because within the vast territory constituting China proper, China had all the necessary ingredients to make it economically self-sufficient. The fertile region of the Northern Plain watered by the Huang He (the Yellow River), of the central plains through which the Yangtze flows, of the West River basin in the south, and of the “Red Basin” (so called because of the color of the soil) in Sichuan, with their climatic variations, provided a rich diversity of agricultural products. Nature had also endowed the country with ample reserves of coal, iron, copper, tin, lead, and silver. China therefore never had to look beyond its borders for trade to supply any of its real needs.

The geographical setting in which Chinese civilization developed thus gave the Chinese a sense of self-sufficiency, exclusiveness, and cultural superiority, which they have not lost to this day.

The Historical Setting

China has over 3,000 years of historical continuity, and it is not the intention here to sum-

marize the pre-1800 history, but only to highlight some of the historical developments that have contributed to the making of the great Chinese tradition.

Legend has it that after a series of semi-divine beings had taught the Chinese rudiments of civilization (like agriculture, silk culture, and weaving), an ideal human ruler by the name of Yao came to control the Yellow River basin, the area that was to be the cradle of Chinese civilization. Yao was not only wise, compassionate, and benevolent but also decided to hand over the throne to a worthy official, Shun, with views similar to his own, rather than to his own unworthy son. During Shun's reign the Yellow River flooded, and he called on a man by the name of Yu to help control the flood waters that were devastating the land. Yu toiled for 13 years before he succeeded. During these many years he passed his own house three times, and he knew that his wife had given birth to a son, but he never once entered it.

This myth emphasizes certain values that later became a part of the Chinese social and political ideals: (1) The greatest goal of a worthy ruler was to look after the welfare of his people. (2) To achieve this end the ruler searched the country for virtuous men of ability to help him in his work (thus Yu is chosen for his talent, not because he is a high official). (3) The authority of the ruler was absolute and royal commands were to be accepted without question. (4) Virtuous men felt honored to be called upon to work for the ruler and, like Yu, believed that serving the ruler (in modern terms the "state") was so important that it was to be given precedence over their personal needs and desires. (5) Unlike myths in other civilizations, the story of Yu has a very human content; it is all this-worldly. No gods or deities came to Yu's aid.

The story also indicates the preoccupation with water control that has characterized government activity in China since the dawn of history. The Yellow River, because of the high sedimentation rate that kept raising the river bed, had to be diked, and if the officials in charge of the dikes were negligent in their maintenance work, the dikes gave way and

the ensuing floods destroyed thousands of square miles of farmland. The capricious river is appropriately called "China's Sorrow."

Because of his virtue and success, Yu was made the ruler. He established the Xia dynasty, which was ultimately overthrown by a hostile tribe, which in turn established the Shang dynasty (1766? BCE to c. 1100 BCE). Though archaeological excavations in the 1950s appear to have confirmed the existence of the Xia dynasty, it still remains a nebulous period. Excavations, on the other hand, have confirmed that the Shang is a historical dynasty and the developments of Chinese culture from this time on show a remarkable continuity. In the Shang dynasty we have the beginnings of recorded history, written in a script that is clearly discernible as "Chinese."

In the twelfth century BCE China (and we can begin to use this term for this early heartland of the Chinese civilization) was invaded by a western tribe called the Zhou, who established a feudal state that lasted from c. 1100 BCE to c. 250 BCE. From around 500 BCE on, when the feudal order had begun to collapse, a great intellectual ferment took place, and many schools of philosophical thought flowered (e.g., Confucianism, Daoism, Legalism) that laid the foundations of Chinese traditional ideology.

The chief exponents of Confucianism, Confucius (c. 551-479 BCE) himself and his follower Mencius (c. 372-289 BCE), portrayed an idealized picture of the past when (supposedly) wise, moral rulers guided and led their people by the example of their own ethical conduct rather than by harsh laws; when the best in society, scholars of high character, advised the rulers and kept them from erring; when proper ritual and ceremonies held the people together, at various hierarchical levels, in close bonds of harmony; and when the government ensured the peasants their livelihood and provided education to all men. The Confucians were against war, not only because it was wasteful and brought human misery, but also because real authority came not from physical power but from virtue that radiated humanity and benevolence. By following these precepts the

and he managed the finances, arranged the marriages, hired tutors to educate the children, settled disputes between family members, and so forth. The complicated web of relationships within the extended family was clearly defined, and each person was expected to know exactly where he or she fitted in the structure and to behave accordingly.

The cult of "ancestor worship" had existed long before Confucius, but he put great emphasis on it and also enlarged on the concept of "filial piety." If the family was to be the cornerstone of his society, the continuity of the family lineage was a must. Confucians did not stress life after death, so the word *worship* in ancestor worship needs to be understood in the Chinese context. Ancestor worship was a family affair and did not denote an organized religion in the Indian or the Middle Eastern sense. Since the number of generations of dead ancestors to be venerated was limited, the living were tied to the memory of those who had just preceded them. As Confucius said, "Filial piety is seen in the skillful carrying out of the wishes of our forefathers, and the skillful carrying forward of their undertakings."¹

Confucianism stressed five human relationships (or bonds)—between father and son, husband and wife, elder brother and younger brother, prince and subject, and friend and friend—and maintained that if the rules governing these relationships were properly followed, society would achieve tranquility and harmony. Except for the last, these relationships were between a superior and an inferior, and although calling for obedience and loyalty from one side, presumed benign concern from the other. Three of these relationships are familial, but even the one between prince and subject can be considered an extension of the father-son relationship.

The Confucians looked upon the family unit as the foundation of civilization. Not only was the individual totally subordinate to the family unit, but also all loyalty was focused on the family at the expense of every other social or political institution. The ideal family consisted of five, or at least four, generations who lived under one roof. In this state within the state, the grandfather or great-grandfather ruled the household with absolute authority. His word was final in all matters,

ruler could eradicate crime because crime was a product of poverty and ignorance.

There was no permanent "divine right" to rulership, and the ruler ruled only as long as he was virtuous and worked for the welfare of his people. The king did have a "mandate from Tian" (Heaven), but Tian was looked upon as a moral force that guided the universe, and the responsibility of the ruler, the "Son of Heaven," was to bring humanity into harmony with Tian. This mandate could be withdrawn because "Heaven hears as the people hear, Heaven sees as the people see," and natural or man-made catastrophes leading to disorder and suffering were indications of Heaven's discontent. When bad events occurred, the mandate was taken to have expired; the Confucians approved of rebellion against a king who had thus proved himself lacking in virtue. No political philosophy until modern times has given the common man, in theory, such an important place in the state.

Filial piety came to influence not only the institution of marriage (marriages were arranged not for "love" but for the production of sons who would carry on the lineage and who were indispensable to ancestor worship), but also the development of Chinese humanism. Confucianism engendered the notion of graded love. If one could not love one's parents, how could one love those who were not even related by blood? An individual had to learn to serve and submit to one's parents with sincerity before becoming a parent and dispensing benevolence to one's own children and expecting them to be obedient. Cultivation of proper behavior for all members of the kinship group was essential to the proper regulation of a family. If all families were so regulated, the state would automatically be well regulated, and there would be universal tranquility and harmony.

Finally, since everything in Confucianism depended on correct behavior, and correct behavior, to be effective, had to reflect

the inner man, the Confucians emphasized the need for self-discipline and self-examination and the continuous cultivation of the inner virtues of righteousness; propriety; wisdom; faithfulness; and most important, of *REN* (compassion, human-heartedness, goodness, and benevolence).

The one dark spot in the high ideology of Confucianism was that in the familial and social hierarchy of status it assigned a low position to women, who were inferior and subservient to men. A virtuous woman was supposed to uphold "three subordinations": be subordinate to her father before marriage, to her husband after marriage, and to her son after her husband died. Men could remarry and have concubines, whereas women were supposed to uphold the virtue of chastity when they lost their husbands. Although this has nothing to do with Confucianism as such, in the Song dynasty (960–1279) it became fashionable, among the upper classes, to bind women's feet when they were little girls so that the feet never grew to be more than a few inches long. This strange and painful fashion, which lasted into the twentieth century, gradually came to be accepted even by the lower classes. Thus the women of China came to be hobbled in more than one way.

Contrary to the Confucians, the Daoists discarded society and its burdens and rejected all rational, man-made concepts of ethics and morality. If people could understand the *Dao* (The Way) of the cosmic order and seek harmony with it, they would realize the unity behind the diversity. This understanding could not come through reasoning or logic but through inner illumination. Like all schools of mysticism, Daoism is difficult to explain. Suffice it to say that it strengthened what probably was an ancient Chinese conception that the cosmic order was a united whole, that all things were relative, and that all contradictory phenomena supplied the correlates that went to prove the indivisibility of the whole. Daoism turned people's minds to nature and away from society because nature represented freedom from man-made restrictions and provided an opportunity for the expansion of the inner being.

Coexisting with Daoism was a belief that the cosmic order was influenced by the interplay of two forces, one positive and the other negative—Yang and Yin. The forces were contradictory yet complementary. They were represented by such opposite phenomena as the sun and the moon, day and night, summer and winter, heat and cold, male and female.

Daoism was antithetical to much of Confucianism and, if nothing else, helped to correct some of Confucianism's overemphasis on "man," which led to pomposity and rigidity of overly formalistic behavior. Daoist beliefs in a primitive society and minimum government died an early death, but philosophical Daoism left its abiding influence on the Chinese arts, particularly painting and poetry, in which the artist discarded Confucian rules and regulations and allowed the inner emotions to have freer play. With the passage of time Daoism also produced a popular religion, which attracted the common people with its rituals, magic, and a pantheon of divinities.

If Confucianism provided the framework for social behavior and the high ethical principles to guide good government, it was Legalism that actually eliminated the warring feudal states and unified China under a single imperial government. Unlike most Confucians, the Legalists were involved in the actual business of government. They were practical and forward-looking.

Instead of trying to revive the feudal order, they oversaw its burial. In contrast to the Confucians and Daoists, the Legalists looked on human nature as intrinsically evil and contended that laws (regulations) providing harsh punishments and bountiful rewards were essential for social peace and order. The Legalists advocated a strong autocratic government that would impartially administer the laws, conduct commerce, and own all resources of capital and labor. All power was to rest with the emperor, who was to exercise it with the help of administrators recruited for their talent and their loyalty to him. There was absolutely no need to depend on the moral example of the rulers or their advisors.

When the Qin ruler, Shi Huang-di (the First Emperor), using Legalist practices, succeeded in unifying China under his direct and absolute control in 221 BCE, the country underwent a major revolution. For a moment it appeared that with the abolition of hereditary nobles and their fiefs; the division of the country into districts under centrally appointed officers; the standardization of the writing system, money, weights, and measures; and the burning of books written by non-Legalist philosophers, not only feudalism but also Confucianism had been effaced. However, the ruthless Qin empire did not outlast its founder, Shi Huang-di, by many years, and the feeling of revulsion against the tyranny and dictatorship that had characterized Qin rule led to the rise of pro-Confucian sentiment. In the Han dynasty that followed, the essential features of the modified Confucian ideology that guided imperial government for the next 2,000 years were formulated, but the structure of imperial government established by Shi Huang-di was accepted with little change.

Held up as an example of a wicked ruler for two millennia, Shi Huang-di was rehabilitated by the Chinese Communists and their great leader Mao Ze-dong, who otherwise found little in China's tradition worth saving. By using vast amounts of forced labor, Shi Huang-di built the Great Wall and an impressive network of roads; by forced transfer of population he extended the empire all the way down to present Vietnam and, of course, brought unity to China. The Maoists condoned his ruthlessness (it is said that under every stone of the Great Wall lies buried a Chinese laborer) for his forward-looking policies and the greatness he brought to China.

The Making of Imperial Confucianism

During the Han dynasty (206 BCE–CE 220) the classics proscribed by Qin Shi Huang-di were "rediscovered"—some were indeed found intact, some were rewritten from memory, but some were forged. The purity of pre-Qin Confucian thought was lost, and the new Confucian scholars accepted many ideas as Confucian that actually had been propound-

ed by philosophers antagonistic to Confucius. The final synthesis, which incorporated many Legalist elements such as the institution of an absolute monarch and his bureaucracy and the right of the state to establish legal codes, dispense harsh punishment, have an army, and indulge in commercial activities (e.g., monopolies in salt and iron production), is called Han Confucianism or Imperial Confucianism.

The Confucian element in this synthesis is the reassertion of the principle that in the ultimate analysis, good government depends not on laws and institutions but on ethics and moral leadership and that its primary duty is to look after the welfare of the people.

Realizing, no doubt, that high philosophical ideas may not in themselves be enough to check the absolute power of the Legalist emperor, Confucian thinkers tried to use the imperial system itself to achieve their ends. The bureaucracy, the key Legalist institution of the imperial order, was increasingly recruited through an examination system based on Confucian texts. Thus the best minds in the country came to be trained in Confucian classics, and the orthodox ideology was perpetuated.

Another institution that was established in the Han dynasty, and with various changes lasted to the end of the empire, was the Censorate. The censors, who were among the most learned of the Confucian scholars, were supposed to admonish the emperors for misgovernment and to impeach the officials who were corrupt or failed to perform their duties properly. As one can imagine, the first function was often difficult to fulfill, although there are many instances in Chinese history of censors who had the moral courage to reprimand the emperors even at the cost of their lives.

Accepting ideas from other schools of thought besides Legalism, Han Confucianism held that there was a basic unity in the universal order. All things were related to one another and influenced one another in the manner of Yin and Yang, which, though contradictory, were both essential to unity and harmony. In the following passage Dong

Zhong-shu (c. 179–104 BCE), one of the great synthesizers of Confucian thought, shows how Heaven, Earth, and Man were closely connected and how the ruler played a critical role in the universal scheme

. . . Heaven, Earth and Man are the basis of all creatures. Heaven gives them birth, Earth nourishes them, and Man brings them to completion. Heaven provides them at birth with a sense of filial and brotherly love; Earth nourishes them with clothing and food; and Man completes them with rites and music [civilization]. The three act together as hands and feet join to complete the body and none can be dispensed with . . . a worthy ruler . . . advances brotherly affection and encourages filial conduct. In this way he serves the basis of Heaven.

He personally grasps the plow handle and plows a furrow, plucks the mulberry himself and feeds the silkworms, breaks new ground to increase the grain supply, and opens the way for the sufficiency of clothing and food. In this way he serves the basis of Earth.

He sets up schools . . . in the towns and villages to teach filial piety and brotherly affection, reverence and humility. He enlightens the people with education and moves them with rites and music. Thus, he serves the basis of Man.²

The examination system based on Confucian texts later made Confucianism the official ideology of the bureaucracy, which meant the ideology of the educated class. It soon became the hallmark of high culture and gradually was accepted as national ideology by all Chinese.

One non-Chinese element that made a permanent mark on Chinese culture and even helped shape the metaphysics of Imperial Confucianism (hereafter referred to simply as Confucianism) was Buddhism. Entering China at the end of the Han dynasty, it spread over the entire country and reached its high point in the eighth century. Then, having lost its vigor, it continued to the present as a part of China's popular culture.

Buddhism came to China when the Han dynasty was collapsing; the country was torn by strife and was soon to enter a period of dis-

unity that lasted three and a half centuries. In this time of political chaos and human misery, Buddhism, with its elaborate rituals, its explanation of suffering in this life, and its promise of a paradise after death, was attractive to the common person. It was also attractive to many intellectuals who had become disillusioned with the rigidity and superficiality of Confucianism as it had come to be practiced. Buddhism offered a highly sophisticated philosophy that dealt with the intellectual and spiritual life of the individual.

When Buddhism reached the height of its popularity, there were some 30,000 monasteries and thousands of pagodas and temples, which dotted the landscape in every part of the empire, and over 2 million monks and nuns who served the church. Every aspect of life was touched in one way or another by this alien religion. Apart from the realm of philosophy, Buddhism enriched the literature and the music of the country; added new styles to Chinese sculpture and painting; and contributed to Chinese science, especially astronomy, mathematics, and medicine.³

Buddhism, however, began to pose a dangerous challenge to the Confucian way of life, and an organized church with royal patronage began to exert an unacceptable political influence. Buddhism's advocacy of celibacy and withdrawal from society ran counter to the emphasis of Confucianism on filial piety, ancestor worship, and the need of all persons to be involved in productive social activities.

With the reunification of China in the Sui (581–618) and the Tang (618–907) dynasties and the institution of the examination system, there was a revival of Confucianism. In the next great dynasty, the Song dynasty (960–1279), several brilliant Confucian scholar-reformers, in the process of reinterpreting classical Confucianism added a metaphysical dimension to it to counter the influence of Buddhism, and, thereby, established a new school of Confucian philosophy; this school came to be known as Neo-Confucianism in the West. The most important of these scholars, no doubt, was Zhu Xi (1130–1200) who synthesized the works of his

predecessors and gave final shape to Neo-Confucianism.

At the popular level the Confucians found it comparatively easy to attack Buddhism for its antisocial attitudes, but at the intellectual and philosophical level they had to prove that the Buddhist doctrine of the Void was false. The doctrine of the Void posited that the phenomenal world was not real. There was nothing in Confucianism that could counter this postulate, so the Neo-Confucians added an ingenious dimension to Han Confucianism, the concept of "The Great Ultimate." The Great Ultimate, they said, was not Void but an immaterial and immutable "Principle" inherent in all things. It operated through a "material force," which because of the interaction between Yin and Yang, condensed into the myriad phenomena of which we are cognizant (i.e., the world of reality). Reflecting the Buddhist idea that the *One* Buddha-mind was present in the *Many* (all sentient beings), the Neo-Confucians declared that the Great Principle is found in all things and constitutes their essence. By proper cultivation of self, a person's mind could be made one with the "mind of the universe" and the Great Principle understood. This "enlightenment," unlike Buddhist enlightenment, led not to a rejection of the material world but to a greater comprehension of the proper role of human ethics, the importance of social relations and filial piety, and the abiding need to help improve the environment in which one lived.

The link between the moral order of the universe and the social and political order on earth was revitalized. Neo-Confucianism became the orthodox doctrine of the imperial state into the twentieth century, although a thinker in the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), Wang Yang-ming (1472–1528), did add his school of thought to the mainstream. According to Wang, "knowledge" and "action" should be closely connected. Knowledge that did not result in action was useless; all people have "innate knowledge" of what is right, but they lose that knowledge when they allow selfishness to blind them. A person must, therefore, eliminate base selfish emo-

tions to rediscover the virtues of benevolence, righteousness, and loyalty.

Neo-Confucianism reinforced the role of the ruler, the Son of Heaven, and strengthened the notion that culture and state were coterminous. In other words, there could never be more than one government over the state that coincided with the Chinese culture area. All peoples outside the culture area were barbarians.

There was only one orthodox ideology that all had to follow. No concept of a loyal opposition was permissible. This basically secular ideology (Confucianism) was all-embracing, relating humankind to the universe, the individual to the family, the family to society, private life to public life, and culture to politics.

The highest goal of humanity was to comprehend this ideology through education and self-discipline so as to better serve society, which could best be accomplished by participating in the government. Government was the hub of civilization. Commerce and trade were activities unworthy of the virtuous person.

The authority of the ruler as the ultimate protector of the ideology was all-pervasive, and the people were supposed to be beholden to him for everything. They could, therefore, have no "rights," only the obligation to serve him loyally and obediently. Individuals could fulfill themselves only through the group and the collective by recognizing their station within the hierarchical pattern of human relations. Outer action was a reflection of inner virtue. Conformity brought merit. Obedience to authority was inculcated as a virtue.

MANCHU CHINA C. 1800: THE MYTH AND THE REALITY

China never came close to the Confucian utopian ideal, but the Confucian political, social, and economic framework did prove durable, and over the centuries, Chinese culture did possess enough vigor to outlast other civilizations. The distinctive political and cul-

tural patterns that first became visible in the Han dynasty continued to develop creatively until about the fifteenth century, when the system can be said to have matured and further growth slowed down. Broadly speaking, the Song period marked the high point of traditional Chinese culture and civilization that put China ahead of the rest of the world in arts, literature, and learning (the art of printing books increased literacy and expanded the literati class); in political philosophy and government (the appointment of officials through an impersonal examination system made official posts accessible even to commoners and the state more centralized and "modern"); in the economic field (cash replaced silk as the medium of exchange and a proto-banking system arose; and there was a growth of urbanization: Cities became huge commercial centers and also witnessed the emergence of a popular genre of drama and music that catered to the commoners); and in technology (specialized industries began to mass produce porcelain and silk cloth).

The following pages provide an overview of conditions that prevailed when China entered the nineteenth century and give a bleak picture of a state and society that appear to be on the verge of collapse; the sophisticated imperial system, which had once allowed for technical developments and economic growth, had lost its resilience and dynamism, and the gap between Confucian ideals and the sociopolitical reality had begun to widen beyond repair.

It has been suggested by some historians that in the late Ming-early Qing period, China saw a tremendous growth in silk and porcelain production, which led to the emergence of "workshops" and the "sprouts" of capitalism, and that had it not been for the destructive Western presence (appearing on the scene at the wrong time), China would have produced its own Industrial Revolution. Though the possibility of such a development cannot be wholly ruled out, the thesis becomes irrelevant in the face of actual historical progress, in which the West rapidly outpaced China. As a respected Communist historian, Bai Shouyi, has pointed out (and

his pro-Chinese, anti-imperialist stand can hardly be doubted), "Though nascent capitalism made its appearance during the late Ming and early Qing period, it never had a chance to grow normally for several centuries." Among the reasons he gives are "inertia of a self-sufficient economy," limitations placed on capitalist development by "guilds and handicraftsman," government oppression, diversion of investment capital to land, and the Ming-Qing "self-defeating" policy of imposing restrictions on foreign trade.⁴

The Political System: The Rulers

The Manchus. A small but significant problem that faces students of modern China is the use of the term *Chinese*. On the face of it, it is obviously correct to refer to the government at Beijing as the *Chinese government*, the emperor as the *Chinese emperor*, and the people of China as the *Chinese people*. The fact that the last dynasty was a Manchu dynasty introduces an element that sometimes makes the use of these terms misleading. The Qing dynasty (1644-1911) was established by *Man-*ren** (men of the Manchu race), who were a tribal people from Manchuria, a territory that lies northeast of China proper. Although the rulers adapted themselves to the civilization of *Han-*ren** (people of the Han, or "Chinese," race), they never came to be totally absorbed, and the distinction between *Han* and *Man* was never lost throughout the Qing dynasty. The term *Chinese* will generally be used in this and the following sections to cover both Han and Manchu aspects of Chinese polity; on occasion it will connote the majority community as juxtaposed to the Manchus.

The success of the Manchus in being accepted as the legitimate rulers of China was primarily due to the fact that having restored peace in the empire by the use of their superior military power, the Manchus went on to rule the country through existing imperial institutions and with the help of Han officials. The local Han landlord-scholar-gentry families (see section below) were allowed to function as heretofore, and their interests were

not touched. In other words, the Manchus, who constituted only 2 percent of the population, moved in at the top of the existing political pyramid and became supervisors of a system that had been perfected over the centuries.

The Manchus tried to preserve their separate identity and continued predominance over the vastly larger Han population by trying to keep the *Man-*ren** segregated from the Chinese (Han) and by maintaining a military establishment that was primarily Manchu and Mongol. The Chinese military units were deployed in areas of secondary importance and used largely as a police force. As time passed, Manchus at the lower levels, especially Manchu soldiers, broke the various bans imposed on them and began to wear Chinese dress, speak Chinese, and intermarry with the Chinese. But the sense of their being superior to the Chinese and the sense of antagonism between the two communities disappeared only with the collapse of the dynasty.

The most serious consequence of the Manchu domination of China was the increased concentration of power in the hands of the emperor. Theoretically, all Chinese emperors had been absolute despots, but the Manchu emperors circumscribed the power of the Han officials even more severely because of the inherent Manchu fear of the majority community. No Han officials were included in the department handling relations with dependencies; a Manchu was appointed, jointly with a Chinese, to head each ministry, and most governor's general in the provincial administration were Manchus.

The Qian-long emperor (reigned 1736-1796) carried out a literary inquisition and suppressed thousands of works that were supposed to be seditious (many of them criticized the Manchus as barbarians) and punished the authors with death or banishment. Such actions of the Qing rulers increased the servility of the officials and the literati to the government and smothered those who could have provided more creative political solutions to the problems that arose in the nineteenth century with the arrival of the Western powers.

The Qing continued the Ming approach to mercantilism. In internal trade this meant that the repressive system of tariffs, duties, and "squeeze" was perpetuated, and a national market was kept from developing. However, although the government had no constructive policies designed to foster manufacturing industries, the doubling of the population in the eighteenth century had led to a huge growth in demand and some cities and areas had begun to develop specialized products (e.g., porcelain at Jingdezhen; teas and silks in Jiangxi).

In external trade, to begin with, the Manchu policies were even more restrictive of growth than those of the insular Ming government. In the early decades of the Qing dynasty the Ming loyalists had continued to harass the new government from overseas bases. The Qing tried to cut off the connection between the Ming loyalists and the population inland by forcing the coastal inhabitants to withdraw several miles inland. The size of the merchant ships was reduced, and orders were issued forbidding overseas Chinese from returning to the motherland. Even when the government was securely in power, its suspicions of overseas Chinese and those involved in naval commerce never abated. Despite all these handicaps, by 1800, the growth of internal commodity trade impacted on overseas trade and exports to the so-called tributary territories of Siam, south-east Asia, the Philippines, and Japan increased significantly; there was also a sizable growth in the tea sales to the British East India Company.

Cultural contacts with the West, tenuously maintained by the Jesuits (see boxed note below), came to an end when Christianity was declared a heterodox cult in 1742. Around 1760 trade with the West was restricted to the one port of Canton, where it was carried on under strict official supervision.

In the century of isolation from the West that followed, China extended its authority over Tibet (1751) and Central Asia (1760s), which was later called Xinjiang ("New Frontier") and made a province of the empire in 1884. It also expanded its influence

over Nepal and Burma through extensive military action. Thus the empire came to be a conglomerate of provinces, colonies, and protectorates. Manchuria, the homeland of the Manchus, was kept separate from China proper and given a special status; Mongolia was bound to the empire through ties of tribal loyalty to the Manchus; Xinjiang was administered by the military; and Tibet was a protectorate. By maintaining the fiction that these areas were dependencies and that their peoples were "minority" communities of China, and by suggesting that it was in this capacity that these people occasionally tried to become the rulers of China, the present government has avoided the issue of imperialist expansion. Otherwise one would have to recognize that China's occupation and absorption of the outlying regions was an act similar to that of the Western imperialists, who at this very time were beginning to carve out world empires.

Internally, however, the period was largely one of stability and prosperity, although signs of dynastic decline started to become visible by the late eighteenth century and multiplied in the nineteenth century.

THE JESUITS

Jesuit missionaries first managed to reach Beijing in 1600, at the end of the Ming dynasty. They learned the Chinese language, studied the Chinese classics and Confucian philosophy, and changed their dress to that worn by the Chinese scholars, hoping that if they could find acceptance in the eyes of the Chinese upper classes they could propagate their religion among the Chinese intelligentsia. They achieved some success under the Ming, and even the early Manchu rulers were disposed to favor them. The situation changed after 1742 when the pope, siding with the Jesuits' opponents in the church, declared that the Chinese rites of ancestor worship and the worship of Confucius and of Tian (Heaven) were not "civil" rites, as the Jesuits maintained,

but religious rites and therefore unacceptable; Chinese converts were to be forbidden from participating in them. The Qing rulers could not accept this attack on what constituted the foundations of Chinese social and political ideology, and henceforth only those missionaries were allowed to stay who virtually denounced the papal decree. The court found the few Jesuits who did stay on very useful: They were good at casting cannons, calendar making, painting, and cartography, and they could be employed as interpreters when Western envoys came to Beijing. However, since Christianity had been declared to be a heterodox cult, the Jesuits' work as missionaries had basically come to an end. The last of the Jesuits in China died in 1805.

The Emperor. The emperor played a key role in the Confucian sociopolitical system. The accepted myth was that the emperor was the Son of Heaven, the ruler of all humankind, the fountainhead of civilization, the ultimate defender of ideology, a most humane sovereign, whose only *raison d'être* was his concern for the welfare of the common man. And he was endowed with supreme power.

In actual fact few emperors had the physical stamina and the intellectual capacity to undertake the direct rulership of the country and to exercise this power. The first few emperors of the Qing dynasty, those who helped to establish it, were no doubt men of vigor, and they did actually "rule" the country. But with the passage of time weaker emperors emerged who were more content to "reign" through a bureaucracy that was becoming vastly inflated. At the same time, the military, which was under the direct command of the emperor and had not seen any real war for a century and a half, began to lose its fighting capacity.

There were other limitations, too, on the power of the later emperors. They were

bound by Imperial House Laws (laid down by the emperor who founded the dynasty), by the edicts of their predecessors, and by custom and tradition. Raised by eunuchs and maid-servants, these emperors had hardly any contact with life outside their high palace walls. When in power they were caught up in palace intrigues; guided by eunuchs and sycophants, they hardly fit the Confucian myth. The need to uphold the myth, however, became greater as the reality slipped further and further from the ideal.

What, for example, could be more un-Confucian than a eunuch who could not continue his lineage, except a eunuch advising the emperor. Although the original reason for having eunuchs in the residential quarters of the imperial palace was to protect the emperor's wives and concubines from coming in contact with any male other than the emperor, the numbers and the duties of the eunuchs proliferated with time. The 3,000 eunuchs in the Forbidden City (the Imperial Palace compound) at the end of the Qing dynasty performed such tasks as transmitting imperial edicts, leading officials to audiences, receiving memorials, and collecting money and grain sent by treasuries outside the palace. The eunuchs thus came to control the communication links between the emperor and the outside world.

The Central Government. The emperor was assisted, at the highest level of government, by the Grand Council (*Junjichu*) and the Grand Secretariat (*Neige*). The Grand Council, comprising an equal number of Manchus and Chinese, met with the emperor every morning to discuss policy issues, usually raised by memorials sent by senior central and provincial officials, and to help draft imperial edicts that settled the issues and laid down policy. The Grand Secretariat oversaw the execution of policy through the activities of the six central ministries (sometimes referred to as "boards"), each headed by two presidents and four vice-presidents, half Chinese and half Manchu: Civil Affairs (appointment and dismissal of officials), Revenue, Rites (state ceremonials, tributary missions,

and imperial examinations), War, Punishments, and Public Works (roads, dikes, canals, flood control, imperial buildings, etc.).

Other important organs of central government located in Beijing were a Censorate, which kept watch over the officials and reported incidents of impropriety and violations of moral and legal codes, and a Bureau of Dependency Affairs, handling relations with inner Asian dependencies.

Provincial Administration. China proper was divided into 18 provinces, which were further subdivided into circuits, prefectures, districts, and subprefectures.

Each province was under a governor, and most provinces were paired together under a governor general, or viceroy. The governors were mostly Chinese; the governors general, mostly Manchu. In provinces that had a governor and governor general, the two officials jointly reported important business to the emperor. Other important officials centrally appointed to the provincial capital were a financial commissioner, handling revenues; a judicial commissioner; and a provincial commander-in-chief, in charge of central military units in the province.

The basic local administrative unit was the district (*xian*), of which there were about 1,500 in the country. The district magistrate, appointed by Beijing, was a key imperial official because he came in direct contact with the local populace. He represented all government authority in his person, and his activities covered all fundamental branches of government. He collected the taxes, maintained peace and order, arrested the criminals, adjudicated the law, and looked after the public works and public welfare.

To avoid the possibility of establishing a local power base, no magistrate was appointed to his home province, and his tenure in any one district was usually no more than three years. He was helped in the difficult task of administering a district with a population of several hundred thousand by his personal staff (who moved from district to district with him), as well as a local staff of clerks,

messengers, servants, and so forth and by the voluntary help of the local scholar-gentry.

The Examination System, the Gentry, and the Bureaucracy. The 40,000 officials who headed the civil service and the million or so degree holders who formed the scholar-gentry were all the product of the imperial examination system, which incidentally, was later copied by almost the whole world.

The examinations, which were held at various levels at regular intervals, led to three important degrees: *xiu-cai* ("flowering talent," may be taken to be the equivalent of the B.A. degree since it is the lowest of the three), *ju-ren* ("recommended person," M.A.), and *jin-shi* ("presented scholar," Ph.D.). The examinations, based on Confucian texts, were by no means easy to pass, but since they were the only avenue of upward mobility and since the rewards of passing them were so great, hundreds of thousands of the best minds in the country were continuously locked in rigorous preparation for this harrowing experience. Scholars who failed could take an examination repeatedly, and sometimes a grandfather would be enrolled for the same examination as his grandson.

Candidates would be placed in separate cubicles (that were not large enough for a person to stretch out in and sleep) and tested in several sessions of several days each. They were allowed to bring food, bedding, and writing materials but were thoroughly checked for any books or scraps of paper with writing on them that they might have concealed on their persons. When the examinations were over, "suffering from fatigue, and under heavy pressure, most candidates became a little strange in the head. . . . In the most severe cases men became sick or insane."⁵

Only those who passed the top two levels of the examinations were entitled to any official position, but the *xiu-cai*, too, played an extremely important role in the maintenance of the political system. They and the scholar-officials who had come to their home districts on leave or retirement formed the bulk of the literati class. They are known as

the gentry, which should not be confused with the term as used in Britain. In China one attained gentry status and enjoyed certain well-defined social, economic, and legal privileges because of one's scholarly attainment. Gentry were the accepted leaders in their locality, and the magistrates treated them with respect. Not only were they their scholarly peers, but the magistrate also needed gentry goodwill to function effectively in an alien environment.

The privileges granted to the gentry put them in a category apart from the rest of the people. Socially, they were eligible to wear certain clothing that the common folk were denied and to have a flag post outside their residences with a pennant displaying the degree they had earned. Some of their taxes were reduced, and they were exempted from corvée labor. They were also exempted from judicial punishment short of penal servitude, and that punishment could be meted out only after they had been first deprived of their degree.

In return for these privileges the gentry were expected to perform certain unpaid functions. For example, they raised funds for the maintenance of public works (canals, dams, dikes, roads, and bridges); they looked after the Confucian temples, set up schools, gave lectures on public morals, published local histories and gazetteers; they supported poor houses, widows' homes, and orphanages; and in times of flood or famine they organized relief work. In case there were local uprisings they were authorized to raise a militia for local defense. These functions paralleled the work of the government.

The million-plus members of the gentry constituted an important part of the ruling class of China. They were all educated in the same Confucian texts and were imbued with the same ideology and world outlook; spread over the entire country, they had a deep-rooted, vested interest in the existing system and helped to strengthen the cultural unity of the country. The functions they performed made them an unofficial branch of the government. A dynasty could not last without their support.

According to the Confucian myth, the officials and the gentry were the wise, sage leaders of society who helped sustain the moral order and who worked zealously for the welfare of the people. In reality, the gentry and the officials usually connived and competed with one another to squeeze as much as they could out of the peasantry in order to build up private fortunes. By the nineteenth century, as the central government became more inefficient and ineffective at the local level, the gentry increased their terribly un-Confucian activities, removing their land holdings from tax registers, grabbing land belonging to tenants in debt, gathering taxes from the peasants far in excess of government demand, and so forth.

Instead of being the "father-mother" officials the mandarins were supposed to be, they consciously separated themselves from the common people and ruled from a distance, not unlike the colonial British officials in India. Indeed, at one level, the Chinese political system can be compared to a colonial government, for the main thrust of the Manchu rulers was to preserve themselves by giving maximum free play to supportive traditional institutions, which indoctrinated the people to make them subservient. The Manchus spent more energy creating a network of checks and balances than fostering dynamic policies of growth and advancement. Thus the function of the Beijing government was negative rather than positive. In the face of European aggression, when the need arose to lead society, neither the emperor nor his officials were in a position to do so.

Over the centuries the examinations had become stereotyped, knowledge had become stultified, and there was little allowance for creative political thinking. Education was not for broadening mental horizons or liberating the spirit of enquiry but for memorizing texts that exulted in conservatism and a backward-looking Confucian ideology that effectively shut out the world beyond the borders of the Middle Kingdom. The few who survived the system and emerged with their intellectual vitality unimpaired were an exception to the rule.

The Manchu rulers, who themselves were "barbarians," should have been more aware of the danger that the "barbarians from the West" represented. But they had become so sinicized by 1800 that they too had acquired the Confucian blindfold. In fact, to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the Han population, the Manchus had to out-Confucian the Confucians.

Corruption. Behind the facade of Confucianism, which continued to be affirmed publicly in every possible manner, there was a vast web of nepotism and corruption that had become a part of the bureaucratic system. Officials were expected to maintain a style of life befitting their status, pay the salaries of their personal staff from their own pocket, and provide for innumerable relatives who, because of the Confucian emphasis on kinship, could demand to be looked after. Besides the officials also usually managed to amass a considerable fortune by the time they retired. Since all this could not be managed within the limits of their relatively meager salaries, they were forced to find moneys from "other" sources. This resulted in a national system of graft and corruption that extended from the eunuchs and the princes in the Imperial Palace in Beijing down to the magistrate's clerk in the district.

For example, let's start with a lowly magistrate who wants to be posted to affluent districts, where there are greater chances of making money, than to poor ones. To get such appointments the magistrate needs to keep his patrons and superiors in the bureaucracy happy. He does so by sending "gifts to superiors" (*kui-song*) which was an accepted and regular feature of official life. His patrons and superiors pass on a part of their graft to their patrons and superiors. But where does our magistrate get the money for these gifts? Since it was officially recognized that his salary was not even enough to cover his legitimate expenses, he was *officially* allowed to make up the balance through a designated amount of "customary fees." These customary fees became, in time, a polite term for graft. Ultimately, of course, it was the poor peasant at

the bottom, whom they were all supposed to be serving so assiduously, who was wrung dry.

The most notorious example of corruption at this point in Qing history is no doubt He-shen (1750–1799), who because he was the favorite of the Qian-long emperor, rose from the position of a bodyguard to that of chief minister and accumulated personal property worth the equivalent of \$1.5 billion.

The Financial Base of the Empire. The imperial government kept a detailed record of the intake and outgo of national financial transactions, but these figures do not indicate the true nature of the economy because many of them were ritualistic. There was no "common purse" into which revenues were collected, nor indeed was there any system by which the government could know precisely what revenues were actually collected.

Central revenues were based on three sources: land-poll taxes (75 percent), commodity taxes (customs duties, 10 percent), and monopolies (the most important of which was salt, 15 percent). But since provincial and other local expenditures were deducted from the amounts forwarded to Beijing, the figures tell only half the story.

Consider, for example, the land-poll taxes. The figures for cash and grain reaching Beijing were, by and large, correct, but figures giving the total collections were more often than not totally false. One reason was that few magistrates were content with the 10 percent "customary fees" surcharge they were supposed to collect and illegal exactions often were as high as 50 percent of the legal tax.

Another form of corruption resulted from the exchange rate. The tax was collected in terms of silver, and the official exchange rate was supposedly fixed at 1,000 copper cash for one tael of silver. Local officials, however, sometimes arbitrarily raised the rate to as high as 4,000 cash. Since the local gentry could actually pay in silver, they did not suffer from the system as did the poor peasants, who could hardly raise enough copper cash even to pay the fixed amount at the

authorized rate of exchange. The officials further abused their position by imposing various miscellaneous taxes.

Although the tax system was based on the amount of land under the plow and the number of adult males who worked it, the imperial government was not concerned with individual tax returns but allocated a quota to be collected by each province. If the contribution asked for was forthcoming, the central government had no further interest in local finances or in how much was actually being collected.

Similar corruption marked customs collection and the management of monopolies; officials connected with the supervision of commodity production and trade lined their pockets with illegal exactions from the merchants involved. The total amount of revenues reaching Beijing before 1850 was about 40 million taels, a fifth to a third of the official collections. When foreign aggression placed added financial demands on the central government, the antiquated revenue system could not meet the need. Additional levies on the land were impossible, for the peasants had been taxed to the limit. The development of new sources of wealth required a revolutionary change in the agrarian-based Confucian ideology, and China was not yet ready for such a change.

The Military System. All Chinese dynasties had come to power with the help of the military, and the ultimate source of imperial power was the army. Yet a myth had arisen that the Chinese were a pacifist people who had contempt for the military man and for military affairs. Whether this myth was a concession to Confucianism, which as an ideology looked askance at the military, or a product of the propaganda by the scholar-literate that they alone kept the empire going, is inconsequential. In fact, the Chinese are no more pacifist than any other people; their history is no less bloody than that of any other nation. Indeed, if one were to go by their operas, plays, and literature, they have a host of popular military heroes who have stirred

the hearts of commoner and elite alike through the centuries. Perhaps the contempt for the military was also due to the fact that the Manchu dynasty not only kept the senior-most military posts in Manchu hands but also kept the Han out of the main fighting armies.

However, it is noteworthy that Chinese military officers were considered members of the gentry, and many civil officials had military responsibilities. In the latter half of the nineteenth century some of the senior Confucian civil bureaucrats became prominent provincial military leaders.

The Manchu military was known as the "banner forces" (so called because each army had its own distinguishing banner), and after the occupation of China the Manchus used their own forces to garrison the capital and the key areas in China. The Chinese army, the "Army of the Green Standard," inherited by the Qing and about 600,000 in strength, was nearly twice the size of the Manchu forces. But it was decentralized and used primarily as a local police force. The banner garrisons occupied their own fortified residential quarters in a city, so even though the Manchus became sinicized, the Han could not quite forget that they were occupation troops.

Like the rest of the administration, the military gradually lost its efficiency and became corrupt. The banner forces were ill paid, ill trained, and ill supplied. From being proud Manchu soldiers who were not allowed to engage in trade or labor, many were now forced by adverse circumstances to work as artisans and peddlers. The forces of the Army of the Green Standard existed in full strength only on paper. The commanders, whose muster rolls showed 100 to 500 percent more soldiers than existed in fact, appropriated military funds for private use, built up private fortunes, and lived a life of corruption and luxury.

The army had become so worthless that it often could not even enforce law and order. Indeed, at some locations the soldiers themselves were the cause of disorder, and their depredations were comparable to those of the local banditry. As a result, many locali-

ties began to form local corps for defense, under the leadership of the local gentry.

Law in Traditional China. Confucian ideology stressed the overriding obligation for all persons, from the emperor to the peasant, to preserve harmony and not disturb the natural order. It was reasoned that since this harmony could be achieved, in the nation and in the family, by following the ritualized rules of social conduct, by moral suasion, and by maintaining the proper attitude toward authority, there was no need for laws and punishments. However, even before the establishment of the Legalist imperial state, Confucians had recognized that only the educated superior person could be expected to have the moral understanding and self-discipline that would obviate the need for punishments. The common people, often referred to by the literati as "the foolish ones," might need to be disciplined by punishment. The Legalists, as their name implies, put great emphasis on laws (regulations) and prescribed harsh punishments for those who broke them.

Legal practice in imperial China reflected both these strains of thought. The so-called legal codes that had developed through the centuries were primarily administrative and penal and stressed both morality and harsh punishment. Civil law had a limited and stunted growth. Within the framework of Confucian society, the family, the clan, the group, and the collective were responsible for individual behavior. The individual therefore had no rights that needed to be protected. Any conflict between individuals was best mediated within the family or the group and settled by compromise and accommodation. Mutual surveillance and mutual responsibility were officially encouraged.

If, however, a crime was committed and the group failed to punish the culprit, it disturbed local harmony and endangered the state. The state then moved in with a heavy hand and severely punished the group to which the criminal belonged, unless, of course, the group on its own identified the

criminal. Law, as dispensed in China, was less to distribute justice than to instill fear into the hearts of the evil-doers and to ensure that the people understood the terror of the law. Often an innocent person was punished, but that was secondary to the fact that the law had set an example.

Law was not transcendental. Keeping Confucian values in mind, the magistrate would punish a father lightly for killing his erring son but award the death penalty to a son who had merely injured his father. The preservation of the Confucian moral order was more important than any respect for an abstract legal doctrine. There was no development of an independent judiciary or a science of jurisprudence. The magistrate combined in his person the functions of the police (he was to ensure that the criminal was apprehended), the public prosecutor, the defense attorney, the coroner, the judge, and the jury.

Since crime meant disorder and a lack of harmony, it reflected on the magistrate's inner virtue. The greater the number of crimes in his district, the less virtuous he was seen to be; consequently the likelihood of not being promoted or receiving an increment was greater if crime was common in his district. Moreover, if a magistrate could not apprehend the criminal within a certain period, he might be suspended without pay or even demoted. It was therefore in the interest of the magistrate to cover up criminal activity in his district or connive to get the criminals to move into a neighboring district. As the Qing administration deteriorated, this practice meant that the government was progressively unaware of the actual conditions in the countryside. It also meant that bandits and other bad elements sought refuge on the borders of administrative areas (e.g., mountains separating provinces), where they were free from control.

Quoting cases in which the victims of injustice "had to fall back on the faith that supernatural power would help them . . . where human agencies had failed to do so," Sybille van der Sprenkel concludes that "legal

institutions . . . may in fact have done much to undermine the social order as to uphold it . . . [by] strengthening irrational tendencies which were at variance with the common-sense humanism of Confucianism.

The Commoners: The Ruled

Peasants. In spite of the Confucian lip service to the peasants and their supposed high position within the ranking structure of the Chinese classes—next below the all-important literati and above the artisan and merchants—the peasants, who constituted nearly 80 percent of the population were in fact at the bottom of society. As a generalization it was true that the craftspeople and merchants, although in theory considered to be social inferiors, definitely enjoyed a more comfortable life than the majority of the peasants.

According to the Confucian myth, Chinese society was egalitarian, and the humblest male peasant could aspire to the highest pinnacle of social status by passing the imperial examinations, rising through the bureaucracy, and perhaps even ending his career as a member of the Grand Council or as the head of one of the ministries. The fact that in some rare cases peasants actually had climbed this ladder of upward mobility had helped to perpetuate the myth. In reality China was a two-class society: the landlord-gentry-scholar-bureaucrats, forming the ruling elite, and the illiterate peasants (along with the numerically fewer artisans, merchants, and soldiers), the exploited masses.

Over the centuries elements of Confucian high culture had, indeed, trickled down to the peasantry and had come to provide basic family values and patterns of familial and social relationships. However, Confucianism never did wholly replace other elements that formed the living fabric of mass culture. Popular Buddhism and popular Daoism, with all their hells and heavens and myriad of gods and goddesses, continued to provide a much-needed spiritual solace to the

peasants, whose precarious existence could be shattered by one bad harvest.

With an abundance of workers and limited technology, the agricultural economy worked fairly well until the nineteenth century. But for reasons not yet fully understood, a population explosion had occurred by this time. The population doubled in the 100 years preceding 1850, reaching the staggering figure of 400-plus million. This increase resulted in a definite decline in the peasant economic situation, manifested in decreasing acreage of small holdings, increasing tenancy, agricultural unemployment, indebtedness, and peasant rebellions.

Throughout history Chinese peasants had suffered periodically from devastating floods and famines, but agrarian distress from 1800 on resulted in death by the millions. During one famine alone, in 1877–1878, some 9 to 13 million persons perished in four northern provinces. The rapacity of the officials added to the cruelty of nature. By the mid-nineteenth century corruption in taxation practices often meant an increase of 300 to 1,000 percent in what the peasants had to pay. The imperial system of public granaries, where grain was stored for distribution during shortage, broke down and was abandoned. According to Barrington Moore, "the government and the upper classes performed no function that the peasant regarded as essential for their way of life."⁷

Unlike the ruling elite, the peasants generally did not live in extended family units. It was customary for them to live as a conjugal family, in their own home (however small) in the local village. The average family size was five. All members of the family who had the physical capacity to do so labored long hours intensively cultivating their land holding. Although not all peasants were poor, the number of those who owned comparatively small holdings, on which the family labored without outside help, and those who rented land as tenants formed the bulk of the peasantry. The practice of dividing the land equally between male offspring tended over time to reduce

the size of the holdings even further. Dependable figures are not available, but it has been calculated that in the nineteenth century the average size of a farm in North China was three acres, and in South China, one and a half acres.

Two aspects of peasant life have come to leave their mark on Chinese society as a whole. One is that the peasants' preoccupation with maintaining the fertility of the soil led to their carefully collecting all refuse for use in the fields, particularly night soil. A perceptive foreigner who lived in China in the 1850s observed that the "preparation of manure from night soil . . . furnishes employment to multitudes who transport at all hours their noisome loads through narrow city streets. Tanks are dug by the wayside, pails are placed in the streets and retiring stalls opened among the dwellings, whose contents are carried away in boats and buckets . . ."⁸ This situation prevails in large areas of China even today.

The second aspect is that centuries of fighting famines and food shortages has led the Chinese to experiment with every possible source of nutrition. The beauty is that the ingredients, such as snakes, frogs, cats, and dogs, are transformed into the most appetizing dishes. The pity is that the peasants, who no doubt helped in the development of this culinary art, became so poor that they could rarely afford to eat any dishes made even of these humble ingredients.

The peasants lived in villages, but the imperial control system (the *bao-jia* system) organized the households in units of 10 (*pai*), 100 (*jia*), and 1,000 (*bao*) for collective responsibility, thus cutting across the limits of a single village. The natural village therefore could not acquire the independent identity it often did in other traditional societies; however, the Chinese peasants, because of their strong attachments to their kin and native place, did identify with their village. The *bao-jia*, as a police control system, collapsed by the middle of the nineteenth century, but by then banditry and internal wars had made village life chaotic.

Artisans and Merchants. The artisans and merchants were city dwellers, although the bulk of their clients lived in the rural areas. The artisans stood above the merchants in the Confucian social stratification, but they were numerically fewer and not as well off as the merchants. The artisans were organized into separate guilds for each of the main trades (shoemakers, weavers, carpenters, goldsmiths, etc.), which were usually located in separate neighborhoods. The masters and the apprentices established a familial relationship, living and working together until the apprentice had learned the trade and was ready to set up his own craft shop. The guild regulated the conditions of work, established quality control and prices, settled disputes, and collected taxes. It was also responsible to the government. In addition the guilds organized social entertainment and got-togethers for their members.

The merchant community ranged from itinerant peddlers, who carried their wares from village to village, and street vendors to large-scale traders, who were millionaires. Merchants who handled the interprovincial distribution of specialized products like salt, silk, and tea tended to be affluent, often many times richer than the wealthy bureaucrats, but their status in society did not match their prosperity. Even a petty official could make life difficult for them because they had no protection under the law. Confucianism considered their activities parasitic.

Although called a *class* in Confucian terminology, the merchants never came to form an independent class as they did in Japan or India. They established guilds, but unlike the guilds of Europe, Chinese guilds proved unable to promote effectively the special interests of the merchants or give them a voice in government affairs. Rather, Chinese guilds served more as control mechanisms for the government. In the cases of salt and foreign trade the guilds were established by the government itself. Trade and merchants thus remained subservient to government officials and dependent on official goodwill. Since the officials could, and did, squeeze the merchants, the merchants learned to work as

allies of the government and kept high officials happy with "gifts" and "donations," thereby securing protection at the highest level and avoiding harassment at lower levels.

Despite the element of government control, guilds of course performed useful functions for Chinese merchants. For example, to protect merchants who were away from their home province, regional guilds were established in major trading centers in other provinces. As the conditions of law and order deteriorated, some of the richer guilds even began to organize their own militias. And by fixing prices and arbitrating disputes, the guilds tended to reduce competitive tensions between merchants.

Many wealthy merchants who wished to discard their lowly status and gain higher social honor became landlords and encouraged their male children to take the imperial examinations; even if one son succeeded in the first level of the examinations it would, automatically, put him and his entire family in the gentry class. Thus the development of capitalism and the entrepreneurial spirit remained thwarted by unfavorable social circumstances.

Secret Societies and Peasant Rebellions. Confucian political theory accepted peasant rebellions as a legitimate response to dynastic decline. Indeed, such rebellions had usually helped to establish new dynasties throughout Chinese traditional history. Yet nothing was so abhorrent to Confucianism as "disorder" (*luan*.) This ambivalence came to be resolved, in practice, by the acceptance of the leader of a successful rebellion as a man of great virtue who had received the heavenly mandate to rule China and by the condemnation of the leader of an unsuccessful rebellion as a "bandit" and a "traitor" who was sliced to death for having shown disloyalty to his prince. Peasant defiance of authority, however, was not limited to these relatively rare occasions of dynastic change. At any time when famines, floods, or the rapacity of landlords or officials made life impossible for the peasants and drove them beyond the limits of forbearance, uprisings occurred. When these

uprisings became widespread and were led by secret societies, they were taken to be a sure indication of dynastic decline.

Usually associated with some Buddhist or Daoist religious cult, the secret societies had long histories, going back several hundred years, during which time they had managed to ward off every effort by various dynasties to crush them. Each secret society had developed elaborate rituals and secret signs that gave a sense of identity to their members. In times of peace and order they provided group security and advancement.

By 1800, as Qing power declined, peasant uprisings led by secret societies began to harass the government. The rising of the White Lotus Society in the region bounded by Hubei, Sichuan, and Shaanxi lasted nine years (1796–1804) and cost the government about 120 million silver taels to suppress (three times the annual state revenue). The Heavenly Reason Society staged an uprising in Henan, Shandong, and Zhili provinces in 1813 and even attempted to seize the Forbidden City. The slogan "Overthrow the Qing," which appeared at this time, served as a rallying cry for its opponents until the collapse of the dynasty. These early nineteenth-century uprisings were eventually quelled. But in the process it became abundantly clear that the Qing military had deteriorated because the government had to raise a militia force of several hundred thousands to achieve victory.

It can be concluded that by 1800 the Confucian imperial system had become too

set in its ways. It was no longer possible for its operators to change it in any significant manner. Indeed, the ruling classes were themselves the prisoners of the system. The system still held the country together, but cracks had begun to mar the impressive facade of the ideal monolithic, centralized power structure, cracks created by the very real contradictions between the imperial Inner Court and the bureaucracy, the central government and the provinces, the bureaucracy and the gentry, the gentry and the people; in short, between the government as a whole and the people as a whole.

NOTES

1. See "Doctrine of the Mean," in *The Four Books*, trans. James Legge (Shanghai: The Chinese Book Co., n.d.), p. 377.
2. W. T. de Bary, Wing-tsit Chan, and Burton Watson, eds., *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), pp. 178–79. The quote is slightly amended.
3. See Chin-Keh-mu, *A Short History of Sino-Indian Friendship* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1958).
4. Bai Shouyi, *An Outline History of China* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1982), pp. 416–18.
5. Ichisada Miyazaki, *China's Examination Hell*, trans. Conrad Schirokauer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 130.
6. Sybille van der Sprenkel, *Legal Institutions in Manchu China* (London: Athlone Press, 1962), p. 130.
7. Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), p. 205.
8. S. Wells Williams, *The Middle Kingdom*, Vol. II (London: W. H. Allen, 1883), p. 8.