

Introductory Overview

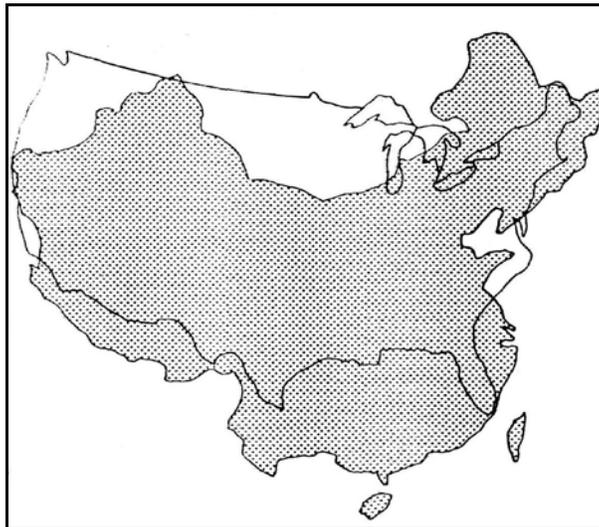
No country in the world has a history longer than China's. If you were to travel back in time over two thousand years, you would discover the Chinese state thriving where it is today, a strong government ruling over the largest country the world had ever known. And though you had traveled back before the time of Jesus, you would find that China already possessed a historical tradition two thousand years long. Since that time, there have been periods where the country of China has been divided for extended periods, with regional governments claiming independent sovereignty, but the belief that China is at root a single state with a single culture has always remained so strong that unity has ultimately returned, making even centuries of fragmentation seem like brief lapses in the story of the longest surviving political entity on earth.

No country on earth has a population greater and more diverse than China's. With over 1.3 billion people, vast stretches of land occupied by minority nationalities who, in many cases, don't even consider themselves Chinese, and a jarring mixture of soaring city skylines and premodern rural backwaters, China today may be the most complex country in the world, difficult even for the Chinese themselves to understand.

We'll begin our survey of this vast cultural history here with a brief, very general overview of geography, language, economics, and some social and historical factors.

Space: the land and its peoples

China today is roughly the size of the continental United States, located at comparable latitude on the globe. Unlike the U.S., China is bounded by only one ocean – the Pacific,



Map 1: China and the Continental United States

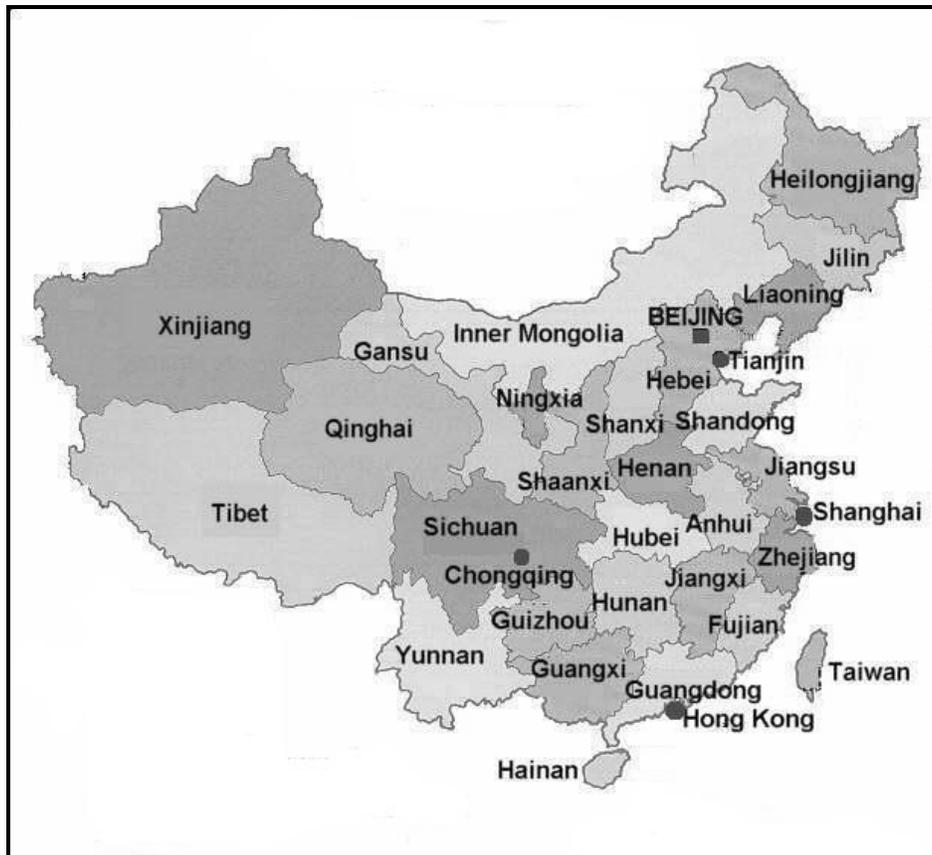
on its east coast. Inland, China stretches deep into the deserts and mountain highlands of Central Asia, its far west bounded by India to the South, Kazakhstan and other former Soviet republics due West, and Mongolia to the North.



Map 2: China and its many neighbors

Much of this territory reflects the fact that China was constructed as an empire. Its heartland, anchored in its eastern provinces and populated by an ethnic majority known as the “Han” (meaning the descendants of the great Han Dynasty, which flourished about 200 BCE to 200 CE), was expanded through conquest and settlement in order to create vast buffer regions, protecting the central state from marauding neighbors. In contemporary China, although 90% of the total population is Han, the minority populations comprising the other 10% number over 100 million people – one-third the population of the United States – and occupy land areas comprising over 60% of China’s total size. Several major ethnic groups to greater or lesser degrees regard themselves as captive to the imperial ambitions of China’s past. For example, the large western province of Xinjiang is dominated by a Muslim Turkic people called Uighurs, whose aspirations for independence represent a major threat to China, heightened by fears of terrorist tactics spreading from the Middle East (Afghanistan shares a narrow strip of border with Xinjiang). To the south of Xinjiang, the province of Tibet, stretching over the peaks and high plateaus of the Himalayan mountain range, was once a strong independent state, with its own language and culture. The pressure of Tibetan nationalism, strengthened by the international stature of Tibet’s exiled spiritual leader,

the Dalai Lama, has forced the Chinese government to resort to a half-century of military occupation and cultural coercion in order to prevent the secession of Tibet.



Map 3: China's Provinces and Administrative Regions

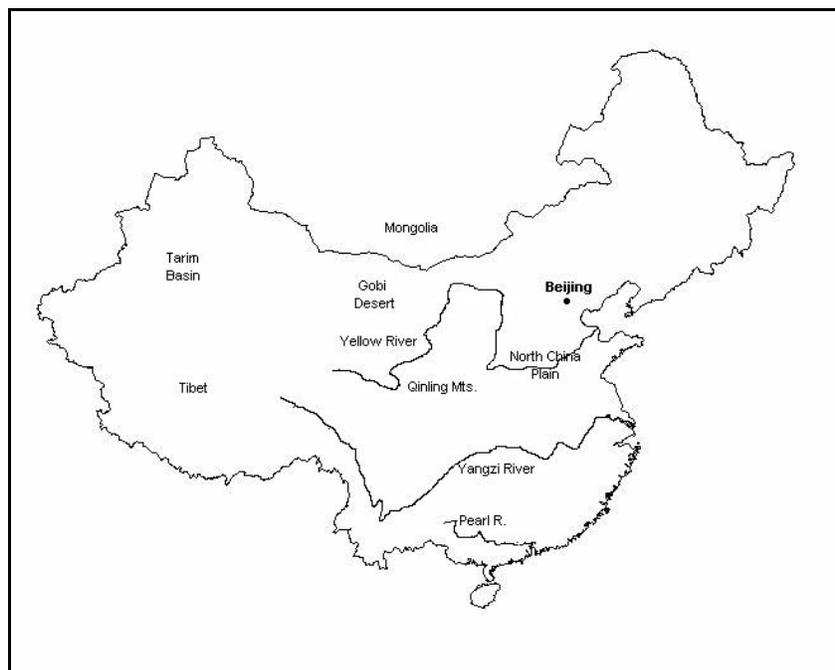
One province, the southern island of Taiwan, has been outside the reach of China's governmental control since 1949 – an outcome of a bitter civil war. For over fifty years, Taiwan has called itself the Republic of China, operating as a de facto independent state, a situation that had created enduring and severe political tensions, of concern to all countries in the East Asian region and the United States.

The traditional heartland of China – from Liaoning Province to Guangdong Province on the east coast, stretching west to Shaanxi, Sichuan, and Guangxi Provinces to the west, can be easily divided into two great river valley regions: the Yellow River (or Huang He) valley region in the north, and the Yangzi River (or Chang Jiang) valley region in the south (see Map 5). The highlands of the Qinling Mountains stretch east from Tibet towards the Pacific, dividing these two regions, and the Chinese often think of their mainstream culture as possessing two variants, Northern and Southern, characterized by major economic, social, and linguistic differences.



Map 4: Relief image of China

North China. It was in North China that the earliest civilizations ancestral to modern China first appeared. Northern China is largely a dry region, over which westerly winds carries desert sand from the dry Tarim Basin and Gobi Desert to the east, depositing it over much of North Central China. This airborne silt, called “loess” (*low-ess*), forms a thick layer of topsoil, fertile but easily eroded. It stretches east across the great bend in the Yellow River, on past the limits of the central mountains, and across the broad valley of the lower Yellow River, known as the North China Plain. This plain, sometimes called



Map 5: Rivers and Other Features

the cradle of Chinese civilization, has historically been densely populated farm country, sustained by dry-grain agriculture based on millet, wheat, and sorghum, supplemented by vegetable crops. Because of low rainfall, the Yellow River has served as a critical source of field irrigation, but at a great price. The river carries enormous amounts of loess soil in the muddy water that gives it its name; this fertile silt gives the plain its rich farming land. However, the river bed is constantly rising as the silt is deposited, so that the river is actually far higher than the surrounding land. Over the millennia, the Chinese have contained its waters by means of massive dikes, but periodically, these have failed, resulting in catastrophic floods. The river, which now empties into Bohai Bay, north of the Shandong Peninsula, has in the past changed its course to empty into the ocean south of Shandong, returning centuries later to its older path. These shifts have had devastating effects on the people of North China.

For thousands of years, the center of gravity of Chinese culture was in the North, the South being sparsely populated jungle. The early capitals of China were located close to the Yellow River or its tributaries. Although in the earliest periods of Chinese history, the climate was warmer and wetter than it is now, the North was never a region of easy abundance, and Northern culture has traditionally been cautious and conservative.

South China. The Yangzi River valley region was home to some important contributors to early Chinese civilization, but it lay beyond the borders of the earliest Chinese homelands, and Chinese migration to the South did not begin on a large scale until the first century CE, after farmers in the North China plain suffered a particularly disastrous series of floods.

South China is warm and moist, a land of rivers and lakes. Once refugee farmers cleared the land, crops were far easier to grow than in the North. The most widely grown grain is rice, which is grown in flooded fields called paddies. Rice farming requires the leveling of fields, so that water can be held within raised field borders, and intensive labor to nurture, transplant, and maintain rice sprouts. But the weather allows the harvesting of two to three crops a year, making rice farming much more productive than dry grains. In addition, the Southern climate is ideal for cultivating fruits, nuts, and vegetables. Moreover, the abundance of waterways, allowing for easy transport, makes South China far more conducive to communications and the movement of goods. This combination of agricultural promise and transportation ease resulted in Southern Chinese culture laying much greater stress on trade and commercial development than was true of the North. From about 1000 A.D. on, these greater economic opportunities drew the balance of the Chinese population South, and from the twelfth to the seventeenth

centuries, the capitals of China were usually located there. A burgeoning urban culture led to a generally more dynamic and daring society than was the case in the North. In contemporary times, this difference is often represented by contrasting atmospheres of China's two greatest cities: Beijing, the capital in the North, a city of broad avenues, monumental architecture, and scholarly traditions, and Shanghai, in the Yangzi River delta, China's most populated city, a cluster of narrow, disorderly streets, jammed with people, cars, and shops, increasingly dominated by enormous skyscrapers housing the financial and industrial headquarters that drive a twenty-first century economic dynamo.

Whether in the North or South, Chinese society has always been based on agriculture. From earliest times, in a world context, China has been a heavily populated society, reliant on high crop yields to sustain itself. Although China is a large country, and was even in ancient times, before its imperial ambitions expanded its borders, in fact only a small percent of its land is suitable for agriculture. In many areas, steep hills, high mountains, swamplands, and deserts make farming impossible. Although in total size China is comparable to the U.S., China has only half as much arable land – and four times the number of people who need to live off it. The struggle to use limited land to nurture a large population has been a theme since the earliest stages of Chinese history.



Time: a history of dynasties

The Western world has a tradition of viewing historical time as a linear progression. We number our years consecutively, and easily conceptualize past eras in terms of centuries, succeeding one another as a type of narrative flow. In 1949 – a pivotal year in Chinese history – a communist revolution in China installed a new government that mandated the adoption of the calendar used in Europe and the United States, and on the Chinese mainland, the People's Republic of China (PRC) now numbers its years as we do. However, on the island Province of Taiwan, off China's southern coast, where a pre-communist version of the Chinese state survives as the "Republic of China (ROC)," this year, 2004, is referred to on coins, documents, and in speech, as "the 93rd year of the Republic," reflecting a tradition dating back thousands of years.

Until the establishment of the Republic of China in 1912, the governments of Chinese history had all been led by kings or emperors, whose thrones were passed down on the principle of hereditary succession within a single, ruling family: a "dynasty." The history of China before 1912 has traditionally been conceived in terms of a succession of

dynasties – rulers of China passing their thrones to their sons through the generations, until the authority of the ruling family is undermined by serious misrule or military weakness, and a challenger’s armies conquer the government, installing a new “dynastic founder,” who begins the process again.

Time was traditionally bound to the ruler. Each new ruler has begun the calendar anew, proclaiming a new “first year” upon the year of his (or, in a single celebrated case, her) accession. Years and dates did not reflect a notion of progressive time – a march towards “the future”; rather, time itself was inseparable from the ruler, whose edicts controlled the calendar. For millennia, rulers of China would exploit this tie by proclaiming new starts to the calendar even in the midst of their own personal reigns, as a way of wiping away past mistakes or launching new policy regimes.

Historical time was understood through a line of succession – the list of dynasties that had ruled China. Because there were periods of time where China was, in fact, not ruled as a single country by a single ruler, this line of dynasties, when listed in full detail, could be rather complex. However, it was – and still is – common when speaking of China’s past to refer to these periods of disunity by titles such as “the period of the six dynasties,” and so forth, and in this way, the three thousand year course of traditional Chinese history is often represented as a succession of just ten major dynastic houses.

Major Dynastic Periods of Traditional Chinese History		
<i>Pre-imperial</i>	Shang	c. 1700 – 1045 BCE
	Zhou	1045 – 256 BCE
<i>Imperial</i>	Qin	221 – 208 BCE
	Han	206 BCE – 220 CE
	“Six Dynasties”	220 – 589
	Sui	589 – 617
	Tang	618 – 907
	“Five Dynasties”	907 – 960
	Song	960 – 1279
	Yuan	1279 – 1368
	Ming	1368 – 1644
	Qing	1644 – 1911

The first two dynasties were ruled by “kings” (to translate the Chinese term into its rough English equivalent), whose power was somewhat limited, and whose “kingdoms” were significantly smaller than contemporary China. Beginning in the year 221 BCE, however, the greater part of today’s China was unified and then expanded under

an enormously powerful but short-lived ruling house, the Qin (pronounced “Chin,” from which the word “China” is derived). From this time, China is considered to have become an empire, ruler by an “Emperor,” a title which translates a grandiose term coined for himself by the founder of the Qin, a man known as “the First Emperor.”

When people in China think of time in the distant past, they don’t think of it in terms of this or that century; they think back to dynasties. Each dynasty has a narrative of events and outstanding people, as well as a distinctive cultural character, and this makes Chinese cultural history, despite its great length, something that can be conceptualized with relative ease.



Society: the primacy of the male order, the family, and the state

China’s cultural history may be the most diverse of any in the world, and no generalization is likely to be entirely true. However, the often repeated statement that the family is of overwhelming importance to Chinese culture has a great deal of validity. Of course, the family is such a basic human form that it is important in all world cultures, but the institutions associated with the family in Chinese tradition have been unusually profound and self-conscious. It seems equally true to stress that in China, the authority and influence of the state – the emperor’s government – has been unusually strong and pervasive, a pattern that continues today. What is less often noted is that between the levels of the state and the family – where in many societies various forms of “community” institutions are found – there tends to be a relative gap in China, both historically and today.

Male dominance. It is generally true that premodern societies worldwide gave dramatic priority to men over women. For most cultures, the role of women was confined to the home, while roles in the “public” spheres of community and state were open only to men. China was no exception, and in some respects male dominance was more profound than in other major world cultures.

Male dominance was not fully established at the start of Chinese civilization. When we explore the earliest evidence we have for Chinese culture, we see isolated instances of women playing significant public roles, and some scholars believe these were vestiges from the prehistoric past – there is a theory that at some distant time, perhaps before the advent of agriculture in about 7000 BCE, China was a “matriarchal” society, where women were dominant, though the evidence for this theory is very sparse.

In time, Chinese traditions of male authority grew increasingly explicit, and whereas it is possible to read the early evidence as indicating that gender role differentiation reflected an idea of divided labor, rather than male superiority, by the early imperial era orthodox thought tended to celebrate men not only as stronger and more able public figures, but as better than women in a moral sense.

Sometime in the tenth century A.D., the subordinate status of women was made physically explicit through the gradual spread of a unique custom, “footbinding,” in which the feet of young girls were intentionally reshaped through a long and painful process. The result of the process was to render women’s feet terribly small. This was perceived by Chinese as a reflection of grace and femininity, and was erotically attractive to men, but it rendered women physically unfit for any serious labor, and made it difficult for them even to exercise the independence of walking.

As we will see, the status and role of women, when explored in detail, was more complex than this brief characterization of subservience may suggest. However, when speaking of the main actors of cultural history in traditional China – and even, to a distressing degree, in modern China – we will find ourselves with only a few exceptions speaking only of men.

Family. The key to understanding the importance of family in traditional China is probably the fact that historically, the core religious practice of Chinese culture has been “ancestor worship.” The meaning of this term, at root, relates to twin beliefs: first, that after death, people continue for a time to exist as spirits, in a form that requires for sustenance some form of ordinary food, and second, that these spirits retain their interest in and expectations of the members of their family. The basic act of traditional Chinese religion is the regular offering of food and drink to deceased members of the family, and the basic expectation is that if ancestors are properly nourished in this way, they will employ their powers as spirits to continue to aid their families.

These structures of practice developed alongside a view of people principally framed in terms of their membership in families. Whereas in the modern West, we tend to picture people as independent being, foregrounding the fact that each of us is a biologically self-sustaining creature with thoughts and feelings that are known only to ourselves, in Chinese tradition much less attention was paid to the fact that we are physically separate, possessing private thoughts, than was paid to the fact that we survive and grow only with the care and support of our families. Indeed, the character of individual people was seen much more as the product of family nurturance and tradition, rather than as a trait possessed by people independently. There was a greater sense that

people *begin* as nurtured products of a social group – the family – and this sort of idea naturally leads to a view that the family has priority over the individual.

In this way, the “family” was actually pictured as a sort of corporation, a league of the living and the dead, working together to perpetuate and strengthen the lineage. Families of higher social standing traditionally maintained detailed genealogical records, often regarding a very large number of related nuclear family units as belonging to a single “clan,” which might have a highly organized structure of mutual obligations and support, focused around regular ceremonies at a complex of ancestral temple buildings. The social cohesiveness of clans, which united and organized all the component clan families who continued to reside within a geographical area, made them a powerful social force on the community and state level. However, the importance of family was not confined to these great clans; even among the poorest farming families (or “peasants,” as farmers who do not themselves own the land they work on called), there was a high consciousness of family ties.

Within families – as within Chinese society as a whole – authority lay with the males, and among males, seniority was the principal index of authority. Because marriage within even the most extended of clans was forbidden, only males were full members of the family lineage – brides were married “out of” their natal families, meaning that young girls were destined before long to leave, and older women were outsiders to varying degrees, depending on how long since they had married into the family. For individuals, knowing that after death they would be dependent on their descendants for sustenance as spirits, nothing was more important than having children, and as daughters would marry out of the family and participate in feeding their husbands’ parents, rather than their own, each man and wife knew they would ultimately be dependent upon their sons. This contributed to the very high valuation of male children by both parents, and by society as a whole, while daughters were often regarded as an unwanted burden, useful only if an opportunity arose to marry them off to families higher up on the social and economic ladder. Because the stakes were so high, Chinese men of means often supported, in addition to a wife, “concubines,” a type of secondary spouse, by whom husbands could have additional sons. Common peasant men could rarely afford to take advantage of this opportunity to expand their family and their odds of having surviving male descendants, but in wealthy households, men might have a number of concubines, whose male children might inherit the role of family leader, if the principal wife bore no sons.

The focus on the male-dominated family fostered authoritarian patterns. One of the cardinal human virtues in Chinese tradition was “filiality,” service and obedience to

parents by children, especially male children. This stress on authority and obedience created a dynamic where young people who had been given few opportunities for initiative and independent thinking found themselves, upon the deaths of their fathers, called upon to exercise a relatively high degree of both. Among the educated classes where this was most true, the gap was filled by high emphasis on education outside the home, under the tutelage of male teachers other than one's father.

One of the most dramatic differences between these traditional social patterns and those of contemporary China is the result of an experiment only a quarter century old. In 1979, alarmed by the projected difficulties China would face if its population were permitted to grow at a natural rate, the government of the PRC decreed that henceforth couples would be permitted to bear no more than a single child. While this "one-child policy" has not been universally observed, its enforcement has been effective in many central regions, such as major urban centers. The result is that a new generation is now coming of age in China without brothers or sisters, and in time, most vestiges of the extended family will disappear. Under these circumstances, it is difficult to imagine the institution of the family figuring importantly in China a generation from now, unless the one-child policy is dramatically reversed.

State. As already noted, the traditional Chinese state was a powerful force throughout Chinese history, with the king or emperor a central concern of individuals at every level of society. In many ways, the state was pictured as a larger version of the family. The king or emperor was, himself, the leader of a family, and owed his ruling position to the status of that clan and his position within it. From a very early date, the populace of China under the ruler's control was referred to as "the hundred surnames" – picturing the ruler's subjects in terms of their family identities.

The earliest formal ideology of the Chinese state – a system of thought we now call "Confucianism" – began by making a very clear distinction between the unqualified obedience to one's parents and one's obligations towards a ruler. In the case of a ruler, one owed not unqualified obedience of filiality, but rather unqualified loyalty, which included an obligation to argue against bad policies and to refuse to act on immoral orders. But over the centuries, as the power of the imperial state grew, this distinction grew increasingly unclear to most people and most government officers. Early Confucianism had spoken of the ruler as "the father and mother of the people." Originally, this had pointed to the ruler's obligation to treat the people with as much care as he would treat his children, but in time it came equally to suggest that people owed to the ruler the same unquestioning obedience they owed to their fathers.

In practice the state's attitude towards the people was much closer to a master-servant relationship than a family one, and enormous resources were devoted to providing the state with tools of social control that would ensure obedience. While China was far too large and communications far too undeveloped for the state to be truly "totalitarian," in the modern sense, there was no belief that individuals had "rights" that the government could not violate without strong justification, and the basis for a true totalitarian period that China underwent in the 20th century was well laid in the structures and ideology of the traditional state.

In a sense, the strong concept of the group and the relatively weak concept of the individual as a formally independent being that lay at the center of the Chinese family enabled the state to make claims on people almost as strong as those of the family.

By contrast, social forms that tend to be more closely tied to notions of "free association" – councils of elders, neighborhood groups, trade associations, guilds, or leagues – these did not flourish in traditional China, except as the state sponsored their formation as government-mandated social control instruments. In Europe, organizations of this type were important in building an arena of civil society that individuals encountered outside the family and apart from state sponsorship. One of the problems often identified as an obstacle to the development of a fully modern, democratic China is the relative absence, even now, of a rich social culture of non-familial voluntary associations. Modern China has tended to remain a family-centered country, where social activity beyond the family tends to be directed by the government to an unusual degree.



Language: the primacy of family and state

One of the most unusual aspects of Chinese culture is the Chinese language. Chinese is not written with an alphabet, it includes a vast array of regional dialects, many of which cannot be understood by Chinese of other regions, and it features the use of inflectional tones to distinguish among different words, otherwise pronounced identically. These characteristics make Chinese dramatically different from European languages, and it is relatively difficult for speakers of English and Romance languages to learn. But these differences also make Chinese a language of unusual interest.

The earliest evidence of writing that reflects the spoken Chinese language dates back over three thousand years to the lower Yellow River Valley. Ancient Chinese seems to have been part of the same linguistic lineage that produced the languages of

Tibet and Burma, and it is generally considered part of the “Sino-Tibetan” language group. The earliest Chinese states were formed from a coalescence of many different peoples, speaking many different languages, but because among them only Chinese could be written, it came in time to be the universal language of the Chinese state. However, because Chinese characters do not give a clear indication of their pronunciation, regional differences in pronunciation of Chinese were likely always very broad, and particularly after the migrations that led to the development of equally strong Northern and Southern regions, the local dialects of Chinese diverged to the same degree that dialects of Latin in Europe diverged to create the various Romance languages. Today, the language spoken in the southern port cities of Guangzhou and Hong Kong, “Cantonese,” is at least as far removed from the language spoken in Beijing as Spanish is from French.

However, the disjunction between writing and pronunciation has had the contrary effect of preserving the universal intelligibility of written Chinese, which has consequently served to reinforce the cultural and political unity of China. Thus Chinese may be considered the language of the “Han” Chinese people, who comprise the overwhelming majority of the population.

As noted earlier, contemporary China includes many ethnic groups that were brought within Chinese boundaries through processes of imperial expansion: Uighurs, Tibetans, Mongols, and a host of others. The most influential of these groups speak and write their own languages with non-Chinese scripts, and in some cases prefer not to use Chinese, which to them is the language of an occupying power. However, from the early twentieth century, there has been an increasingly active effort by Chinese governments to ensure that a version of Chinese known as Mandarin – closely related to the dialect of Beijing – be universally taught in schools and used for all official transactions. The active spread of Mandarin, particularly once the use of radios and televisions became widespread, has created a common spoken language that can be understood by people in almost all regions.

Phonetic and grammatical features. The official language of both the People’s Republic of China on the Chinese mainland and of Taiwan is Mandarin, a variant of the Beijing dialect. Because of the wide variety of dialects in China, the central government began many centuries ago to require that all candidates for official appointment be able to speak a common dialect, and in this way Mandarin became a standard, though regional dialects remained in use. (“Mandarin” is an English word derived from Malay, meaning “government official,” and applied to Asian countries in the 19th century.)

Modern spoken Mandarin is a “syllable poor” language, meaning that there are only a limited number of syllables that can be used by Chinese speakers. In fact, there are no more than 450 possible syllables that can be used in speech. In English and most other languages, although there is a limited number of basic sounds (phonemes) that we expect native speakers to be able to use, these can be combined in new ways to create new syllable sounds, and these can become part of the language. For example, if you wanted to name your cat Blarksht, your English-speaking friends might be surprised, but they’d call her “Blarksht”; Chinese speakers who met your cat, however, would probably refer to her as “Bu-la-ke-shi-te,” breaking her name into five syllables that exist in Chinese as the closest approximation to the syllable you had invented.

A set of 450 available syllables is very small. There were probably many more in ordinary ancient Chinese speech, but over millennia, the vowel and consonant system of Chinese was greatly simplified, and distinctions among similar sounding words came to be made not through the use of vowel or consonant phonemes, but through standardized intonations, or “tones,” assigned to each syllable. Ancient Chinese was largely a “monosyllabic language”: that is, the semantic (meaning) units of the language were almost always expressed by a single syllable. Each of these semantically significant syllables constituted a word. Words were uninflected: they did not take variable endings that indicated features such as tense, number, gender, or case. For this reason, it was relatively simple to build into syllables – which corresponded to meaning units – a tonal element that would help distinguish their meaning. In standard Mandarin there are four tones: level, rising, low, and falling. In addition, a few words are neutral, free of tones (these are generally grammatical particles). For example, while an English speaker might hear the following sentence as the same word repeated five times:

Mā mà má mǎ ma? 媽罵麻馬嗎？

a Mandarin speaker would understand it to mean, “Is Mom scolding the numb horse?” (Well, if you said this particular sentence, native speakers would probably understand it to mean you were nuts, but it’s useful for illustrating the point.) The Chinese characters written to the side, each corresponding to a word/syllable, show that the marked or neutral tones on each “*ma*” distinguish five different words. Not every syllable can carry every tone, but tones in Chinese mean that, in practice, roughly $4 \times 450 = 1500$ syllables are actually possible in Mandarin. (Not that this removes all ambiguity; 1500 is still a small number, and Chinese has *far* more homophones than English. Looking at a mid-

size dictionary, I see six Chinese characters that are pronounced *mǎ* – not too bad, really, considering that I count 130 different characters that are all pronounced *yì*!)

The syllable-poor nature of Chinese is one reason why, for foreigners, Chinese words may seem to look alike. The other reason is that although modern Chinese has many two-syllable words, it has relatively few that are longer, and it has an unusual proportion of single syllable words. This is an inheritance from the monosyllabic structure of ancient Chinese, where perhaps ninety-five percent of words were one syllable, denoted by a single written character. Having few syllable choices and short words does lead to an unusual degree of resemblance among words transcribed into our Roman alphabet, and it makes it hard for Westerners when they encounter Chinese names and terms in their own script. In Chinese, the ambiguity is greatly reduced by the other striking feature of the language – written characters – which we’ll discuss below.

Before turning to the writing system, it may be of interest to note one other distinctive feature of spoken Chinese: it is a radically “uninflected” language, meaning that it does not have many of the grammatical markers that we take for granted in English. For example, in general, a sentence may have no indicators to distinguish singular from plural or past from present tense. This is truer for ancient Chinese than for modern, but it still contrasts strongly with English, and even more strongly with Romance and other languages, that have gender or case forms as well. All these features, which make many European languages tedious to learn, are entirely absent from Chinese. No tense, no plurals, no subject-object markers. But it is disappointing to discover that a language stripped of all these complex features becomes not easier to master but harder. In particular, in ancient Chinese, which relies almost wholly on word order and a limited set of function words to provide grammatical clues to meaning, the level of ambiguity is spectacularly high. This is one of the reasons why many of the most revered ancient texts remain imperfectly understood.

Chinese characters. Perhaps the most striking feature of the Chinese language is its graphic form. Chinese uses no alphabet. Instead, every word is assigned a “character” which calls up both its sound and its meaning. The largest Chinese dictionaries list about 50,000 characters; a fully literate person needs to know about 3-4,000. The system of writing in characters seems to have evolved during the Shang period, about 3200 years ago. The earliest surviving Chinese texts date from that era, and the characters used in these are far more rudimentary and non-standardized than those we see later.

Learning Chinese characters can be a tedious chore, but learning *about* them is fun. The characters can be understood as the products of several approaches to

representing a word in graphic form. Characters represent words, and words may be thought of as consisting of two major components: a sound and a meaning. Characters relate to words in the following ways, as illustrated by the chart on the following page.

PICTOGRAPHIC FORMS					
子	child [zǐ] (ancient form: )	日	sun [rì] (ancient form: )		
木	tree [mù] (ancient form: )	月	moon [yuè] (ancient form: )		
女	woman [nǚ] (ancient form:  : a kneeling figure)				
IDEOGRAPHIC FORMS					
Simple:	一	二	上	下	本
	one	two	above	below	root
Complex:	好	明			
	good [hǎo] (woman + child)	bright [míng] (sun + moon)			
EXAMPLE OF A LOGOGRAPHIC FORM					
時	<p>This is the character for <i>shí</i>, a word denoting >time= or, more properly, >season.=</p> <p>The graph combines the graph for >sun= on the left with an unrelated character, <i>sì</i> 寺 on the right, which was selected solely to indicate how the character should be pronounced (during the ancient period, the element <i>sì</i> and the word for season, now pronounced <i>shí</i>, were very nearly homophonous). The left-hand element (pronounced <i>rì</i> when alone) contributes only towards indicating the meaning, in that the notion of season is related to the position of the sun; the <i>sì</i> on the right (which means >hall= or >temple= when appearing independently) contributes only phonetic value.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">-- chart adapted from Charles Hucker, <i>China to 1850</i> (Stanford, 1975)</p>				

Characters may be derived from simple pictographic representations of the meaning of a word. On the chart, the first three graphs stand for the words *zǐ*, *mù*, and *nǚ*,

which mean “child,” “tree,” and “woman.” The graphs do not relate to the sounds of the words, but simply derive from a crude sketch of the noun that the word refers to.

The second set on the chart, “ideographic (idea picture) forms,” shows how characters were developed for more abstract words. The characters for the low numbers convey in simple form the meaning of the numbers (again, without regard for sound), and the graphs for “above” and “below” are also representations of abstract ideas, rather than pictures. The set of compound graphs illustrate how abstract ideas could be conveyed through characters that were combinations of pictures pointing to a meaning beyond themselves. For example, a graph including the sun and moon did not mean “the sun and the moon,” as a pictograph would, it meant “bright,” an idea probably conveyed indirectly by this juxtaposition of two shining features of the sky.

The final type of character, a very common one, conveys its meaning by a combined approach to both sound and meaning. In the example given, the problem is to figure out how to represent in writing the concept of a calendrical time or season, as denoted by the spoken word *shi*. The solution is to write the character for “sun,” closely associated with time and the progression of the year, on one side, and on the other side to borrow the character for a nearly homophonous word *si* (the meaning of which bears no relation to time). Readers then can understand the sense of the character to be a word concerning solar properties, one pronounced much like *si* (during the Classical period, *shi* and *si* would have been very close, being pronounced, very roughly, like *dziug* and *diug* respectively).

There are actually a number of other ways in which characters could be formed, some of them very subtle, and the manner in which characters convey meaning is a source of analysis that is both endless and unusually entertaining (at least for those whose obsessions run in that direction).

As mentioned earlier, characters dramatically reduce the ambiguity which is created by Mandarin’s small set of permitted syllables. Recall the sample sentence given above, in which we wondered whether Mom was scolding a numb horse:

Mā mà má mǎ ma? 媽罵麻馬嗎？

Now, because of the very large number of homophones in Chinese, it’s possible that the spoken sentence could be heard to mean this: “Hey, old lady, why not perform a military sacrifice with a flaxen ant!”

Mā mà má mǎ ma! 嫫媽麻媽嘛！

Pronunciation of the two sentences would be precisely the same, and if Chinese used only an alphabet, it would be difficult to ensure that questions about maternal severity towards handicapped horses did not result in frequent and unnecessary religious rituals! Fortunately, the nature of the Chinese written language allows people to clear up confusions like this with ease. (And in actual fact – quite apart from lame sample sentences like these – one does from time to time see Chinese people in the midst of conversation trace written characters in the air or on their palms, to clarify for others just what word they are trying to say.)

Perhaps the most significant facet of the Chinese language for understanding Chinese culture are the psychological and aesthetic effects of a written language composed of graphs rather than an alphabet. After long exposure to written Chinese, the impression grows that processes of understanding occur during reading that have no comparable equivalent for alphabetic scripts. These processes, both aesthetic and more generally cultural, made the Chinese written language appear as a near-sacred gift to the people of Classical China.

Chinese Names. In studying Chinese cultural history, nothing is more difficult than the fact that – just Chinese words in transcription tend to look alike to foreign readers – Chinese names, when written without characters, are far more similar to one another than is the case in Western countries. Even when written *with* characters, almost all the one billion Han Chinese share about 500 surnames. The most common surname in the world is the Chinese surname Zhang 張 – approximately 100 million Chinese people share it, equivalent to about forty percent of all Americans. (Compare that to Smith, the most common American surname, shared by about three million people.) Other very common Chinese surnames include Wang, Huang, Yang, Lin, Chen, Wu, Liu, Zhou, and Zhao – don't be surprised to encounter multiple figures bearing these family names. While there are a few dozen two-syllable surnames in Chinese, they are much rarer (among them, only the surname Sima is frequently encountered throughout Chinese history).

Chinese personal names are either one or two syllables – never more (unless the person is ethnically non-Han). While some personal names are encountered frequently, there is far greater variety among personal names than is the case in the West. In America, for example, almost a quarter of the male population share the most common ten male names. That would never occur in China, where parents very often coin names for children that have never been used before (based on the meaning of the characters chosen). However, from the standpoint of Westerners, who encounter Chinese names in transcription, the similarities among personal names may appear very great. The two-

syllable limit and the similarity among syllables in transcription tend to hide the true variety of personal names. In Chinese, the characters disambiguate personal names easily, but the homogeneity of names in transcription is a special headache for Western students of China. (Another headache, which we won't have much reason to worry about, is that in traditional China, all adult males of any social standing had at least two personal names, a birth name used by family and intimate friends, and a formal name, for use by others, given during a teenage rite of passage.)

◆ The most important rule in dealing with Chinese names is this: *the surname precedes the personal name*. For example, the Chinese revolutionary leader Mao Zedong was the son of Mr. and Mrs. Mao, who gave him the name Zedong. This order always holds in a Chinese context, although some Chinese, when abroad, may reverse the order to conform with non-Chinese norms.

Transcription. Chinese is a hard language to pronounce and a very hard language to render in the Roman alphabet. Many systems of “Romanization” (transcription into our Latin alphabet) have been used in the past – each one awful in its own special way. In this course, we will primarily use the *pinyin* system of Romanization, which was developed in the 1950s in the People=s Republic of China. It is a bad system, but far better than the most common alternative, a system known as Wade-Giles transcription, which was the most commonly used method until the 1990s. Unfortunately, some older books you'll be reading, including Jonathan Spence's *The Death of Woman Wang* and Cyril Birch's *Stories From a Ming Collection*, use Wade-Giles.

You don't need to become an expert in the pronunciation of Chinese, but you do need to have some ability to pronounce names and terms – if you pronounce them all *bleep* in your head as you read you will be unable to remember any; if you pronounce them all *bleep* in class everyone will think you are cursing; if you write them all *bleep* on the final exam your grade will be an occasion for truly colorful language.

Pronunciation guides for the *Pinyin* and Wade-Giles systems appear on the following two pages. Use these as you begin reading, try to sound out names as you encounter them, and listen in class.

Pinyin Transcription

Pinyin is relatively easy to figure out; most letters may be pronounced just as they commonly are in English. The following guide focuses only on the few difficult spots:

- “q” is pronounced like “ch” (pronounce “*qin*” like the English word “*chin*”)
- “x” is pronounced like “sh” (pronounce “*xi*” like English “*she*”)
- “z” is pronounced like “dz” (pronounce “*zu*” like “*zoo*” with a hard “z” sound)
- “zh” is pronounced like “j” (pronounce “*zhan*” like “*John*”)
- “c” is pronounced like “ts” (pronounce “*can*” as “*tsan*”)

Some common problems:

- “zhi” = jur / “ji” = jee
- “chi” = chur / “qi” = chee
- “shi” = shur / “xi” = shee
- “ri” = rur

(After “zh-”, “ch-”, “sh-”, and “r-”, an “i” should be read like the “ur” in “fur”; after “j-”, “q-”, and “x-”, “i” should be read “ee”.)

- “zi” = dzuh (actually, more like just a buzzing “dz-z-z”)
- “ci” = tsuh (more like a hissing “ts-s-s”)
- “si” = ssz (a hiss with a “z” sound after it)

Wade-Giles Transcription

Consonant sounds that may begin a word

There are 23 of these, but a few are very hard for English speakers to distinguish. Twelve of the 23 occur in paired sets, where one member of the set is "unvoiced" and has an aspiration mark ('), while the other is "voiced" and has no such mark. Whenever a letter is followed by an ' it is pronounced as it is in English. When the same letter has no aspiration mark, it is pronounced differently (it is voiced).

ch' as in **chin**

k' as in **kin**

p' as in **pin**

t' as in **tin**

ts' as in **its**

tz' [like **ts'**]

ch like "j" in **jam**

k like "g" in **gun**

p like "b" in **bin**

t like "d" in **din**

ts like "z" in **zone**

tz [like **ts**]

There are nine consonant initials that simply sound as they do in English.

f, h, l, m, n, s, sh, w, and **y** are all similar to natural English readings

Two unusual initials are as follows:

j much like "r," as in **run** (an unusually bizarre choice)

hs much like "sh," as in **shoo!**

Vowel sounds

Basic vowels:

a as in **father**

i like "ee" in **bee**

u as in **rude**

eh like "e" in **pen**

e like "u" in **up**

o as in **soft**

ü as in German **über**

Exceptions:

ih sounds like the "ir" in **sir** (sorry about that!)

u after **ss, tz, tz'** is barely pronounced

u after **y** or **i** is pronounced like the "oe" in **toe**

Diphthongs:

ai like "i" in **ice**

ao like "ow" in **cow**

ei as in **weigh**

iu like "yeo" in **yeoman**

ou like "o" in **obey**

ui like "way" in **sway**

Final consonants

There are only two: **n** and **ng**, as in English **son** and **song**. (A final **h** is always silent.)