

MODERN CHINA

Rana Mitter



A BRIEF
INSIGHT



MODERN

CHINA



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Frontispiece: Migrant laborers cycle past Pudong International Airport, Shanghai, China, in 2005- Millions of Chinese workers travel from the countryside to the cities to find employment and make a new life.

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PRONUNCIATION

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THIS BOOK USES THE *pinyin* system of romanization of Chinese. Very approximately indeed, the transliterations that cause most problems for English-speakers are the following sounds:

c—pronounced “ts”

x—pronounced “sh”

q—pronounced “ch”

And the sounds *chi*, *zhi*, *ri*, *si*, *shi*, and *zi* are pronounced as if the “i” sound is an “r”—so “chr,” “zhr,” and so forth.



People's Republic of China leaders atop the Gate of Heavenly Peace—adorned with a portrait of Mao Zedong—watch the 1999 National Day parade celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the PRC's founding.

What Is Modern China?



It is impossible to do other than assent to the unanimous verdict that China has at length come to the hour of her destiny...The contempt for foreigners is a thing of the past...Even in remote places we have found the new spirit—its evidence, strangely enough, the almost universal desire to learn English...as knowledge of English is held to be the way to advancement, the key to a knowledge of the science and art, the philosophy and policy, of the West.

This assessment comes from the book *New China* by W. Y. Fullerton and C. E. Wilson. In the third decade of China's era of "reform and opening-up" (*kaifang gaige*), at last the clichés of the old Maoist era—the Chinese as worker ants mouthing xenophobic anti-imperialist slogans while all dressed in blue serge boiler-suits—have given way to impressions of a country whose cities are full of skyscrapers, whose rural areas are being transformed by new forms of land ownership and a massive rise in migrant labor, and whose population is keen to engage with the outside world after years of isolation. Fullerton and Wilson's observation that China is reaching the "hour of her destiny," and that a significant part of the population are learning English as one way to fulfill that destiny, seems a reasonable comment on a China that is clearly very different from the one ruled a generation ago by Chairman Mao.

However, Fullerton and Wilson did not pen their observations having landed back at Kennedy or Heathrow airports on one of the many Air China 747s that ferry thousands of travelers daily between China and the West. They wrote their book a full century ago, and their reflections on what the subtitle "a story of modern travel" came at what, in retrospect, is a particularly poignant moment in China's history: the year 1910. The China they portray was lively, even optimistic, and very much engaged with the outside world. Yet within a year, the Qing dynasty, the last Chinese imperial house which still ruled the country that Fullerton and Wilson saw, had fallen. The revolution of October 1911 finally brought the two-thousand-year tradition of imperial rule in China to an end, making way for a Republic. That Republic would collapse less than forty years later, and would be succeeded in turn by a People's Republic whose own form would change over decades as it struggled to define what "modern" China was. It is a sign of how long it has taken for China to define its own vision of modernization that a travel description from the early twentieth century can still have resonance in the early twenty-first.



Shanghai is a cosmopolitan metropolis at the forefront of China's rapid economic development, which began in the early 1980s.

China is the world's most populous country, with some 1.3 billion inhabitants at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Its economy grew in the first decade of this century by an average of around 10 percent a year. It is seeking a regional and global role, with a new political and economic presence in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East, and has taken frequent steps to portray itself as a responsible member of the world community, playing a role in troublesome areas such as Iran and North Korea where the West has little sway. The 2008 Beijing Olympics mark the "coming-out" of China as an integrated member of the world community of nations, the acme of the "peaceful rise" which it has been engineering since the mid-1990s. The term "peaceful rise" (*heping jueqi*) itself associated with the political thinker Zheng Bijian, was thought by Chinese ideologists to be too confrontational, and has been replaced with the term "peaceful development." The idea remains the same, however: that China is finally gaining the role as a regional and global power that it lost in the mid-nineteenth century.

Everywhere one goes in China, there are signs of change. Significant areas of western China have been flooded to make way for the massive Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River. Their former inhabitants are being relocated and urbanized as China moves away from its traditional agricultural past. In the cities, Baidu, a home-grown Chinese internet search engine, dominates the market which is held by the worldwide brand leader, Google, in most other countries. Beneath China's strict censorship laws lies a "gray zone" of cultural production: from underground movies criticizing the Cultural Revolution to pornography, cultural rebels find ways to make their views known.

China is now a major actor in world markets. Through much of the early 2000s, China's burgeoning exports led to concerns in the United States and European Union about the Chinese trade surplus. The West was also concerned about the strength of the Chinese currency (the yuan or renminbi) against the dollar, with the Americans and French frequently lobbying the People's Bank of China to revalue upwards. The Chinese current account surplus also means that it has had cash to spend on investments around the world, from the United States, to Africa, to Russia. Chinese companies bought the assets of the bankrupt British Rover car group in 2005; Chinese capital was offered to help blue-chip UK high

street bank Barclays pay for a takeover of a Dutch rival, ABN-AMRO, in 2007.

Yet China is also undertaking one of the most precarious balancing acts in world history. While the country has the fastest-growing major economy in the world, it is also becoming one of the globe's most unequal societies, even while its policies lift millions out of poverty. For the rural and urban poor, health-care and education are available only to those who can pay for them. China is also in the grip of a resource and environmental crisis. All across China, power blackouts regularly interrupt industrial production. Globally, the country must scramble for energy and mineral resources. Environmental degradation forces bicyclists to wear smog masks and has rendered the Yangtze dolphin extinct. As global warming accelerates, China is set to become the world's largest emitter of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. China continues to maintain a one-party dictatorship and heavily constrains political dissent; yet every year, there are thousands of demonstrations against official policies and practice, some of them violent. Corruption also runs rife.

There are significant differences between China at the start of the twentieth century, and the start of the twenty-first. The China of a century ago was the victim of Western and Japanese imperialism, in danger, in the phrase of the time, of "being carved up like a melon" by the foreign powers. It was a weak and vulnerable state. Today's China, while it has deep frictions and fault lines, is a much stronger entity. Yet the similarities between China now and China one hundred years ago are startlingly also: political instability, economic and social crisis, and the need for China to find a role in a world dominated, even if less so than in the post-Cold War moment, by the West.



Beijing's Great Hall of the People, which looks over Tiananmen Square, is home to the National People's Congress, China's legislature and principal forum for Communist Party policy discussions.

Chinese leaders, who are acutely conscious of history in a way that has been less true of the American and British governing classes in recent years, would also note that the seemingly moribund Qing dynasty had begun to modernize impressively fast in the early years of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, it collapsed, as did most of its successor regimes in the following four decades. It is the earnest intention of the rulers of the People's Republic of China that this fate should never happen to them. To understand their fears and concerns, and to understand China in its own terms, the China of today can only be understood in its historical and global context. That is what this book tries to do, explaining the reasons that modern China looks the way that it does.

Overall, the book hopes to give a picture of China that reflects three main viewpoints. First, rather than being a closed society, China has almost always been a society open to outside influence, and

“Chinese” culture and society cannot be understood in isolation from the outside world. In other words, China cannot be treated as a special case of an isolated society, but rather as part of a changing regional and global culture. Second, it is too simple to say that China has moved from a “traditional” past to a “modern” present. Rather, the modern China we see today is a complex mixture of indigenous social influences and customs and external influences, often, but not always, from the West. Society did not change overnight in 1912 with the abdication of the last emperor, or in 1949 with the Communist revolution, but neither is the modern China of today essentially the same as when the emperors were on the throne one hundred or two hundred years ago. Third, our understanding of how modern China has developed should not come only through following elite politics and leaders and their conflicts. Instead, we should look at continuities as well as changes in how the Chinese have come to modernity, and the impact of change on society and culture as a whole.



This view of Tiananmen Square and the mausoleum of Mao Zedong is from the main gate of the Forbidden City, once home to the emperors of the Ming and Qing dynasties.

What Does It Mean to Be Chinese?

A hundred years ago and today, an important question remains: What *is* modern China? To come to an answer, we need to spend a little time investigating both terms—*China* and *modern*.

“China” today generally refers to the People’s Republic of China, the state that was established in 1949 after the victory of the Chinese Communist Party under the leadership of Chairman Mao Zedong. That state essentially covers the same territory as the Chinese empire under the last imperial dynasty, the Qing (1644–1911), which extended its reach to the west and north of the lands that earlier dynasties had controlled. (The modern state, however, has a firm grasp on Tibet, does not lay claim to Outer Mongolia or the lands in the northeast taken by Tsarist Russia, and in practice does not control Taiwan.) However, this continuity of geography conceals the reality that China has changed shape over the centuries, and continues to do so even now. About twenty-five hundred years ago, a group of independent states that were in conflict with one another existed in the heartland of what we now call “China”; literature and history from this period is recognizably Chinese, readable by those today who take the trouble to learn the classical form of the language. From 221 BCE, successive emperors and dynasties united these states, leading to a succession of dynasties that created China’s classic civilization: the Han, the Tang, the Song, the Yuan, the Ming, and the Qing among them. They created

a civilization in which art, literature, statecraft, medicine, and technology all thrived.

However, the term “China,” or the term *Zhongguo* (“middle kingdom,” the current Chinese word for “China”), was not how the people of those eras would have thought of themselves. The idea of being “Chinese” in the sense that we understand it, as either national or ethnic identity, is a product of the nineteenth century (as is the term *Zhongguo*). Yet there clearly was a shared sense of what we might call “Chineseness” between these people, which outlasted the rise and fall of dynasties. What made up that identity? Most people identified themselves with the ruling dynasty itself, as “people of the Ming” or “people of the Qing.” But what lay behind this naming? How did one qualify as a “person of the Ming”?

Over the centuries, there has been a variety of shared attributes that have brought together the communities we know as “the Chinese.” From early on, Chinese society was settled and agricultural in contrast with the nomad societies such as the Manchus, Mongols, and Jurchen with which it periodically came into contact. Features of that society, such as irrigation, have also been prominent throughout Chinese history. The size of the Chinese population has always dwarfed its neighbors, and that population has increased with territorial growth over the centuries as well. In very early China the landmass was occupied by a variety of peoples, but from 221 BCE, after the unification by the Qin dynasty, dominance remained with a people whom we recognize as Chinese (often called “Han Chinese” after the next dynasty).

But why did the *Chinese* think of themselves as Chinese? Broadly, shared identity came from shared rituals. For more than two thousand years, a set of social and political assumptions, which found their origins in the ideas of Confucius, a thinker of the sixth century BCE, shaped Chinese statecraft and everyday behavior. By adopting these norms, people of any grouping could become “people of the dynasty”—that is, Chinese.

Confucianism is sometimes termed a religion, but it is really more of an ethical system, or system of norms. In its all-pervasiveness *and* its flexibility and adaptability to circumstances, it is somewhat analogous to the role of Judeo-Christian norms in Western societies, where even those who dispute or reject those norms still find themselves shaped by them, consciously or not. Confucianism is based on ideas of mutual obligation, maintenance of hierarchies, a belief in self-development, education, and improvement, and above all, an ordered society. It abhors violence and tends to look down on profit making, though it is not wholly opposed to it. The ultimate ideal was to become sufficiently wise to attain the status of “sage” (*sheng*), but one should at least strive to become a *junzi*, often translated “gentleman,” but perhaps best thought of as meaning “a person of integrity.” Confucius looked back to the Zhou dynasty, a supposed “golden age” which was long-past even during his lifetime, and which set a desirable (but perhaps unattainable) standard for the present day.



The teachings of Confucius have influenced Chinese politics and everyday culture for more than two millennia. This statue of the philosopher is in his home province of Shandong.

Confucius's opinions did not emerge from thin air: he lived during the period of the Warring States, a violent era whose values appalled him, and which fuelled his concern with order and stability. Nor was he the only thinker to shape early China: unlike Confucius and Mencius, who believed in the essential good nature of human beings, Xunzi believed that humans were essentially evil; and Han Feizi went further to argue that only a system of strict laws and harsh punishments, not ethical codes, could restrain people from doing wrong. This period, the fifth century BCE, was one of profound crisis in the territory we know now as China, but ironically, it led to an unmatched excellence in the cultural and intellectual atmosphere of the time, just as the crisis of fifth-century BCE Greece led to an extraordinary outpouring of drama and philosophy. Nonetheless, despite the intellectual ferment of the time, it was Confucius's thought that became most acceptable in Chinese statecraft, although his ideas were adapted, often beyond recognition, by the statesmen and thinkers who drew on his writings over the centuries. But throughout that period, assumptions from Confucianism persisted.

The premodern Chinese had a clear idea of a difference between themselves and other groupings, not least because there were frequent attacks by and on the neighbors. During two of China's greatest dynasties, the Yuan and the Qing, the country was ruled by ethnic non-Chinese (Mongols and

Manchus respectively). However, the remarkable resilience of the Chinese system of statecraft means that these occupiers soon adapted themselves to Chinese norms of governance, something that marked these invaders out from the Western imperialists, who did nothing of the sort. The assimilation was not total. The Qing aristocracy maintained a complex system of Manchu elite identity during the centuries of power: Manchus were organized in “banners” (groupings based on their military nomadic past), and Manchu women did not bind their feet. But overall, the rituals and assumptions of Confucian ethics and norms still pervaded through society: Qing China was at core a Chinese, not a Manchu, society.



A wealthy young woman with bound feet reclines in traditional dress at the turn of the twentieth century.

The nineteenth century saw a profound change in Chinese self-perception. For centuries, the empire had been termed *tianxia*, literally and poetically rendered as “all under heaven.” This did not mean that premodern Chinese did not recognize that there were lands or peoples that were not their own—they certainly did—but that the empire contained all those who mattered, and its border was flexible, although not infinitely elastic. (The Treaty of Nerchinsk, signed in 1689, drew up the border which still exists today between China and Russia; clearly Qing China did not lack a sense of territoriality.)

But the arrival of Western imperialism forced China, for the first time, to think of itself as part of an international *system*. The arrival of European political thought brought to China the idea of the nation-state, and many Chinese came to terms with the fact that the old China was gone, and that the new one would need to assert its place in the hierarchy of nations. That struggle is still with us today.

Yet the modern People’s Republic does not contain the whole of China, or China’s worlds, within its borders. Taiwan provides an alternative, lively and democratic vision of what “Chinese culture” is; so do Hong Kong. Then there are diaspora Chinese: the “overseas Chinese” who shape societies such as Singapore and whose communities are found on all inhabited continents.

China is a continent, not just a country. It is a series of identities, some shared, some differentiated, and some contradictory: modern, Confucian, authoritarian, democratic, free, and restrained. Above all, China is a plural noun.



A man in Western dress poses for a New Year photograph in New York's Chinatown in 1916. Centuries of emigration from China and the resulting worldwide dispersion makes it difficult to define Chinese identity in simple geographical terms.

What Is Modern?

Frequently, “modern” is used as shorthand for “recent”—so a study of “modern” China would refer to its history over the last century or so. This book, however, will use a more specific definition of “modern,” because by doing so, it can get to the heart of some of the biggest questions that continue to face China today—the questions of what sort of society and culture it is, and wishes to become.

First, though, there are certain ways *not* to think about “modern” China. When trying to define the way in which China has changed since the nineteenth century, it is possible to fall into one of two overly broad explanations.

The first explanation was more common a generation ago, when Mao was in power and China seemed utterly to have changed its political and social system. This argument followed the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s rhetoric of a “new China” (although, as the quotation at the start of this chapter shows, this was not the first nor last usage of the term “New China”): that the old, “feudal,” “traditional,” and “semicolonial” China, a world of cruel social hierarchies, foot-binding, torture, and poverty, had been finally brushed aside for a more egalitarian, industrial, and just China.

The second explanation, common in the early twentieth century, but banished for a while after 1949, has become commonplace again today. This argument is that China has not essentially changed. Even figures such as Mao and Deng Xiaoping (the reformist leader of the 1980s), despite their coating in communist ideology and mass mobilization politics, were essentially “emperors” reverting to type. In the countryside today, traditional superstitions, religions (such as the Falun Gong cult banned by the party) and hierarchies reign supreme, just as they have done for hundreds of years. Overall, China remains a Confucian, hierarchical society with an ostensibly communist brand name on top.

These views are wrong. China is a profoundly modern society; but the way in which its modernity has been manifested is indelibly shaped by the legacy of its premodern (a term preferable to “traditional”) past. Not that the premodern past was ever monolithic or static: China changed immeasurably over hundreds of years, developing a bureaucracy, science, and technology (the invention of gunpowder, clocks, and the compass), a highly commercialized economy (from around

1000 onwards), and a diverse syncretic religious culture.

The similarity in many developments in Europe and China in the period 1000 to around 1800 should not, however, conceal the fact that imperial China and early modern Europe also *differed* widely in their assumptions and mindsets. The development of modernity in the Western world was underpinned by a set of assertions, many of which are still powerful today, about the organization of society. Most central was the idea of “progress” as the driving force in human affairs. Philosophers such as Descartes and Hegel ascribed to modernity a rationality and teleology, an overarching narrative, that suggested that the world was moving in a particular direction—and that that direction, overall, was a positive one. There were several drivers of progress. One was the idea that dynamic change was a good thing in its own right: in premodern societies, the force of change was often feared as destructive, but the modern mindset welcomed it. In particular, an acceptance and enthusiasm for progress through economic growth, and later, industrial growth, became central to the development of a modern society. Particularly in the formulation of the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, the idea of rationality, the ability to make choices and decisions in a predictable, scientific way, also became crucial to the ordering of a modern society.



Falun Gong followers in Hong Kong protest against policies of the Chinese government on International Human Rights Day, December 10, 2003. The practice of Falun Gong’s spiritual disciplines, including meditation, is officially banned in China.

Modernity also altered the way in which members of society thought of themselves. Society was secularized: modernity was not necessarily hostile to religion, but religion was confined to a defined space within society, rather than penetrating through it. The individual self, able to reason, was now the center of the modern world. At the same time, the traditional bonds that the self had to the wider community were broken down; modern societies did not support the old feudal hierarchies of status and bondage, but rather, broke them down in favor of equality, or at any rate, a non-hierarchical model of society.

Above all, societies are modern in large part because they perceive themselves as being so: self-awareness (“enlightenment”) is central to modernity and the identities that emerge from it, such as nationhood. This has led the West, in particular, to draw far too strong a distinction between its own “modern” values and those elsewhere in the world. China, for instance, showed many features over

thousands of years that shared assumptions of modernity long before the West had a significant impact there. China used a system of examinations for entry to the bureaucracy from the tenth century CE, a clearly rational and ordered way of trying to choose a power elite, at a time when religious decrees and brute force were doing the same job in much of Europe. At the same time, China started to develop an integrated and powerful commercial economy, with cash crops taking the place of subsistence farming. It is clear that many aspects of “modernity” were visible earlier and more clearly in China than in Europe.

Among the most powerful elements of modern thought in Europe was its ability to maintain the idea that its own genesis and construction were profoundly different from those of other societies. In part, this was because of a desire to create a profound distinction between Western European politics and that of other societies, particularly in the nineteenth century, when imperialist ideology became important. Yet in many ways, the attributes of modernity—particularly self-awareness and its associated sense of anti-hierarchy—were drawn from a pre-existing religious tradition, in which birth and rebirth were crucial. While Christianity was clearly one source of this concept (having also provided the cultural grounding for the teleology of progress that underlies classic modernity), the ideas of enlightenment and self-awareness emerged much earlier as part of Buddhist thought, and in later centuries were developed within another path defined by Islam. The most strongly Eurocentric understandings of modernity have found it hard to acknowledge its cross-cultural roots; yet they are there.

But all the same, China before the mid-nineteenth century did not share certain key assumptions of the emerging elites of Europe in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. China did not, during that time, develop powerful political movements that believed in flattening hierarchies: in the Confucian world “all men within the four seas” might be “brothers,” but “all men” were not equal. Chinese thinkers did not stress the individuated self as a positive good in contrast to the collective, although there was a clear idea of personal development to become a “gentleman” or “sage.” Nor, overall, did it make the idea of a teleology of forward progress central to the way it viewed the world: rather, history was an attempt to recapture the lost golden age of the Zhou and ways of the ancients, and rather than praising innovation and dynamic change in its own right, premodern China developed highly sophisticated technology and statecraft while stressing the importance of past precedent, and of order. As for economic growth, while it would be too strong to say that Confucian thought wholly disapproved of trade (the Ming and Qing saw a comfortable accommodation by the state with the idea of commerce), the concept of economic growth as a good in its own right was not as central to the premodern Chinese mindset as it was to the type of modernity that emerged in Europe.



This racially charged Western cartoon depicts a modern soldier, representing “New China,” cutting a Manchu’s queue. Cutting the Manchu-enforced queue represented a clean break with the Manchu dynasty, which the revolutionaries blamed for the corruption and weakness of the last century of imperial rule in China.

These assumptions mark a profound difference from China’s experience in the contemporary era. Since the early twentieth century at least, China’s governments and elite thinkers have accepted most of the tenets of modernity, even while vehemently opposing the Western and Japanese imperialism which forced those ideas into China. As we will see ([chapters two](#) and [three](#)), the Communist and Nationalist governments that dominated China in the twentieth century both declared that China was progressing toward the future; that a new, dynamic culture was needed to take it there; that hierarchy needed to be broken down, not preserved; and that while order was important, economic growth was the only way to make China rich and strong. Most notably, China’s leaders were much more fierce and uncompromisingly modern in their assumptions than many of their contemporaries in India or Japan in the early twentieth century: as [chapter three](#) suggests, the “May Fourth Movement” of the 1910s was far more eager to reject China’s Confucian past completely than figures in India, such as Gandhi, were to reject that society’s past.

But at the same time, there is a chimerical element to the quest for modernity. Modernity keeps changing, and Chinese conceptions of it change as well: the modernity of the “self-strengtheners” who sought to adapt Western technology in the late Qing is not the same as that of the radicals who declared a “new culture” in the 1910s, nor of the Nationalists and Communists whose primary goal was to find a stable, modern identity for the Chinese state and people. Even today, the question of what a modern China looks like is in flux. At the same time, China’s new-found strength means that it is in a much better position than ever before to project aspects of its own model of modernity back into the wider global definition of the term.

With very few exceptions, all of the warring factions that vied over China's future in the twentieth century were "modern," not just in the sense of being "recent," but in their rejection or adaptation of the Confucian norms of the past, and their embrace of a new set of norms that were derived from outside, but which were adapted to make "Chinese" and "modern" compatible, rather than terms which seemed to be in opposition to one another. Although they violated their own rhetoric on countless occasions, China's rulers in the twentieth century—and the twenty-first—have sought to create a nation-state with an equal, self-aware citizen body. This is a profoundly modern goal. The rest of the book will seek to assess how successful they have been in achieving it.



An opium trader's boat is tied up in the treaty port of Hong Kong (c.1901). The treaty ports and the opium trade reminded Chinese of their international weakness in attempting to confront foreign powers. Following nineteenth-century foreign military incursions that forcibly opened China to increased trade, imported opium devastated the Qing culture and economy, while opium addiction spread among the population.

The Old Order and the New



A TYPICAL CHARACTERIZATION of China's past, often put forward by Chinese modernizers in the twentieth century, is that late imperial China was a corrupt, "feudal" mess that was held back by unchanging, conservative, Confucian thought. Yet the imperial Chinese state, while underpinned by ideas of order and hierarchy, was also driven by a sense of mutual obligation between different groups in society and gave rise to an ever-changing and highly dynamic political and social culture, although this had collapsed in many important respects by the early twentieth century.

However, Western political influence did change China profoundly in the late nineteenth century in the wake of the Opium Wars, when concepts such as nationalism and Social Darwinism became hugely influential on a generation of Chinese who felt that their country was now vulnerable to the outside world. Japan also became a conduit for importing the new modern modes of thought. In 1868 the revolution known as the Meiji Restoration began, turning Japan in just a couple of decades from a feudal state run by a warrior aristocracy to a modernizing, industrial empire. Among these modern political concepts that energized debate in the very last days of the Qing dynasty were the ideas of constitution, parliamentary government, citizenship rather than subjecthood, and reorientation of China into an international system of nation-states. Even though the dynasty itself fell, these concepts would shape all political discussion in the twentieth century, and are indeed profoundly important today.



The emperors of the Ming and Qing dynasties sometimes held court in the Hall of Supreme Harmony in Beijing's imperial palace, or Forbidden City.

The early twentieth century was a time of great political distress in China, but also opened up unimagined new vistas for generations of Chinese at all levels of society: rural girls who became factory workers, farmers who became Communist activists, and middle-class students who learned about Japan, Europe, and America at first hand. The imperial system collapsed in the Revolution of 1911, and a new republic was established. The political atmosphere of the time allowed fierce debate on nationalism, socialism, and feminism, among other ideas, although the Confucian influences and preconceptions still continued to shape everyday life. Civil war and the dominance of imperialist powers in China, however, prevented participatory politics from taking hold, even after the Northern Expedition of 1926–28, which brought the Nationalists to power under Chiang Kaishek, the successor to the veteran Nationalist leader Sun Yatsen. This chapter charts the first stage of that long journey toward a modern mass politics.

The Age of Gold

The English civil war and the American and French revolutions had a profound influence on the relationship between Western governments and their people. The modernity of those systems lies in certain assumptions: that government should be representative of the people, and that the people have inherent rights to the choice and policies of their government; that government should act rationally and to the greatest benefit of all; and that citizenship, membership in a national body, should be granted on the basis of equality and not assigned by a hierarchy derived from any irrational, arbitrary, or other-worldly source.



A municipal magistrate and his son pose together in 1911, on the eve of the collapse of Qing China.

It is often assumed that non-European societies such as China shared few, if any, of these assumptions. Certainly some of them ran counter to Confucian assumptions, yet as we shall see, the question of how the people might be governed justly was critical to many Chinese political discussions. Central to the assumptions of emperors and their officials were Confucian ideas about the

make-up of the state. In these ideas, hierarchy was not only present but essential: the body politic was held to be a metaphorical extension of the family; just as sons should obey fathers and wives should obey husbands, so subjects should obey their rulers. The people did not have inherent rights as individuals or even as a collective body.

However, it would be wrong to think that this made Chinese governance arbitrary, irrational, or despotic. A good ruler in the Confucian world was not at liberty simply to do as he pleased. The people were in his charge, and cruel or unfair behavior toward them would result in his losing the “mandate of heaven.” Confucius and philosophers who had followed his tradition, such as Mencius, stressed that attendance to the welfare of the people was a primary task for any ruler. The great dynasties of imperial China certainly paid attention to questions of welfare; for example, removing tax burdens on areas where flooding had destroyed crops, and on occasion trying (not very successfully) to maintain “ever-full granaries” that would hold food reserves for distribution in times of hardship. Government was primarily concerned with the maintenance of order, but to do so, it was clear that the people had to feel that laws were applied fairly and equitably. At times of turmoil, the system became corrupt and dysfunctional, but during its periods of confidence and prosperity, such as the eighteenth century, the system was one of the world’s most successful empires.

Chen Hongmou (1696–1771) was one of the most prominent administrators and thinkers of statecraft of the High Qing, the period during the eighteenth century when China seemed peaceful and prosperous, a prime example of a well-run empire that looked to the good of its people. The assumptions and contradictions in Chen’s writings show clearly the way in which Confucian principles and the realities of governance created an effective, though not always consistent, style of government (and in those contradictions, no great difference from the compromises of Western governments). Simultaneously, Chen and his contemporaries in the Qing bureaucracy showed a commitment to the traditional Chinese patriarchy, yet Chen also declared that “heavenly goodness” [*tianliang*] lay in a people, even “petty commoners,” lowly “yamen [local magistrate’s office] clerks,” and even those who were not ethnically Han Chinese. Chen and his contemporaries also put into place policies that encouraged social mobility and popular education (including literacy for women), as well as merchant enterprises: none of the latter are popularly associated with “Confucian” thought, yet Chen advocated them with no sense of violation of the norms for a decent and well-ordered society.

Wei Yuan (1794–1856), one of the most well-known thinkers of the late Qing era, thought broadly about the nature of political participation. He was a Qing loyalist, but strongly argued that the dynasty needed to reform its administration if it were to cope with the threat from overseas. While he never came anywhere close to advocating that the ordinary population of China should take part in their own governance, he wrote extensively about the danger of political sterility that could come from restricting both the number and scope for argument of those who were in power: “There is no single doctrine which is absolutely correct, and no single person who is absolutely good.” Wei argued for competition in ideas, that would enable the ruler to choose between competing ideas, and in 1826 made his own contribution to that discussion by publishing the “Collected Essays on Statecraft.” Wei Yuan, however, did not want to widen political participation so as to reduce the role of the state, but rather to strengthen it.

The New World

If the eighteenth century was a broadly successful one for China, the nineteenth saw the Qing dynasty disintegrate under a series of crises both internal and external. The most obvious trigger for collapse

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