

China as an Outlier in World History

Patricia Ebrey

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Patricia Buckley Ebrey 伊沛霞, recently retired after many years as professor of history at the University of Washington, is a leading scholar of Song China and has greatly influenced how Chinese history is taught in the United States. Over her distinguished career, she has written widely on Chinese history. Her best-known books are *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China* (1996, 2010, 2022), *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Women in the Sung Period* (1993), and *Emperor Huizong* (2014), all also available in Chinese translation. She has also co-edited several volumes, the most recent of which are *Chinese Funerary Biographies: An Anthology of Remembered Lives* (2019) and *Visual and Material Cultures in Middle Period China* (2017). She currently is editor of the *Journal of Chinese History*.



A CONVERSATION WITH PATRICIA EBREY

You are working on a book about why China has been the largest country in the world for most of its recorded history and why there are so many Han Chinese today. How are you approaching these issues?

I begin with how exceptional China is. Many countries today have fewer than 50 million people, and ethnic groups with more than a hundred million people are not all that common. China, though, has 1,400 million people and there are more than 1,200 million Han Chinese. India is also a very large country, but it is much more divided by language, religion, and caste.

The simplest answer to the question of China's size is that empires were repeatedly established after periods of division. At the time of the Roman Empire, the Han and Roman empires were comparable, but the Roman Empire eventually split in two, and each part in time broke up. In China, by contrast, centralized empires as impressive as the Han were put together several more times, four of them lasting on the order of three centuries. Thus, over the last 2000 years a single government controlled both north and south China well over half the time. But that answer just raises more questions, such as why were dynastic states able to last centuries, was there something distinctive about Chinese states that made them successful at administering far-flung territories in pre-modern conditions, was there something distinctive about Chinese understandings of ethnic identity that facilitated steady growth, should economic growth leading to population growth be seen as a key part of the story, and so on.

Why tackle such a huge issue? Isn't that too broad for one book?

I have done my share of specialist research aimed at other Song historians. My goal in this book is to write in a way that will interest world historians, and for them big comparative questions are the most interesting. When Chinese historians write for each other, as we do most of the time, we tend to focus on the issues that concerned the writers of our documents, such as failed politi-

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example is Mark Elvin's 1973 *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*. In it he addresses two key questions: How was China able to maintain such a large empire? And why did it lose its economic predominance by the sixteenth century? This book is the closest to what I want to do, but it is now half a century old. More recently, the book that has caused the most stir among world historians is probably Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (2000). In it Pomeranz asks when the most advanced regions of China and Europe began to diverge economically and argues that it was not until the end of the eighteenth century. But Pomeranz confines himself to the late imperial period, and I want to show that earlier periods are also central to understanding how China developed its very distinctive pattern.

Are there any competing explanations of China's size?

A few scholars have touched on these issues, either briefly or at length. The most common explanations I have come across concern geography, ideas, the Chinese script, or the Chinese form of government. Most of them focus on relatively early periods.

Let me give a few examples. In an article, Joseph Needham and Ray Huang point to China's geography, explicitly rejecting ideas such as Legalism or Confucianism as the explanation. Rather it was the high silt content of the Yellow River, which required diking and dredging and rewarded political units large enough to coordinate this across a wide area. The counterargument here is that an explanation focused on the Yellow River does not really explain why the south was so many times successfully incorporated into Chinese states even though north and south China are quite distinct in geography. China would not be nearly as large a country in popu-

cal policies, intellectual debate on contentious issues, and elite social life. This can give the impression that these dynasties were perpetually on the brink of collapse. When one starts from the vantage point of world history, however, it is the remarkable success of Chinese dynastic states that calls for analysis, rather than their shortcomings. They governed huge territories and lasted for centuries.

Other Chinese historians before me have successfully engaged world historians with question-driven books. A good

lition without the south. And second, Huang and Needham do not provide a link between geographic preconditions for a Chinese empire and actual military conquest, which is after all how each reunification took place.

Another common approach is to look for something unique to China to explain China's exceptional history, and this is usually its retention of a non-phonetic script. For instance, W. J. F. Jenner, in *The Tyranny of History* (1992) writes "The script, identical through space and time, permanent and absolute, inhibits the development of local linguistically defined loyalties because they cannot be written down" (p. 225). Boiled down, this explanation would mean that because of the script, Chinese thought differently than people whose writing was phonetic. They saw a common culture and history where other people would have stressed what divided them. The major objection to this line of thinking is that reunifications were also achieved when rulers were not Han Chinese and not able to read Chinese. In such cases, identification with culture linked to script led to fierce resistance to unification, not action for it. The unifications by the non-Chinese Mongols and Manchus are crucial to the size of China today. In addition, it is difficult to go from a mental willingness to see unity to actual military unification.

Key philosophical ideas have also been proposed as the determining element. Yuri Pines in his *Everlasting Empire: The Political Culture of Ancient China and Its Imperial Legacy* (2012) explicitly rejects geographic explanations and sees one idea as the key: the idea that stability depends on unity, which he dates to the Warring States period. He argues that "the empire's most powerful asset was its uniform acceptance by its subjects" (19). Pines sees unification by non-Chinese, such as the Mongols and Manchus, as evidence that "the advantages of unification in the eyes of the Chinese elite (and probably the whole population) clearly outweighed the disadvantages of alien rule" (41). The main problem here is that lots of people did resist alien rule.

It is also worth considering Dingxin Zhao's *The Confucian-Legalist State* (2015). Zhao explicitly criticizes Yuri Pines for making ideas the crucial factor. He sees political culture as the key element that explains the resilience of Chinese empires. His Confucian-Legalist state is a political system that "relied on practical Legalist measures to rule society and at the same time-based its legitimacy on Confucian morality" (294). Zhao gives considerable thought to the place of the military and concludes that China achieved a level of civilian control over the military not seen in other premodern countries, which he dates back to Han Wudi about 100 BCE (Before Common Era).

To my mind, the main weakness of Zhao's book is its treatment of what happens after the Han dynasty, which is covered in a more cursory way than the pre-imperial period. When I think about the age of Han Wudi, I see much less certainty about how Chinese society would subsequently develop. Couldn't Buddhism have retained more vitality as

it did in Korea and Japan? Or Confucianism continues in its less exclusive Tang form? Then there are developments that cannot be traced back to Confucianism or Legalism, such as the rise of the Xianbei, Turks, Uighurs, Kitans, and so on. It is far from inconceivable that the Kitan state of Liao could have decided in 947 when it took Kaifeng that it would stay there and attempt to incorporate all the lands that had been under the Tang. If they had succeeded, there would then never have been a Song dynasty. If China had been under non-Han rule for several centuries in this period, would the civil service examinations ever have developed into such an important institution? Would the shared culture of the literati elite that Zhao stresses ever have reached the level of the Song-Qing period? In my understanding of history, there is much more contingency than in Zhao's. As you can see, I have problems with all of these explanations. What makes China an outlier, in my view, is not something there by 100 BCE but the conjunction of several factors/events/trajectories that can be dated to specific periods.

Can you give me an example of how you are thinking about states?

Again, I would contrast the view from inside China with the view from outside. The big questions that Chinese historians ask about the major dynastic states are how they got founded and what led to their eventual collapse. How they survived in the interim is given less attention. But surviving for several centuries is not the norm in world history and deserves to be analyzed. I see two sides of this. One is keeping heirs on the throne, as Chinese understanding of states were monarchic dynastic states. If someone from another family seized the throne, the state had come to an end. To highlight change over time in succession systems, I compare the ways the throne was passed down during the Tang and Song periods. Succession was messier in Tang times, with some violence early on, an empress seizing the throne, and domination after 800 by the thousands of eunuch palace servants. During the Song period, by contrast, succession to the throne was remarkably orderly, even when an emperor had no sons. Some of the key Song modifications of the system they inherited were limiting the number of eunuchs in the palace, expanding the number of potential heirs but keeping them from power, making the senior empress the king-maker when there was no heir apparent, and introducing pre-mortem adoption.

For a dynastic state to survive, it also had to recover from major crises, usually military crises. Here I take the case of the Jurchen invasion and occupation of north China in 1127. This story is complicated, but I stress the importance of the

support the imperial family had built in the previous century, its willingness to relocate, and its ability to get generals to work for it without letting them gain the upper hand. Here all the achievements of Song statesmen in improving statecraft over the previous century and a half proved a great asset.

Have any of your ideas shifted as you have worked on this project?

Yes. When I started, I thought that the huge number of Han Chinese was a byproduct of large, united empires: over time, I assumed, many of the non-Han people who came under Chinese government control became culturally Chinese and eventually were absorbed into the Han Chinese. What led me to realize that it is not that simple was getting drawn into the genomic science literature. Two findings are particularly relevant to the issues raised in this book. First, a remarkably

large share of men who today consider themselves to be Han Chinese do in fact descend from men who lived in north China in the Zhou period along the patriline. We know this because they carry genes on their Y chromosome that can be traced back to people buried in a Zhou cemetery dating to about 800 BCE. The mtDNA passed down through mothers that they carry, by contrast, is less distinct from that of southern non-Han. This is evidence that males from the north sometimes had children by local non-Han women, with the children and their descendants often accepted as Han Chinese. An equally important finding is that regional disparities between Han Chinese in different provinces is remarkably small, much smaller than between adjacent countries in Europe. This means that there has been a lot of gene flow across regions and classes in China.

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Men with higher social status had several times more descendants. This “social advantage” contributed to the high homogeneity of the Han Chinese as a restricted number of men provided a disproportionate share of later genes.
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These scientific findings seem in tension with the arguments made by many social scientists who treat ethnicity as a social construct, as situational and open to negotiation. They have documented recent cases of people deciding to become Han Chinese, and the histories, too, show that the descendants of non-Chinese who conquered parts of China later merged with the general Chinese population. If those who consider themselves Han Chinese do in fact share much of their paternal ancestry, was there less assimilation than social scientists and historians have assumed?

Is there anything about Chinese social or cultural practices that would explain these findings?

I think there is, particularly kinship and marriage practices. Patterns of mating can vary considerably across cultures, with some societies more endogamous than others, meaning that they mate with others who share much of their genome, perhaps marrying within a limited social group or favoring cousin marriage. Here it is useful to draw a comparison

between China and India. In India, members of a jati (caste) are expected to marry within that group, and examining the genomes of present-day people shows that these rules have been widely observed. According to David Reich, the degree of genetic differentiation among members of different jati living in the same village is many times larger than found in European villages. To put this another way, in India, inbreeding in small sub-populations, such as jati, makes those subpopulations more homogeneous but increases the heterogeneity of the larger Indian population.

In China some small non-Han populations may have been inbred, but the larger Han population had few barriers to gene flow. Here it is relevant that Chinese marriage practice is strikingly different from India's. In China the primary marriage rules were whom not to marry, not whom to marry. The first rule, from ancient times on, was not to marry anyone with the same family name (even if there was no common ancestor in a thousand years or more). Given that China had a relatively small number of family names, people with common surnames were prohibited from marrying substantial numbers of people. The second rule was not to marry a relative of a different family name (through mothers, aunts, sisters, and so on) of a different generation (such as aunt and nephew or uncle and niece), which further reduced possible marriages with close relatives.

If the comparison is between China and Europe (rather than India or the Muslim world), church teachings are relevant. The Catholic church generally banned the marriage of first cousins and uncle-niece and aunt-nephew and sometimes also second cousins, but probably more important was its insistence on monogamy. Throughout the rest of Eurasia, richer and more powerful men could legally mate with multiple women at a time, the additional mates considered secondary wives or concubines. This could lead to very large

sets of descendants. The ability of men with social and political power to produce more offspring is referred to by geneticists as "social advantage" and reduces genomic diversity.

In the Chinese case this can be seen most impressively in the growth of imperial clans, all descended from the dynasty's founder or his father. The Song imperial clan reached 5,155 male members in its sixth generation (that is, within a century and a half), and the Ming imperial clan reached an estimated 100,000 members, in less than 2.5 centuries. Although rich and powerful men in Europe may well have had mistresses or concubines, the demographic impact could not have been anywhere so great. Moreover, their out-of-wedlock sons were considered bastards, reducing their social and political power.

Thousands of Chinese genealogies survive which allow us to document gene flow through multiple marriages in Chinese history, letting us see that "the rich get children," as one scholar titled an essay on this topic. Genealogies document that men with higher social status ended up with several times more descendants within a couple of generations, in part because they could have children by concubines, in part because they could afford to marry again if their first wife died, in part because their own sons were more likely to marry, and so on. This form of "social advantage" must have contributed to the high homogeneity of the Han Chinese as a restricted number of men provided a disproportionate share of later genes.

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