
UNIT 1 CHINA: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE*

Structure

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this Unit, you will learn about:

- the ways in which our understanding of China's history and the essential features of its civilization has changed in recent scholarship;
- some of the main landmarks and trends in Chinese history;
- the Qing – the last imperial dynasty to rule China; and
- the nature of China's relations with the rest of the world before the mid-nineteenth century.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This Unit will present the historical background to the course on China's modern history from 1840 to 1978. China is one of the oldest civilizations and polities with a continuous existence in the world. It follows that its more recent history can be understood only in the context of its long and eventful history over several millennia.

As you go through the course on China from 1840 to 1978, some of the questions that may occur to you are:

- What was the nature of the Chinese economy that not only sustained a flourishing civilization and empire for centuries, but also attracted traders and admirers from around the world?
- How did such a vast and powerful polity, as the Chinese empire was, break up into small units and then reunite within a short span of 50 years in the twentieth century?

- How did a country that was repeatedly defeated and humiliated by foreign powers from the mid-nineteenth century onwards manage to overcome this situation and re-emerge as a powerful state within a few decades?

Some of the answers to these and other questions can be found through an understanding of China's past discussed in this Unit.

1.2 CHANGING UNDERSTANDING OF CHINA

Till recently, much of our understanding of China's modern history has been influenced by nineteenth and early twentieth century Western narratives of China. As you know, this course begins with the middle of the nineteenth century when China suffered the first in a series of humiliating defeats at the hands of Western powers and later Japan. For decades after this, Western narratives of China were concerned with showing:

- Why the assault on China by the West was historically inevitable or justified,
- That imperial China's defeat and collapse in the early twentieth century was a foregone conclusion,
- Why China failed to adequately 'respond to the West' and 'modernize' itself,
- Why, in the middle of the twentieth century, China was 'lost to communism'.

The result of this was that Western scholarship on China for a long time emphasized the insular and rigid nature of traditional Chinese society and government, which it said, came in the way of China 'opening' itself to the outside world and undertaking reforms to face the challenges of the modern era. Driven by the narrative of 'China's failure', it emphasized the weakness and degeneracy of the imperial system and traditional culture, particularly under the last dynasty, the Qing.

In addition, Western narratives put forward the concept of 'Sino-centrism'. According to this notion, the Chinese believed that they were the centre of the world and hence looked down on other peoples and countries. Consequently, they were unwilling or unprepared to learn from other countries and engage with a world order based on the concept of equal and sovereign nation-states.

More recent scholarship has rejected the 'failure' narrative as a prism through which to view China's history, particularly in recent centuries. Indeed, scholars at the present time are more inclined to look to China's past and its traditions to explain the phenomenal 'rise of China' in recent decades. At the very least, the over-emphasis on China's decay and decline in the nineteenth century is considered to be misplaced.

Another change in perspective that is of concerns is when to place the beginning of 'modern China'. Many courses on modern Chinese history, including this one, begin with the Opium Wars in the mid-nineteenth century, as it was believed that it was the external shock provided by defeat at the hands of Western powers that set in motion the processes of modernization in China. However, based on studies of processes such as commercialization of the economy, urbanization, the spread of literacy, technological development and so on, scholars are now more inclined to locate the beginning of 'modern' China at the start of the Qing period in the mid-seventeenth century, or during the 'Ming-Qing transition' in

the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, or even as far back as the Song period around the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In other words, well before the assault on China by the West, internal processes were underway in China that bore a striking resemblance to those in early modern Europe.

Finally, the notion that China and the Chinese were contemptuous of non-Chinese peoples, and sought to isolate themselves from the world outside, has been discredited. In the course of its long civilization, China has absorbed influences from many directions, and even been profoundly transformed by them. Buddhism, which came to China from the Indian subcontinent via Central and South East Asia, is one of the most important examples in this respect. Furthermore, far from seeing imperial China as indifferent to or opposed to foreign trade, current scholarship emphasizes that China was actually at the hub of global trade flows from at least the sixteenth century if not earlier. Earlier too, China was a major partner in a thriving intra-Asian trade. The most important products of China – silk, porcelain, and tea – had always attracted traders from far and near, and except for certain periods in its history, China's rulers had understood the benefits of foreign trade and facilitated it.

1.3 THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF CHINA

The area which constitutes today's China in the eastern end of the Eurasian landmass is a territory of continental size and variety. It includes the fertile plains along two major west-east river systems, the Yellow and the Yangzi rivers, and many other waterways; a long coastal belt that is narrow and hilly particularly in the southern part; the thickly forested hills of the south-southwest; the high Tibetan plateau and the Himalayan range further west-southwest; a vast and arid desert region in the far west and north-west; and the temperate forested zone bordering Siberia in the northeast.

The extraordinary archaeological findings unearthed in China in recent decades show that multiple centres of bronze age civilization emerged in widely dispersed parts of this landmass from the early second millennium BCE. Although they interacted with each other, and shared certain common characteristics, such as a highly sophisticated process of bronze casting, they were also quite different from each other in many respects. So far, the most extensive findings have been in the region of Anyang in north China, and these have been identified as belonging to the core of a state known as the Shang. The archaeological evidence shows a clearly stratified society and a theocratic state that was able to command great reserves of labour. Most important, they show that the people at this time had evolved a written language clearly recognizable as the forerunner of the present-day Chinese script. This is seen mainly on the remains of tens of thousands of "oracle bones" through which the Shang dynasty rulers sought to communicate with the world of the divine.

Towards the end of the second millennium BCE, the Shang rulers were defeated by those who founded the Zhou dynasty, the longest lasting dynasty in Chinese history which ended only in the 3rd century BCE. The Zhou is the first dynasty for which there are literary records. It is the period when the foundations of the most important classical schools of thought in China were laid (See below). Moreover, the use of iron led to a great increase in agricultural productivity and wealth and more powerful military weaponry. However, the actual territory directly governed by the Zhou rulers was not very big, and there was a much

larger area governed by members of the royal family and nobles who owed loyalty to the Zhou overlord. In the later part of the Zhou period, from about the 8th century BCE, rivalry and warfare among the principalities in the area known as the *Zhongguo* (or ‘central states’) grew, with some becoming more powerful and swallowing up their weaker rivals. In fact, the last two centuries of the Zhou period are known as the period of The Warring States. The contest ended with the victory of the ruler of the Qin state in the northwestern part of China, who established a unified empire and proclaimed himself ‘the first emperor of the Qin’, Qin Shihuangdi, in 221 BCE.

1.4 THE EVOLUTION OF CHINESE THOUGHT AND THE IMPACT OF BUDDHISM

The increase in wealth and the rise of new technologies under the Zhou, coupled with the growing warfare and breakdown of order in the later part of this period, led to social and intellectual ferment, and the appearance of the so-called ‘hundred schools of thought’. Various philosophers and thinkers tried to make sense of the rapid changes taking place around them.

Certainly the most famous and most influential among them was Confucius, born in 550 BCE and known in Chinese as the Master Kong, or Kongfuzi. Confucius deplored the breakdown of order which he saw, and ascribed it to moral decay. He urged a return to what he considered the golden days when relationships and mutual obligations among people were respected, such as those between the ruler and the ruled, between father and son, and other family relationships. But more significantly, he believed that order and prosperity would be restored only if truly moral ‘men of talent’ governed the land. Confucius believed that the qualities required of such men did not depend on birth but on education and merit. The primacy given to merit acquired through education, and the notion of ‘government by virtue’ rather than government based on divine right, are distinctive features of Confucian philosophy. This was later extended by Confucius’ disciple Mencius to argue that the people even had the ‘right to rebel’ against a non-virtuous ruler.

Confucius was a teacher and advisor to the local ruler, and his sayings were collected after his lifetime by his disciples and made into a compilation known as the *Analects*. His was a social-political-ethical philosophy rather than a religion as such. But he exercised a greater, and more lasting, influence on Chinese society than perhaps any other individual, and has been venerated almost like a god. The primacy placed on respecting order and hierarchy, on valuing education over birth, and his teachings on the moral foundations of governance, have formed an intrinsic part of the traditional Chinese ethos.

Roughly around the same period that Confucius expounded his teachings, another very different philosophy arose, known as Daoism. Its ideas are ascribed to Lao Zi, and its foundational text is called the *Dao De Jing*. In marked contrast to the Confucian emphasis on social order, structure and governance, Daoism held that Man needed to live in tune with the natural order of things, or the ‘dao’ (usually translated as the Way). Daoism was a mystical philosophy that valued spontaneity and intuition. As opposed to the direct, moralistic and didactic tone of the Confucian texts, Daoist works often spoke in riddles and parables.

The co-existence of these two very different schools of thought, Confucianism and Daoism, lent much depth and complexity to the Chinese psyche and spiritual/

intellectual world. Although Confucianism appeared dominant because of its eventual adoption as the ideological orthodoxy of the Chinese empire, it never displaced the importance of Daoism, which permeated in particular the realm of Chinese poetry, painting, and the inner world of the Chinese, both the common people and the scholars.

One feature that the Confucian and Daoist philosophies had in common was that they were not very concerned about God or life after death. This element was introduced into the Chinese belief system by Buddhism, which entered China mainly from around the 3rd century CE. The first couple of centuries in which Buddhism began to gain many followers in China was again a period of social and political confusion in China, following the breakup of the unified empire and the invasion of north China by various nomadic peoples. It is possible that these conditions led many people to question the meaning of life, and the possibility of an individual leading a righteous life when conditions around them were so chaotic. Buddhism provided answers to some of these questions. The form of Buddhism that became dominant in China was Mahayana Buddhism. Its colourful rituals and fables, and practice of veneration of the Buddha and bodhisattvas and minor deities, added richness and a new dimension to Chinese spiritual life. The Buddhist sangha or monastic order carried out welfare measures which also helped it to gain adherents for Buddhism at a time when the imperial order had collapsed.

By the time the unified empire was restored under the Sui and Tang dynasties, in the 6th to 9th centuries, Buddhism had deeply entrenched itself in China, and continued to flourish, contributing greatly to Chinese religious life, art and literature, political traditions and social practice. It gradually became less dependent on doctrinal inputs from India and elsewhere, and major Chinese schools of Buddhism began to develop and influence other societies like Korea and Japan. The story of the absorption of Buddhism into China is one of the most telling refutations of the argument that China was a closed or insular society contemptuous of other cultures and peoples.

Overall, the Chinese belief system was a complex amalgam of different, and often contrasting, philosophies and practices. In contrast to the situation in many other countries, in China for the most part these different schools were not seen as being mutually exclusive. There was much flexibility and variety in the ways they were adhered to.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Identify three main ways in which recent scholarly understanding of China's historical development has changed. (In about ten lines)

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- 2) Name the two earliest dynasties of China.

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- 3) What were three of the major belief systems of the Chinese people?

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- 4) Identify some of the key elements of the Confucian philosophy in about five to ten lines.

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1.5 THE CHINESE IMPERIAL STATE AND THE CHALLENGE FROM THE STEPPE

The integration of the earlier loosely connected principalities of the Zhou period into a centrally administered empire by Qin Shihuangdi in 221 BCE was a major landmark in Chinese history. Thereafter, the Chinese empire went through many modifications, and it even broke up into separate contending states in certain periods. But the centralized state ruled by the Emperor through a professional bureaucracy remained the ideal, as well as the reality for much of the time, until the collapse of the imperial system altogether in 1911.

Under the first Emperor, Qin Shihuangdi, the empire was for the first time divided into provinces which were centrally administered. A uniform legal code and a unified script was enforced. He turned the peasants into freeholders who had to pay taxes directly to the state. Trunk roads connecting the different parts of the empire were built, and weights and measures were standardized. Qin Shihuangdi was most famous for connecting up and strengthening the different walls built by the former states into what we know today as the Great Wall of China, to keep nomadic peoples to the north and west from raiding or invading his empire. He also ordered the mass burning of books from before his time so that the literary record would begin afresh with his rule.

The amazing thing is that this **basic frame of the Chinese empire**, which lasted right until the twentieth century, was built in less than a couple of decades, before Qin Shihuangdi died. His dynasty was toppled shortly after, in the first recorded instance of the many peasant rebellions in Chinese history. The leader of this rebellion went on to found the Han dynasty that lasted four centuries. However, the **structure and features of the Chinese empire were modified considerably** over subsequent centuries. Apart from the centrally administered provinces, the Chinese empire at different times came to include other territories on the periphery, which were governed with less direct intervention from the Centre. The ideology of the state was tempered with Confucian notions of ‘rule by virtue’ rather than the first emperor’s emphasis on strict laws and harsh punishments. Over the centuries, the core of the bureaucracy came to be manned by educated scholar-officials or mandarins who entered the service mainly through rigorous competitive examinations, rather than through inheritance or recommendation. All these changes lent greater stability to the Chinese empire. Whereas the “first empire” of the Qin and Han dynasties was followed by nearly

three centuries of break-up and disunion, in the last seven and a half centuries of imperial rule, the unified empire remained intact even though China saw different dynasties come to power, its size waxed and waned in different eras, and it went through repeated civil strife and foreign invasions.

The greatest challenge to the Chinese empire from its earliest days was the presence of warlike nomadic peoples on its northern and north-western frontiers. The riches of China, based on its developed agricultural economy, were a source of great attraction to the nomadic peoples, who often were militarily superior to the Chinese state, particularly in those periods when the state was weak. While trade between China and the nomads carried on almost all the time, in periods when the nomadic tribes were militarily stronger, China experienced many invasions from the steppe. Starting from the period of disunion following the collapse of the Han empire in the 3rd century CE, nomadic tribes repeatedly invaded China and even managed to establish their rule over parts of northern China. However, it was only the Mongols under Kubilai Khan in the 13th century who managed to establish the rule of ethnically non-Chinese (or non-Han, as it is termed) people over the **whole** of the Chinese empire for the first time. Four centuries later, their feat was repeated when the people called Manchus from the region north-east of the Great Wall invaded and established their own rule, that of the Qing dynasty, the last dynasty to rule over the Chinese empire. The remarkable thing is that the rule of these non-Han dynasties over the Chinese empire did not lead to the break-up of the empire or abandonment of the existing imperial institutions. On the contrary, the empire was relatively strong and stable under the Mongol (Yuan) and Manchu (Qing) dynasties. Despite this, right from the Han period onwards, the Chinese state and its rulers and officials were greatly preoccupied with the danger from the steppe, which seemed to them to pose the only serious threat to the security of the empire. This has to be kept in mind when we try to understand the relative lack of attention paid by Chinese rulers to potential threats on the maritime frontier, particularly when Western traders started to flock to Chinese shores from the sixteenth century.

1.6 SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CHANGE

Despite major continuities in the political system governing the empire, the China of the nineteenth century facing the West was vastly different from that unified by the Qin emperor. We will look at some of the major socio-economic and cultural changes that took place over the course of the two millennia of imperial China.

From aristocracy to gentry: In an effort to consolidate his rule, the first Qin emperor had sought to deal a mortal blow to the powerful aristocratic families that could have challenged him. He also sought to establish a direct relationship between the state and the mass of peasant taxpayers. However under the Han rulers and in subsequent centuries, aristocratic elite comprised of large landed families commanding political and military power once again revived. This class was badly hit by the bloody wars accompanying the end of the Tang dynasty and in the subsequent half century of civil war in the tenth century CE. Another blow to its power was the success of later emperors in centralizing military power in their own hands. But perhaps the real demise of the aristocracy came through the broadening of the social base of the officialdom through the expansion of recruitment into it via competitive civil service examinations. From about 1000 CE, this became the main channel of entering officialdom. What this meant was

that a much larger elite stratum, based on landed and commercial wealth which enabled their sons to acquire education, could enter the highest levels of officialdom and acquire power. This stratum came to be known as the gentry.

Ethnic and cultural diversity: The penetration of Buddhism, a foreign religion, into China and the wave of nomadic incursions that occurred in the centuries after the break-up of the Han empire, led to the development of a society that was far more mixed and complex than earlier. Trade and social connections, including inter-marriage, between Chinese and non-Chinese, particularly in the north, increased tremendously. The era of the great Tang dynasty (618-907 CE) was a period of great cosmopolitanism and openness to foreign influences and foreign trade. All this led to a much more diverse society and culture in China, which combined indigenous and foreign customs and traditions, whether in dress, tastes, the performing arts, pastimes, and so on. Since this was more the case in the north of China, the beginnings of a cultural north-south divide in China started to emerge.

Growing commercialization of the economy:

The Song period in China (960-1279 CE) saw remarkable economic growth and the development of inter-regional commerce. The earlier pattern of peasants producing mainly for their own subsistence and in order to pay rent to the landlords started to change, and the peasantry increasingly began to produce for the market. The years of disunion and invasion in the north had triggered great waves of migration and the settlement of the more fertile central and southern regions of China. The abundance of water and the favourable climate there, and the introduction of new, early-ripening varieties of rice, led to a great increase in agricultural productivity. Certain areas began to specialize in specific crops like cotton or tea which were produced entirely for the market. The growing inter-regional commerce led to the increasing importance of money and to experiments with new forms of currency, including the world's earliest paper currency. Major tax reforms were instituted which replaced earlier payments in labour and in kind with payment in money. It was from this period that commercial revenues began to exceed the land revenues of the state.

Economic growth in turn led to the expansion of market towns and urban centres, and the emergence of great commercial cities like Kaifeng and Suzhou, as opposed to the grand administrative capital cities of earlier times. Growing prosperity among certain classes and strata led to the spread of literacy, aided by the invention of woodblock printing. Urban life also led to distinctively new and popular forms of culture as well. However, even though the life of the elite and the moderately prosperous sections of society became richer and more colourful, it was evident that growth also led to the marginalization of the poorer sections of the peasantry and to increasing distress migration into the cities and into poorer and more barren areas of the countryside.

Population growth: The increase in agricultural productivity also was the basis for a tremendous increase in population in the last few centuries of imperial China. It has been estimated that while the population of China stood at around 100 million in 1000 CE, by the early seventeenth century, this had increased to 260 million. Under the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), the population again doubled to about 500 million. This led to tremendous pressure on the land, particularly since the amount of virgin land available had declined, and also because Chinese society followed the system of parceling out land equally among

sons in a family, greatly reducing a family's landholdings over time. Under these circumstances, many peasants chose to abandon their lands, which could no longer sustain them. These were then often acquired by landlords, leading to increasing land concentration particularly in the more fertile regions. Many of the landless peasants either turned to tenant farming or non-agricultural occupations to sustain themselves, or moved to less populated and less fertile areas to eke out a living. A few, particularly from the southern coastal regions, migrated overseas, particularly to Southeast Asia, though this was frowned upon by the authorities. Many peasants swelled the ranks of the secret societies and rebel movements which offered them some form of protection and hope.

The many centuries of economic growth and relatively stable political conditions had brought China to a level that was in many ways more advanced than other parts of the world, including Europe on the eve of the Industrial Revolution. However, this apparent success also gave rise to phenomena that weakened the overall system. Altogether, by the end of the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, a crisis of major proportions was brewing in China.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Who was Qin Shihuangdi, and what were some of his main accomplishments?

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- 2) Name two non-Han (not ethnic Chinese) dynasties that ruled over the Chinese empire.

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- 3) Explain in about ten lines some of the ways in which Chinese society and economy changed over the centuries.

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1.7 THE QING DYNASTY

As noted earlier, it has been customary to view the Qing primarily through the prism of failure, as the dynasty responsible for the humiliation of China at the hands of the West, and for the collapse of the imperial order. But few periods of Chinese history have gone through such a major reassessment in recent years as the Qing period. Far from seeing it as a period of decline and failure, it is widely acknowledged today that under the Qing dynasty, China had reached a height in terms of size, power and prosperity.

The dynasty was founded by a non-Han people from the region called Manchuria north-east of the Great Wall, who overthrew the last 'pure' Chinese dynasty, the Ming, in 1644. Much has been written about how successfully these foreign emperors ruled as Confucian monarchs and successfully co-opted the Chinese elite into serving them, after an initial period of resistance. However, equally important is that the Manchu rulers used a variety of methods to incorporate vast territories into the Chinese empire that had not been part of it before, including parts of Mongolia, Chinese Turkestan (renamed Xinjiang), Tibet and parts of the deep south-west. In ruling these areas, the Qing did not always apply the same mechanisms they used to rule the rest of China, but skillfully adapted their methods and expectations. By the later eighteenth century, their rule over their vast realm was virtually unchallenged. It shows that the Qing could be very flexible and creative in devising solutions to challenges they faced.

The Qing developed an administrative system that could be viewed as the most effective of its time anywhere in the world for the governing of such a vast and heterogeneous territory. The three Qing emperors who ruled in succession from the 1660s to the end of the eighteenth century were in addition particularly able and hardworking rulers, who kept a close watch on the pulse of what was happening in different parts of the empire. However a major problem was that the officialdom was not expanded to meet the needs of a rapidly growing population and economy, nor were the salaries of the officials correspondingly raised. This led to decreasing central oversight of what was happening in the provinces, and growing administrative inefficiency, corruption and demoralization. Another problem was that the Qing, who used their military forces so effectively to conquer China and peripheral territories in the early decades, were more concerned afterwards with preventing the military establishment from becoming a threat to their own rule. This led to a form of military organization that was riddled with checks and balances, and not suited to rapidly responding to new threats such as that posed by the Western powers on the maritime frontier or by the mass revolts that began to erupt in the nineteenth century. Fiscal problems, particularly the shortage of silver, and the spread of the opium-smoking habit among civil and military personnel, were other problems that affected the Qing administration in the early nineteenth century.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to say that the Qing government and elite had become incapable of responding to major challenges and taking major initiatives in the last century of their rule. The Great Opium Debate initiated by the Emperor in the 1830s among his officials to devise a solution to the opium problem, the systematic efforts taken by officials and scholars to try and understand the changing world order and the West in particular, and the decisive stamping out of the great mid-nineteenth century revolts by the Qing and the scholar-gentry, all indicate that the imperial order presided over by the Qing did not collapse easily.

1.8 CHINA AND THE WORLD BEFORE THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

In this last section, we will consider some aspects of China's relations with the rest of the world before the nineteenth century. Since in a later Unit you will learn about some of the main features of traditional China's external relations, this section will focus on some of the concepts traditionally advanced in Western-

language literature about pre-modern China's relationship with the rest of the world, and analyse how useful they actually are.

Sinocentrism: Zhongguo and Tianxia: We have seen at the beginning of this Unit that *Zhongguo*, the name for China, was the term first used to refer to the 'central states' in China during the Zhou period. However, *Zhongguo* can also be translated as 'middle kingdom', and this has been used to argue that the Chinese thought of themselves as the centre of the world and that they looked down on everyone else. As we have seen, the Chinese at different times have been keenly aware of the existence of other countries and peoples of equal or even greater military or cultural power than themselves. For instance, for a number of centuries after Buddhism took root in China, devout Chinese Buddhist rulers, monks and lay persons even believed that India, the original home of Buddhism, was the central realm while China was just a 'borderland'. Another concept that has been much discussed is that of *tianxia* or 'all under Heaven'. The Emperor of China was believed to preside over 'all under Heaven', and this has been used to reinforce the notion of sino-centrism or China-centredness. However, it has been argued that in the Chinese world view, *tianxia* was little more than a way of referring to those areas which were contiguous to the centrally administered Chinese empire but which were not directly ruled by the Emperor – broadly speaking, other parts of East Asia, Central Asia and parts of Southeast Asia. While it served the imperial court to maintain the discourse or rhetoric of superiority over others, it should not lead us to believe that all or even most of their foreign policies and actions flowed from a sino-centric view of the universe. Like those of other big powers, the foreign policies of the Chinese rulers mostly flowed from hard-headed calculations of their own interests and prevailing power equations.

The tribute system: Under the influence of John King Fairbank and American sinology, it became common to use the term 'tribute system' as the overarching framework to describe pre-nineteenth century China's external relations. According to this concept, China maintained relations only with those states and peoples which presented tribute to the Chinese emperor and thereby accepted the superiority of the Chinese emperor. In return, it was posited, the Chinese emperor would send back valuable gifts and also allow the visitors to trade, which was the motivation for foreigners to participate in this ritual. The implication here is one of Chinese exceptionalism – in other words, the idea that China did not conduct its foreign relations on the basis of the 'usual' calculations of self-interest and profit, but mainly from concern with its own prestige. Many scholars however now reject the validity of the tribute system as a description of China's external relations on various grounds. One is that it doesn't do justice to the vast range of policies and institutions employed by Chinese rulers, who differentiated between various kinds of foreigners and didn't apply a 'one standard fits all' rule. For instance, most Western nations were allowed freedom to trade with China without being required to present any tribute. The same applied to Japan and various Mongol peoples too. Secondly, even to the extent that tributary relations were practiced, this was true only in certain limited periods (mainly during parts of the Ming and the Qing) and hardly applied in earlier periods. Thirdly, except for a limited period during the Ming, state-controlled tributary trade was not the main form of external trade conducted by China.

Hostility of the Qing to free trade: The argument that the Qing was opposed to 'free trade' was central to Western justifications for the Opium Wars and

the unequal treaty system that was thereafter imposed on China in the nineteenth century. As is now well known and understood, from about 1500, China was a major participant in a globalized commerce that among other things saw Chinese tea, porcelain and silk flowing in increasing quantities all over the world and silver from the Americas pouring into China. It is true that some of the Ming rulers sought to regulate and monopolise the trade from the Chinese side. Even though this policy did not last long, later Ming rulers officially maintained a ban on private trade with other countries (except Japan). However the Qing, after they had consolidated their rule over China, lifted the ban in 1684, and foreign traders from all countries were welcome to trade. Except for the Russians and Japanese, for whom there were special arrangements, foreign traders, big or small, were free to call at any port as long as they had goods to trade. The Qing valued the revenues derived from foreign trade, and established institutions and procedures to facilitate and regulate, it. The extremely rapid growth of foreign trade under the Qing is the best evidence that they did not discourage foreign trade. Eventually, the trading system established by the Qing collapsed on account of weakness and decay in its own administrative structures, not because of Qing hostility to foreign trade.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) What was the original homeland of the rulers of the Qing dynasty?
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- 2) What do you understand by the concept of 'sino-centrism'?
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- 3) How would you characterize the attitude of the Qing to foreign peoples and foreign trade?
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1.9 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we learned:

- About some of the main stages in the evolution of China's society, polity, culture and economy.

- That the scholarly understanding of China's past, and especially that of the last dynasty, the Qing, has undergone many changes. The Western-derived narrative of China's "failure" to meet the challenges of the modern world, and the attempt to find the reasons for this in China's traditional civilization and institutions, is largely discredited now.
- That Chinese civilization, far from being insular or resistant to change, underwent tremendous changes over the centuries. The absorption of influences from non-Chinese peoples, and sustained growth particularly over the last millennium had resulted in the emergence of a complex and advanced society and economy.
- That the Chinese empire had over many centuries repeatedly expanded and contracted in size. Despite a strong centralized political structure and growing regional integration through internal migration and inter-regional trade, it also experienced several periods of disintegration and disunity.
- That China had had extensive contact with the world outside, and sustained trading relations with several regions. On the whole, Chinese rulers had pursued a wide range of policies and shown considerable flexibility in dealing with foreign countries and people.

A note on pronunciation of Chinese words in this text:

- 'Qi' (as in Qin, Qing) is pronounced like 'Chhi' (Chhin, Chhing)
- 'Xia' (as in Tianxia) is pronounced like 'Shya'
- 'Zh' (as in Zhou, Zhongguo) is pronounced somewhat like 'J'
- 'ong' (as in Zhong, Song) is pronounced like 'oong'

TIMELINE OF CHINESE DYNASTIES

DYNASTY	PERIOD
Shang	ca. 1600 – 1050 BCE.
Zhou	ca. 1046 – 256 BCE
Warring States	475 – 221 BCE
Qin	221 – 206 BCE
Han	206 BCE – 220 CE
Six Dynasties	220 – 589 CE
Sui	581 – 618 CE
Tang	618 – 906 CE
Song	907 – 960 CE
Yuan	1279 – 1368 CE
Ming	1368 – 1644 CE
Qing	1644 – 1912 CE.

1.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) See Section 1.2
- 2) See Section 1.3
- 3) See Section 1.4
- 4) See Section 1.4

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) See Section 1.5
- 2) See Section 1.5
- 3) See Section 1.6

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) See Section 1.7
- 2) See Section 1.8
- 3) See Section 1.8