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Dear reader,

This is a first draft of the chapter on China and East Asia for the textbook on the history of international relations that I'm working on. Chapters on the Mongol empire, the various Muslim khanates, India, Africa and the Americas will soon follow. I'm very keen to hear your comments on the text. Get in touch: erik@ringmar.net

The book will be published by Open Book Publishers, out of Cambridge, hopefully next year. It will be freely downloadable as a pdf but you can also buy it as a regular book. All the material I have written so far is available at <http://www.irhistory.info/>

yours,

Erik

Lund, Sweden, February 2016.

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China and East Asia

For much of its history, China was the all-dominant country in East Asia and international relations in this part of the world were more than anything organized by the Chinese and on Chinese terms. China itself was an empire, meaning that the country contained a multitude of different ethnic groups, but the international system of which China was the center concerned the *external* relations of the empire — its relations with the rest of East Asia. In order to describe these relations the metaphor of a solar system is sometimes used. Here China is the sun around which other and far smaller political entities, located at increasing distances from the center, are circulating in their respective orbits. Some historians use the term “suzerainty,” referring to a relationship in which “a dominant state has control over the international affairs of a subservient state while the latter retains domestic autonomy.” Yet there was a great difference in the way the Chinese dealt with neighbors to the north and the west of the country, and neighbors located predominantly to the south and the east. The former relations were organized according to what we will call the “overland system,” and the latter relations according to what we will call the “tribute system.” There were overlaps between these two systems to be sure and together we can refer to them as the Sino-centric international system, the international system with China at its center.

With rulers and peoples to the north and the west, the Chinese always had a troubled relationship. This was the case for the simple reason that they shared a common border and since these neighbors always constituted a military threat. China was not only exceedingly rich but also difficult to defend militarily, and for that reason alone it constituted a temptation to its neighbors on the steppes of Central Asia. The Chinese empire was periodically overrun by these unruly tribes which, despite their economic and technological inferiority, had access to the most advanced military

technology of the day — bows and arrows and fast horses. The policies which the imperial authorities pursued in return were often defensive: they built walls around their cities and around the northern part of the country as a whole. Yet, on occasion the imperial authorities went on the offensive. The emperors of several dynasties – including the Han, the Tang and the Qing – conducted large-scale military operations against the nomads which took them far into the heart of Central Asia.

But there were limits to both strategies. Defensive strategies did not work once the nomads learned the secrets of siege warfare and once they were able to scale, or simply blow up, the walls that the Chinese had constructed. The offensive strategies did not work since the nomads often preferred to retreat across the steppe rather than to stay put and fight. Such an illusive enemy was impossible to conclusively defeat. In practice the Chinese authorities would instead opt for rather more make-shift solutions and seek to include the nomads in shared institutional arrangements of various kinds. This included exchanges of gifts, marriage alliances, negotiations and diplomatic practices, but also military pacts. Yet these strategies too would often fail, and as a result China was periodically invaded, and taken over, in whole or in parts. Several Chinese dynasties were originally established by tribes coming from the north and the west, including the Yuan, 1271–1368 CE, which was of Mongol origin, and the last imperial dynasty, the Qing, 1644-1911 CE, which was Manchu.

As far as China's relations with countries to the east and the south were concerned, they were far easier to manage. China's borders in these directions were shorter and easier to defend, and since communications took place mainly across the sea there was no risk of attacks by ferocious, bow-wielding, horsemen. From these states the Chinese emperors demanded tributes. That is, the foreigners were required to make the journey to the Chinese capital at regular intervals and present gifts to the emperor. These journeys were organized according to a set protocol which included a number of

separate rituals, but the highlight of the journey was the audience with the emperor himself. Here the visitors affirmed their loyalty to the empire while the emperor assured them that they indeed were the subjects of his benevolent care. In this way the Chinese were confirmed in their view of themselves — they really were the “Middle Kingdom” to which people from around the world paid tribute. But the foreigners gained something too. The diplomats who showed up in Beijing were recognized as legitimate by the emperor of China and thereby the rulers of their countries were recognized as legitimate too. Besides, while making the journey to China the foreigners always took the opportunity to engage in trade, and trade with China was always highly profitable. The tribute system, as most foreigners saw it, was above all a way to get access to the Chinese market.

The Warring States period

Chinese people are fond of saying that their country has the longest continuous history of any still existing state, yet the subject of this history — “China,” “the Middle Kingdom” — has itself varied considerably over time. What we mean by “Chinese people” is also less than clear. People who historically have lived in what today is China have represented many hundreds of different ethnic groups, and even within the largest of these — the Han people — a number of mutually incomprehensible languages have been spoken. It is only in the latter part of the nineteenth-century that it becomes possible to talk about a Chinese “nation,” understood as a community of people which encompassed the whole country. What made a person Chinese, and what brought a sense of unity to the Chinese people, was instead a shared set of rituals and seasonal celebrations. These rituals go way back. The first powerful rulers — the Shang, 1600-1046, BCE, who ruled over a kingdom in the fertile valley of the Yellow River — engaged in human sacrifice and ancestor worship, and they were the first to use characters, divinations inscribed on so

called "oracle bones," as a means of writing. While human sacrifice soon ceased, ancestor worship and the Chinese form of writing has survived to this day.

During the following dynasty, the Zhou, 1050-777 BCE, the kings became increasingly powerful and the territory they controlled increased dramatically. They regarded themselves as "Sons of Heaven" who had been given a "Mandate of Heaven" to rule the country. This mandate could be revoked, however, by any rebels who could demonstrate that they were powerful enough to take over the state. A successful rebellion was proof that Heaven had bestowed its favors on the rebels. Towards the end of the Zhou dynasty, political power began to fragment as regional leaders who had been given their own land by the kings asserted their independence. Eventually seven separate states emerged, and during the subsequent Spring and Autumn period, 771-481 BCE, these kingdoms were constantly at war with each other. The period is named after the "Spring and Autumn Annals," a history of the state of Lu, which was the name of one of the warring states.

The wars continued for several hundred years although historians usually distinguish the Warring States period, 475-221 BCE, as a separate era. During the Warring States period, we could perhaps say, China was not a country as much as an international system in its own right. The seven independent states engaged in all the traditional forms of power politics: forging alliances, making treaties and fighting wars, and taking turns in the status as the most powerful state in the system. The armies were enormous, counting up to perhaps 1,000,000 men, and it is said that some 100,000 soldiers might die in a single battle. Not surprisingly, the Warring States period is a favorite of twenty-first-century costume dramas on Chinese TV. Eventually one of the states, Qin, emerged on top. The question for the smaller states was how they should react to Qin's ascendancy, and the topic was much discussed by philosophers and military strategists at the time. These scholars would often travel around China giving advise to

the various rulers. [*Read more: Sunzi and modern management techniques*]

At the time, two strategies were particularly prominent, associated with two different schools of strategic thought. The first school advocated a “vertical,” or north-south, alliance referred to as *hezong*, according to which the six states should join together in an alliance to repel Qin. The other school advocated a “horizontal,” or east-west, alliance called *lianheng*, according to which the states should rather become Qin's allies and seek its protection. The question, in other words, was whether the states should use balance of power politics to counter Qin or to jump on the Qin bandwagon. At first the balancing strategy had some success but eventually it broke down due because of fears and mutual suspicions among the six smaller states. Skillfully planting rumors and sowing discord, the diplomats of the Qin court successfully played its opponents against each other.

Since this was a bleak time of insecurity and war, it is surprising to learn that the Warring States period also was a time of great economic progress and cultural flourishing. Military competition, it seems, helped spur innovation. The imperative for all seven states, as the popular dictum put it, was to “enrich the nation and to strengthen the army.” This was first of all the case as far as military hardware was concerned, with new forms of swords, crossbows and chariots being invented. In addition, each state became far better organized and administrated. Taxes were collected more efficiently, the independent power of the nobility was suppressed, and a new class of bureaucrats took over the running of state affairs and organized their work according to formal procedures. A powerful state required a powerful economy, and to this end farming techniques were developed and major irrigation projects undertaken. In addition, the production of the new weapons required the development of new industrial techniques. The amount of cast iron produced by China already in the fifth-century BCE would not be rivaled by the rest of the world until the middle of the eighteenth-century CE, over two thousand years later. And economic markets developed too, with coins being used to pay

for goods from all over China but also from distant lands far beyond – including Manchuria, Korea and even India.

The intellectual developments of the period were at least as extraordinary. The Warring States period was known as the age of the “Hundred Schools,” and it was the time when all major Chinese systems of thought first came to be established. Eventually nine of these schools came to dominate over the others, a group which included Confucianism, Legalism, Daoism and Mohism. *[Read more: The Mohists]* Many of these ideas too were propagated by scholars who wandered from one court to the other, and since there were multiple centers of competing power, even unorthodox ideas would be given a sympathetic hearing somewhere. Kongzi, 551–479 BCE – better known outside of China as “Confucius” – is no doubt the most famous of these wandering scholars. Born in the state of Lu in what today is the Shandong province, Kongzi rose from lowly jobs as a cow-herder and clerk to become advisor to the king of Lu himself. Yet political intrigues forced him to leave the court, and this was when he began his life as a peripatetic teacher. Kongzi's philosophy emphasized the importance of personal conduct and he insisted that the virtue of the rulers was more important than formal legal rules. Moral conduct, as Kongzi saw it, is above all a matter of maintaining the obligations implied by the social relationships into which we enter. Society in the end consists of nothing but hierarchical pairs – between father and son, husband and wife, older and younger brother, ruler and subject, and between friends. The inferior party in each pair should submit to the power and to the will of the superior, but the superior has the duty to care for the inferior and to look after his or her welfare. A well-ordered society is a society where these duties are faithfully carried out. *[Read more: Kongzi and his institutes]*

Daoism is a philosophy associated with Laozi, a contemporary of Kongzi and the author of the *Daodejing*, a text of aphorisms and wisdom. Yet there is little historical

evidence for the actual existence of a person by that name and Laozi's teachings are for that reason best regarded as a compilation of texts produced by other authors. *Dao*, "the way," is the name of a religious teaching but it is also a set of hands-on advice for how to live a successful life. Daoist monks emphasized the spiritual dimensions of human existence and sought to communicate with the spirits of nature. They meditated on mountain tops and in other scenic settings and tried to capture the *qi*, the "natural energy" or "life force," which animates everything that is alive. Yet Daoist monks were also very preoccupied with matters of longevity and health. It was Daoist monks above all who developed Chinese medicine, including acupuncture, massage and *taiqi* exercises. But they have also concerned themselves with ways to make money, with how to produce many children and even with sexual practices. Daoism has had an impact on politics too, and its spiritualism and disdain for formal rules have inspired many political movements which have set themselves against the political authorities of the day.

But it was the Legalists who were to have the most direct impact on practical politics. Legalism is a literal translation of the school of political philosophy which the Chinese know as *fajiao*, and the law was indeed important to them but only as a tool of statecraft. The Legalists assumed that all people act only in their own self-interest and that they follow no moral codes with which they disagree. It is only the law, and its enforcement, which can keep people in line and guarantee peace and order in society. The law must therefore be clear enough for everyone to understand it, and the punishments which it metes out must be harsh enough to make sure that everyone obeys. In the end it was only the state and its survival that mattered to the Legalists. In fact, the ruler was free to act in whichever way he wanted as long as it benefited the state. This applied not least to matters of foreign policy. Alliances could be made but also broken; ostensibly friendly countries could be attacked without warning; peace negotiations could serve as a pretext for starting another war, and so on.

Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor, 259-210 BCE, came to power on the back of advice such as these. He suppressed the rivaling states and united the country, standardized weights and measures, the Chinese language, and even the width of roads and of the axles of carts. In an attempt to restart Chinese history, and to do it on his own terms, he ordered all classical texts to be burned and he had Confucian scholars buried alive. The First Emperor died from mercury poisoning at the age of 50 – ironically, after digesting some pills designed to make him immortal. *[Read more: The necropolis of the First Emperor]* Despite the Legalists' ruthless advice, or perhaps because of it, the Qin dynasty only lasted 15 years, and after Qin Shi Huang's death the country soon descended into yet another round of wars. Yet Confucianism and Legalism would continue to play an important role throughout Chinese history. Although Confucianism has been regarded as the official doctrine of the Chinese state, it has often been the principles of the Legalists which the rulers actually have relied on. *[Read more: Chairman Mao and Legalism]* Confucianism is the velvet glove and Legalism the iron fist.

The development of the Chinese state

During the subsequent two thousand years the leaders of the Chinese state would all be referred to as “emperors” and the country itself referred to as an “empire.” Yet since one dynasty continuously was replaced by another, there is little continuity in Chinese history and the struggles for political power resulted in both revolutions and prolonged wars. Much of the time competing dynasties ruled separate parts of the country, and several of the dynasties were not Chinese at all but Mongol, Manchu or something else. Despite this political diversity, there is a striking continuity when it comes to cultural values and presuppositions. Most emperors embraced Confucian ideals and were active participants in the various rituals which Chinese culture prescribed – including ancestor worship and offerings to Heaven at various times of the day, month and year. The emperors saw

themselves as “Sons of Heaven” who ruled by virtue of a heavenly mandate. In addition, a large and rule-bound bureaucracy helped to provide a sense of continuity from one dynasty to the next. For our purposes, there is no reason to discuss every dynasty, but we can briefly discuss the most important ones, with a focus on relations between China and the rest of the world.

The rulers of the Han dynasty, 206 BCE–220 CE, were far more successful than the Qin when it comes to maintaining themselves in power, and the dynasty lasted for well over four hundred years. While the First Emperor may have established many of the imperial institutions, it was during the Han dynasty that the same institutions were consolidated and developed. The Han state developed a proper bureaucracy run by a professional class of administrators whose salaries were paid for by taxes on key commodities. In a sharp break with the cynical doctrines of the Qin, Confucianism was made into the official philosophy of the state and all administrators were supposed to read the Confucian classics and to serve the people with virtue and benevolence. The emperor was placed at the head of the administrative system, but in practice his power was always constrained by court conferences where his advisers made decisions by consensus. The Han state took charge of society and organized economic activities, including the building of roads and canals, and large state monopolies were established for the production and sale of salt, iron and liquor. The coins minted by the Han helped expand trade and they made it possible to pay taxes in cash rather than in kind. Han era coins, with their distinctive square holes at the center through which they could be strung together, were to remain the standard means of payment until the Tang dynasty. Not surprisingly, the Chinese still refer to themselves as *hanren*, “Han people,” and to their language as *hanwen*, “Han language.”

Speaking of trade, it was during Han that the caravan routes first were developed which connected China with Central Asia, with India, and the world beyond. Although the

Roman empire and Han dynasty China had no direct contacts with each other, the goods traded along these routes did, such as Chinese silk which became a fashionable item among Roman elites and Roman glassware which ended up in China. The "Silk Road" is often used as a term for this trading network although the word itself is a nineteenth-century invention by a German scholar – besides, many more items than silk were traded here and there was never only just one road. The caravan routes brought foreign goods to China but also people and ideas, such as Buddhism which spread to China from India during the Han dynasty. But Central Asia was also the site of military engagements. The Han state was continuously harassed by a confederation of nomadic peoples known as the Xiongnu, and during emperor Han Wudi, 141-87 BCE, a large army was assembled to fight them. All male subjects were conscripted and all soldiers underwent one year of military training. Eventually the Chinese prevailed over the Xiongnu, but the people of the steppe would continue to threaten China throughout its history. *[Read more: The Xiongnu Confederacy]*

The Tang dynasty, 618–907 CE, is perhaps best remembered today for its cultural achievements. It was during Tang that arts like calligraphy and landscape painting first were developed, and when writers like Li Bai and Du Fu composed the poems which all subsequent generations of Chinese schoolchildren have been made to recite.

Economically the country was thriving. China-wide markets in lands, labor and natural resources were developed, and many technical innovations took place, including paper-making and woodblock printing; there was extensive mining and manufacturing of cast iron and even steel, and trade was brisk along the caravan routes. Well-fed and prosperous, China's population grew quickly, counting perhaps some 50 million people. The Tang capital, Xi'an, was probably the largest city in the world at the time. It was during Tang that the system of entrance examinations was conclusively established. In order to get a job as a government official you were required to pass a demanding test

on Confucian philosophy and on the classics of Chinese literature. Since the imperial bureaucracy was the main road to social and economic success, the country's elite effectively came to be selected through examinations. It was no longer enough to come from an aristocratic family or to have money.

Tang dynasty China exercised a strong cultural influence over all East Asian countries with which it came into contact. This was for example the time when Japan, Korea and Vietnam came to adopt a Chinese-style writing system and when Confucian philosophy and Chinese arts spread far and wide. During Tang it was very fashionable to be Chinese. At the same time, the Tang dynasty was wide open to the rest of the world, with goods, fashions and ideas entering China along the caravan routes. Through renewed contacts with India, Buddhism was further developed and indigenous Chinese sects such as Chan — what the Japanese were to call “Zen” — were established. While China was fashionable abroad, foreigners were fashionable in China. Chinese people dressed in foreign clothing and Chinese men married women from Central Asia. The Tang dynasty was a cosmopolitan empire where people from all over the world would mingle – Persian and Jewish traders, Arabic scholars and travelers, conjurers from Syria and acrobats from Bactria.

The Song dynasty, 960—1279 CE, was another period of economic prosperity and cultural flourishing, and a number of important technological inventions were made in this period too, including gunpowder and the compass. Making creative use of the invention of paper-making technology, the Song were the first to issue bank notes, and paper money helped spur trade. This was also when large manufacturing industries were established which produced consumer items for a market which included all of China. The Song dynasty was socially dynamic. Poor people could rise in the world and rich people could become richer still, and often members of the new affluent middle-class would established themselves as patrons of the arts. Scholars and connoisseurs of

culture would gather in gardens and private retreats to view works of art or to recite poetry and drink tea, and there were lively, if more plebeian, entertainment quarters in all major cities. During the Song dynasty, literacy increased, books became readily available, and the study of the sciences, mathematics and philosophy made great strides.

In military terms, however, the Song emperors were far less successful. Like all Chinese dynasties they were menaced by tribes attacking them from the north, in this case above all by the Jürchen, a people from whom the Manchus would later claim their descent. In 1127 CE, the Jürchen captured the Song capital of Kaifeng and forced the emperor to retire. In an audacious move, the Song elite relocated their capital to the southern city of Hangzhou, just west of present-day Shanghai. Although they had lost much of their territory, and the defeat was humiliating, the economy continued to prosper. In fact, China's population doubled in size during Song, above all since farming greatly expanded and since new species of rice were employed. The Song strengthened their navy and built ships that could travel to Southeast Asia and trade with the islands of what today is Indonesia. They strengthened their army too, and began using gunpowder as a weapon. Yet the military setbacks would continue. The Song dynasty came to a final end in 1279 when the Mongols under Kublai Khan overran Hangzhou, deposed the emperor and established a new dynasty, the Yuan, 1271-1368 CE.

Despite their spectacular success as conquerors, the Yuan dynasty lasted less than one hundred years and in 1368 the Mongols were replaced by the Ming, a dynasty led by Chinese people, that was to last until 1644. The Ming dynasty is another of the economically prosperous and culturally flourishing periods of Chinese history. The economic success was premised on trade in a domestic network which effectively linked every location in China with every other. There was now a mass market for consumer goods such as fabrics and food stuffs, as well as for prestige items such as porcelain and furniture. Since many of these items were produced in large series, many objects from

the Ming period, such as vases and tea cups, are still with us today. In Hangzhou and in the neighboring city of Suzhou, rich merchants competed ferociously with each other in establishing and extending their gardens. The garden became a fashionable setting for social and cultural life. Meanwhile the Chinese state returned to its Confucian roots after the Mongol hiatus. *[Read more: 1587, a Year of No Significance]* The state examinations were reinstated and administrators were once again selected in terms of their knowledge of the Confucian classics. Yet the Confucianism which now was in fashion was a far more philosophically sophisticated version than previously. Neo-Confucianism, as the teaching has come to be known, was not content to provide aphorisms to guide statesmen but insisted on holding forth on matters of metaphysics.

Relations with the rest of the world were rather more complicated than during the Mongols. The Yuan dynasty had had its fellow khanates as its most important neighbors, and although relations with them often were strained, they were usually not hostile. The Mongols also had a very favorable view of trade and they had done a lot to strengthen the network of trading routes and to incorporate the Chinese sections of it with the Central Asian. The Ming, by contrast, had no similar convictions. There was little understanding among the Confucian elite of the value of commercial activities and they viewed foreigners with suspicion. Yet paradoxically, Ming China was also the time when Zheng He, 1371–1433 CE, set out on his remarkable exploits. On no fewer than seven separate occasions this eunuch in the emperor's employ, brought thousands of vessels with tens of thousands of sailors on journeys of exploration and trade which took them to the Spice Islands and Malacca, India and the Indian Ocean, the Arabic peninsula and even to the east coast of Africa. *[Read more: A giraffe in Beijing]* Yet soon after Zheng He returned from these journeys all foreign travel was banned and all ocean-going ships destroyed. While Zheng He was a courtier, he was not a Confucian, and the Confucian scholars, in their wisdom, decided that foreign contacts on this scale were too disruptive.

Although the policy on foreign trade would continue to fluctuate in response to power-struggles at the court, China increasingly turned in towards itself. Not coincidentally perhaps, extensive work on the structures known as the "Great Wall of China" took place at this time. *[Read more: The Great Wall does not exist]* When a new breed of foreigners – first the Portuguese and the Spanish, later the Dutch – began to appear on Chinese shores, the Chinese would trade with them and this is how American silver and crops such as potatoes, corn and chillies first were introduced. Yet this trade was restricted to a few ports in the south of the country, to certain parts of the year, and it was heavily controlled by the Ming state and by the local guild of merchants.

The Qing dynasty, 1644-1912 CE, which replaced the Ming was the last imperial dynasty. It was established by the Manchu tribes which overran Beijing in 1644 and the rest of the country in subsequent decades. In contrast to the Mongols, the Qing emperors adopted many institutions from their predecessors such as the bureaucracy and the entrance examinations, and also many customs, such as the elaborate rituals which the emperors were required to perform. Yet the Qing were at the same time intensely proud of their Manchu heritage. Manchu princes were taught how to ride a horse and shoot arrows, and at the imperial court in Beijing visitors were often treated to displays of equestrian arts or, in the winter, to skating competitions – skating being the Manchu's national sport. The Qing rulers were Confucians in the ceremonial sense of all emperors, but they were also great patrons of Buddhist temples, especially of the form of Buddhism practiced in Tibet.

Two of the Qing emperors had particularly long and successful reigns. Emperor Kangxi ruled for 61 years, between 1661 and 1722, and his grandson, Emperor Qianlong, ruled for just as long, from 1735 to 1796 – when he abdicated as a gesture of filial piety in order not to end up ruling longer than his grandfather. These hundred plus years was a time of military expansion, when Taiwan was incorporated into the empire, together

with vast areas to the north and the west of the country, including much of Mongolia, Tibet and Xinjiang. The Chinese made wars, if less successfully, in Vietnam and Burma too, and stopped the Russians from advancing southward from Siberia. Even if the state treasury suffered as a result of these campaigns, the economy of the country as a whole was thriving. Both Kangxi and Qianlong were patrons of scholarship and the arts and they consciously sought to ingratiate themselves with the Confucian elite. Kangxi's name is associated with a great character dictionary which helped standardize the Chinese language, and on Qianlong's orders a great anthology of all Chinese books was compiled – containing some 3,450 works in 36,000 volumes. Qianlong was also a prolific if not very talented writer in his own right, with over 40,000 poems to his name.

Yet the Qing policies on foreign trade closely mirrored those of the Ming. During Qing too there were prohibitions and control, and unusually for a tribe with its origin on the steppes of central Asia, the Manchus sought to restrict trade and to keep foreigners out. The response which Emperor Qianlong gave to the British ambassador's request in 1792 that China open up its borders to British-made goods has often been quoted. "As your Ambassador can see for himself," said Qianlong, "we possess all things. I set no value on objects strange or ingenious, and have no use for your country's manufactures." The British, however, did not give up as easily and returned again and again with similar demands, and eventually the diplomats were accompanied by gunships and soldiers. After having lost two wars – the First Opium War, 1839-42, and the Second Opium War, 1856-1860 – China was too powerless to defend itself. Meanwhile, the Taiping Rebellion, 1850-1854 – one of the bloodiest popular uprisings in history, in which some twenty million people died – weakened the country. In the second part of the nineteenth-century the imperial regime tried to reform itself and the country, but the reforms were resisted by conservative groups and they never gained traction. There were renewed incursions by the Europeans, by the United States and Japan, and eventually another

domestic uprising would disposed of the entire imperial structure. A republic was declared on January 1, 1912, and the last emperor, Puyi, who was only 5 years old at the time, was forced to abdicate.

The overland system

The Chinese government, we said, organized foreign relations in two distinct ways depending on the degree of threat posed by the foreigners they confronted. Political entities to the south and the east of China were never serious challengers since the land borders here were well protected and the long coastline meant that any attackers would have to arrive in China by sea. Political entities to the north and the west were an entirely different matter since the land here was only sparsely populated and the borders diffuse and impossible to conclusively secure. The result was an international system which took two quite distinct forms. Perhaps we could talk about the “overland” and the “tribute” system respectively. Although there was a considerable overlap between the two – in particular, many of the overland states were also tribute bearers – the systems were nevertheless governed by quite different logics.

It is easy to explain the attraction which China held to the peoples on the steppes. These peoples were predominantly nomads, meaning that they followed their herds – of goats, sheep and horses above all – to where they could find pasture. Nomads are always potentially on the move, and since they never stay long enough in one place, they have problems accumulating resources. Indeed, they characteristically build no buildings and they take their homes with them as they travel. Instead the wealth of nomads is accumulated in their animals, meaning for example that while the wealth easily multiplies, it is difficult to store. The Chinese, by contrast, were overwhelmingly farmers and some were city-dwellers, meaning that they lived sedentary lives and stayed put in one place. Every Chinese family had a home, be it ever so humble, where they gathered

possessions which they were prepared to defend with their lives. While the nomads had nothing to defend that they could not take with them, the Chinese and their treasures were located in fixed and well-known places. And of course some Chinese families were very wealthy indeed. To the nomads this constituted an obvious temptation. Their general aim was not to occupy and colonize China, and to rule the country as theirs, but simply to raid the villages and cities and to take with them whatever they could lay their hands on. The nomads were interested in all kinds of resources as long as they were portable – gold and silver, animals, women.

It was always difficult for the Chinese to fight the nomads. The land between these northerners and themselves consisted of steppes and large deserts such as the Gobi and the Taklamakan. The steppes were easily crossed by the nomads on their swift horses, but they were far more difficult for the Chinese armies to cross on foot. The deserts constituted obstacles for both parties to be sure, but since they were more familiar to the nomads, they were far more likely to keep the Chinese in than the nomads out. The borders which separated China and the peoples of the steppes were thus difficult to not only to defend but even to define. While the Chinese thought of this border in territorial terms – as a question, that is, of where a line should be drawn between what is yours and what is mine – such distinctions made little sense to the nomads for whom all borders were obstacles to the movements required by their animals. Refusing to define borders, the nomads had no reason to defend them. Besides the peoples of the steppes were difficult to fight for the simple reason that they were very ferocious warriors. Although they initially at least had little by means of military technology, and made few inventions of their own, they had access to horses, the technology which mattered the most in pre-modern warfare. The nomads learned the art of horsemanship already as toddlers and as children they learned to hunt and to kill prey on horseback. These skills were easily adapted for the purposes of warfare. On

horseback they could cover large distances very quickly and they could attack an enemy at full speed, wielding their spikes and firing off arrows with high precision.

The perennial question for the Chinese was how best to deal with such enemies. The most obvious option was to pursue a defensive strategy, and this is what the Chinese did for much of their history. That is, they built walls. The walls protected them from the intruders, it protected their treasure, and from the parapets they could defend themselves against the assailants. Every Chinese city of any size had a city wall, and the city-wall of Beijing was a particularly impressive structure. It consisted of two parallel walls, a foreign visitor reported at the end of the Qing dynasty, which were 14.4 meters high, with the 20.5 meter space in-between them filled up by mud, stones and concrete. All in all the Beijing city-wall was 42 kilometers long, with loopholes and niches for cannons and massive towers at every 200 meters. And then of course there was the "Great Wall of China" itself. Built as a series of smaller structures, it was joined up by the First Emperor and improved during the Han dynasty, when hundreds of thousands of manual laborers were forcibly conscripted to work on it. Yet it was only during the Ming dynasty that the wall took on the form and shape which tour-groups see when they visit it today. The Great Wall covers a distance of some 6,000 kilometers, but since it undulates across mountains and through valleys, the structure is itself far longer, perhaps 50,000 kilometers. And, as a visitor noted at the end of the eighteenth-century, the Great Wall was broad enough to allow five horses, or two carriages, to travel side by side along it. *[Read more: The Great Wall of China does not exist!]*

Impressive as these physical structures no doubt were, a defensive strategy never worked all that well. The Mongols in particular soon learned how to besiege a city using catapults and various ingenious siege engines. In fact, many of the most successful techniques they seem to have learned directly from Chinese engineers. For that reason it was better for the Chinese to go on the offense, and this is indeed what the emperors did

on numerous occasions. Already the first Han emperor undertook large military campaigns, involving hundreds of thousands of troops and just as many horses, and these campaigns continued during his successors. The Chinese established farming communities on the steppes and built fortified towns. The court forcibly moved peasant farmers to new frontier settlements, along with government-owned slaves and convicts who performed hard labor. The court also encouraged commoners to voluntarily migrate to the frontier. Yet this, as the nomads saw it, provided only another Chinese settlement which they could attack. As the emperors discovered to their chagrin, the nomads were infuriatingly difficult to conclusively defeat. Since they had no given territory and no fixed possessions of their own, they could simply retreat across the steppe and outrun, or ambush, any Chinese soldiers that came in pursuit of them. If the Chinese managed to hold on to the territory which they conquered, the nomads would certainly be pushed further and further away, yet this only meant that they lived to fight another day.

If defense was impossible and offense difficult, the question was what the Chinese could do. The option which the imperial court eventually arrived at was to engage the peoples of the steppes in various *ad hoc* arrangements designed to give them a stake in the system. By creating shared institutions there was a chance that the nomads gradually would come to see things China's way, or perhaps that "barbarians could be used to control the barbarians," or that they could be tricked in some fashion or perhaps bribed off. The most obvious option here was to negotiate a treaty. This was a strategy which the Chinese tried in relation both to the Xiongnu Confederacy and the Russians. In both cases, and most unusually for the envoys of the Chinese empire, they sat down to negotiate with the foreigners much as though they had been equal parties. And in case of the Xiongnu, the treaty they concluded required the Chinese to send them a large number of tributary gifts, including clothes, food and wine. In the case of the Russians, the negotiations led to the conclusions of two treaties — at Nerchinsk, 1689, and at

Kyakhta, 1727 – which regulated the border between the two countries. The Russians were given a number of favors unknown to other Europeans: the right to build their own church in Beijing, with its own graveyard and a resident priest. *[Read more: Treaties of Nerchinsk, 1689, and Kyakhta, 1727]*

Another strategy, used in relation to Tibetans and Mongols, was to incorporate elements of the foreign culture into the practices of the Chinese state. Thus Tibetan-style Buddhism was a common point of reference during the Qing dynasty and Mongolian references were everywhere. For example: the Qing emperors constructed a to-scale replica of the Potala palace in Lhasa at their summer retreat in Chengde, and they established Tibetan temples in Beijing to which various lamas continuously were invited. The aim was to make the foreigners feel that they had a stake in the Chinese state – that the empire had universal pretensions and that it included them too. Whenever such cultural measures were unlikely to work, the Chinese government tried more hands-on tactics. They would, for example, give away imperial princesses as wives or consorts to the rulers on the steppes in order to bring their respective families closer together; or they would engage in elaborate gift exchanges in order to establish relationships of mutual dependence; or, in cases where the emperors were particularly desperate, they would even place themselves in the subordinate position of tribute-bearers. *[Read more: independence for Xinjiang]*

The lively commerce which took place along the caravan routes of Central Asia provided opportunities too.*[Read more: Sogdian letters]* The trade brought a large range of goods to the people of the steppes which they never could have produced for themselves, and by selling their own products to the merchants they could raise much needed cash. The Mongols, in particular, were great supporters of the trading network and they worked hard to improve security along the routes and to build relay stations where travelers could rest, get food and change horses. Since the trade was important

to them, they could not afford to disrupt it through warfare. The problem for the Chinese authorities was only that the nomads in this way could gain access to all sorts of goods which the Chinese much preferred them not to have — military technology in particular.

The tribute system

In addition to these rather ruthless methods, the imperial authorities relied on ritual means to pacify the foreigners. These rituals applied to all foreign relations, including relations with states that were members of the overland system, but they became particularly important in relation to foreigners to the south and the east of the country. Many of these states were very keen on trading with China. Despite the official Chinese doctrine which said that China was self-sufficient in all things needed by man, many Southeast Asian merchants discovered the Chinese to be interested not only in their spices and hardwoods but also in specialty items such as rhinoceros horns and ivory. And there was of course no end of things which the foreigners in turn might buy from China. These foreign traders included Europeans such as the Portuguese, the Dutch and the English who they too arrived in China on ships coming from the south. During the Ming dynasty much of this trade was rather informally organized, but during Qing foreign trade came to be concentrated in the city of Guangzhou, known as "Canton," in the south. From the middle of the eighteenth-century no other ports could be used to access the Chinese market.

Since there was no way for a foreigner to enter China except as a tribute-bearer, tribute-bearers was what all foreigners who showed up in China became. Trade was considered a lowly occupation in China and merchants were, officially at least, regarded as an inferior social class. While farmers toiled in the fields, merchants did not produce anything, and they got rich without breaking a sweat. Lacking a proper economic rationale, the imperial authorities interpreted instead foreign trade in cultural terms.

China, they argued, was the most sophisticated country in the world and by comparison everyone else was a barbarian. Barbarians, however, were not to be feared as much as pitied, and the fact that they had showed up at China's doorsteps proved that they were willing to learn from the Chinese. As such they were to be treated patiently and with benevolence. In addition, the Chinese imagined, the foreigners were eager to thank the emperor, in his capacity as "Son of Heaven," for performing the many ritual duties which maintained order in the universe and peace throughout society. By showing up in China, and by submitting themselves to the rules prescribed by the tribute system, the foreigners assumed their place in this world order. The tribute system was proof positive that China indeed was the "Middle Kingdom" and the Chinese emperor the "Son of Heaven."

A detailed protocol regulated these visits. Each mission was not to exceed one hundred men, of whom twenty were allowed to proceed to the capital while the rest were to remain at the border. On their way to the capital, each delegation was fed, housed and transported at the emperor's expense, and in the capital they stayed in the official "Residence for Tributary Envoys," where they were given a statutory amount of silver, rice and fodder. Both coming and going they were accompanied by imperial troops who both protected them and controlled their movements. Clearly, no foreign visitors saw much of the country they were passing through. In the capital they were debriefed by court officials who inquired about the conditions obtaining in their respective countries; they were also given ample opportunities to practice for the highlight of the visit — the audience with the emperor himself. The tributary gifts which they brought along, the rules stipulated, were to consist of "products native to each land." Often these were quite humble items and in each case the imperial court spent far more on the gifts it gave in return. This was one of the ways in which the emperor showed his benevolence.

The centerpiece of the ritual was the audience with the emperor. On the chosen

day, visitors were woken up as early as 3 AM and taken to the imperial palace where they spent hours waiting, sipping tea and eating sweetmeats. At long last, they were accompanied into a large hall, where many other delegations already had assembled – other foreign envoys but also delegations from all over China and state officials of various ranks. Suddenly the emperor appeared and all the visiting delegations were required to perform a *koutou* – a *kowtow* – to symbolize their respect and their submission.*[Read more: The kowtow question]* The emperor graciously accepted their tributes, spoke kindly to them and gave them gifts in return. Then the delegations exited the assembly hall one by one, while again kowtowing, and the audience was thereby concluded. Already later the same day, the visitors were treated to a sumptuous meal with the emperor in attendance, and delegations which for some reason enjoyed his favors could be served a fish caught in one of the imperial lakes or even a plate of food from the emperor's own table. After dinner there would be entertainment, perhaps a firework display, a horse-based joust or an acrobatics show. During the following days, the delegations were given more gifts, repeatedly wined and dined, even if the emperor no longer made an appearance. After that they were quite unceremoniously told that it was time for them to leave. They were accompanied back to the port where they had entered and reminded, as they left China, to come back again after the stipulated number of years.

During the Ming dynasty there were altogether 123 states which participated in the tribute system, although many of the entities in question showed up only once and some of the more obscure names on the list may indeed have been fictional. During Qing the records became more accurate with a core group of states regularly undertaking missions: Korea, Siam, the Ryukyu islands, Annam, Sulu, Burma, Laos, Turfan, but also the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British. The Europeans were represented by their respective trading companies but they were supported by their governments in choosing the appropriate presents. In general, the closer the country, the more often they had to

present themselves at the imperial court. The Koreans were put on a three-years cycle and they were consequently the most frequent visitors. Since they had to travel so far, the Europeans were supposed to show up only every seventh year, but these regulations were in practice not followed. All in all the Portuguese only made four visits to the imperial court, the Dutch also four, and the British three. The Russians showed up too – altogether some twelve times – but since they were a part of the overland system, particular rules applied to them.

One may indeed wonder why the foreigners agreed to submit themselves to all these stipulations, and the answer is that it was the only way to make sure that they could continue to trade. The envoys who went to Beijing would sometimes find ways to buy and sell things on the sly, but more importantly, their compatriots who remained at the border would set up markets where trade would be brisk for a few weeks. The profits earned in this fashion were more than sufficient to justify the trouble of the journey. Once they had showed up in Beijing, moreover, their countrymen who traded in Guangzhou would be free to pursue their activities as before. In addition, however, there were political gains to be had. Whenever a new king ascended the throne of a state that was a member of the tribute system, he would send an envoy to China and if he was granted an audience the authority of the ruler in question was impossible to dispute – he was, after all, recognized by the emperor of China himself. Returning home the diplomat would bring the emperor's official seal with him as a sign of this new status. Sometimes an heir-apparent was included in a tributary mission, a political device which effectively helped refute the claims of any rivals he might have back home. Who after all was to tell the emperor of China that he had made a mistake?

The tribute system was unquestionably hierarchical. It was China that dictated the terms and no one else was in a position to influence the logic or the institutions that constituted the system. The rituals all emphasized submission to the imperial throne, yet

the relationship which was established in this way entailed, at least in theory, obligations on both sides. More than anything the relationship resembled that obtaining between a father and a son. Just like a son, the foreign visitor should be obedient and respectful, and just as a father, the emperor should care about those who enjoyed his benevolence. Politically speaking, the imperial center controlled the periphery only in the loosest sense. Most obviously, the imperial authorities laid no claims to interfere with the independence of each state in the system. Occasionally, such as in relation to pirates in Taiwan at the end of the eighteenth-century, and in the case of attacks on its allies in Malaya, the Chinese state intervened militarily, but these were exceptions and they concerned inter-state relations and not domestic affairs. *[Read more: Pirates in Taiwan]* As long as the foreigners were not making trouble, the imperial authorities much preferred to leave them alone. The units of the system were thus hierarchically ordered but at the same time free to govern themselves.

A Japanese international system?

The inhabitants of the islands of Japan maintained a close relationship to the Asian mainland once contacts first were established with China in the fifth-century CE. At the time Japan was a poor country of fishermen and farmers, and the political authorities that existed above the level of the village are better described as chieftains than as kings. It is unclear how the Japanese first came into contact with China, but it is easy to imagine that Japanese fishermen were washed up on the shores of the Asian mainland after a storm. When they made it back to Japan, they had some amazing stories to tell. Hearing such tales, the local rulers dispatched better organized delegations and soon the Japanese went on regular study-visits to China. Eventually the Japanese imported an entire culture from China, including arts and technology, religion and a writing system, political and social thought and associated political and social institutions. The Japanese

often transformed these imports, and many of the changes were radical enough, but Japanese society was nevertheless profoundly altered as a result of the interaction. Yet Japan was a tribute-bearing state, and an official member of the Sino-centric international system, only for a few hundred years. Once the Mongols tried, and failed, to invade the country at the end of the thirteenth-century, relations could not continue as before. The Japanese did not want anything to do with a China which was aggressive and expansionist [*Read more: Kamikaze*] Although commercial contacts continued, and thrived, with both China and Korea on an informal basis, no more official delegations were dispatched to the emperor's court and Japan was politically speaking on its own.

Among the institutions borrowed from China was that of an emperor, yet the emperor of Japan was nowhere near as powerful as his Chinese counterpart. Instead real power in the country was in the hands of various local and regional leaders who had a strong and largely independent position in relation to each other. Japan was decentralized, with many different centers vying for political power. There was, for example, a fundamental tension between the leaders who controlled the Kanto region, where today's Tokyo is situated, and the leaders who controlled the Kansai region, the area around today's Osaka and Kyoto. Already during the Kamakura period, 1185–1333 CE, power was taken over by military leaders, the *shogun*, who had Kanto as their center. The Japanese emperor, residing in Nara and later in Kyoto, was a figurehead, a symbolic leader, and for most of the country's history he was more or less ignored by the rest of the country. Emperor Go-Nara in the sixteenth-century even had to sell calligraphy in his own hand in order to pay for his household expenses. Yet the power of the shogun was actually quite limited too. This was particularly the case during the *Sengoku* period, 1467-1573 CE, which was Japan's own version of China's Warring States period. This was a time of lawlessness, heroism and political intrigue with vast armies of samurai pitted against each other. [*Read more: The samurai in fact and fiction*] In 1592, one of

the military leaders, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, even tried to invade Ming dynasty China but he was stopped already in Korea.

The warring states period ended in the year 1600 after the Battle of Sekigahara when one of the military leaders, Tokugawa Ieyasu, decisively defeated the others. This inaugurated the Tokugawa period, 1600-1868 — also known as the “Edo period” — which brought peace to the country but also economic development and great social and cultural change. In the 1630s, the Tokugawa rulers banned foreign trade and limited contacts with the rest of the world. Foreign missionaries were expelled, Japanese people were banned from building ocean-going ships, and Japanese people abroad were not allowed to return home. Officially Japan was a *sakoku*, a “closed country,” and trade was limited to a few ships per year which entered at the only accessible port, Nagasaki in the far south. According to the official rhetoric, Japan was self-sufficient and its people should not waste their precious silver on luxury items from abroad, such as silk. Yet unofficial contacts of various kinds continued, not least silk trade with merchants in Korea and the Ryukyu islands. *[Read more: The Ryukyus as the center of the world]*

Although Japan now was pacified – historians often talk about a *Pax Tokugawa* – the country was *not* a unified whole. Instead various regional rulers, known as the *daimyo*, continued to affirm their independence, each one ruling a region, or *han*, of their own. The number of *han* varied over time but for most of the Tokugawa period there were at least 250 of them. The Tokugawa family controlled the largest of these regions and also the largest cities, but over something like three quarters of the *han* they had no direct influence. The *daimyo* raised their own taxes, had their own armies, police forces, legal and educational systems, and they pursued independent social and economic policies. In fact, the *han* even had their own currencies, and at the end of the Tokugawa period there were hundreds of separate forms of exchange in circulation in the country. While the shoguns in Edo reserved the right to put down peasant rebellions wherever

they occurred their military power was restricted by the fact that they could not tax people outside of their own lands.

The question is how best to characterize Japan during this period. The most obvious answer is of course to see Japan as an ordinary, unified, state, yet this description is surely faulty. The Tokugawa government was not fully sovereign since it did not have full control over the country's territory, it could not make laws for the country as a whole, and it had no foreign policy. Perhaps Japan is better described as a compound made up of mini-states, or perhaps we can even think of it as an international system – a mini-system – in its own right. If so, however, we need to be able to explain why it was that Japan remained so remarkably peaceful during the 250 years of Tokugawa rule. The answer to that question points us in the direction both of institutions and social norms.

More than anything, peace was enforced thanks to a small set of regulations regarding military matters that applied equally to all *han*, involving, for example, restrictions on military installations and rules that prevented marriage alliances that could threaten Tokugawa rule. The most spectacular feature, however, was the system of *sankinkotai*, “alternate attendance,” according to which the daimyos were required to spend every second year in Edo, where the shogun was able to keep a close watch over them. Moreover, during the year they spent at home, taking care of the business of their *han*, they were required to leave their wives and children in Edo, where they effectively would serve as the shogun's hostages. If the daimyo in some way misbehaved, it was easy for the shogun to seek retribution. In addition, the fact that all future leaders grew up in the same place, and in the same social environment, meant that they came to share a cultural outlook. In Edo the various daimyos and their courts became social rivals, competing with each other for status. Thus although Tokugawa Japan was deeply divided in political terms, it was well integrated both culturally and socially. [Read more:

Processions through Japan]

In the early nineteenth-century, the Tokugawa rulers were weakened by economic difficulties and by popular rebellions. In 1853, Commodore Perry, an American, arrived in Edo Bay insisting that the country open up to foreign trade, although the issue most prominent on his mind was to find coaling-station for American steamships on their way to China. In 1858, the Japanese were forced to allow access to five ports for foreign merchants and ten years later, in 1868, the Tokugawa regime was toppled by a group of daimyos from the south of the country who declared the establishment of a new regime, the Meiji. After close to a thousand years of neglect, the imperial institutions were dusted off and the emperor reinstated as the nominal ruler of the country. The international system which was Japan – the composite, mini-states-within-a-state, country – was replaced by a unified state according to the European model.