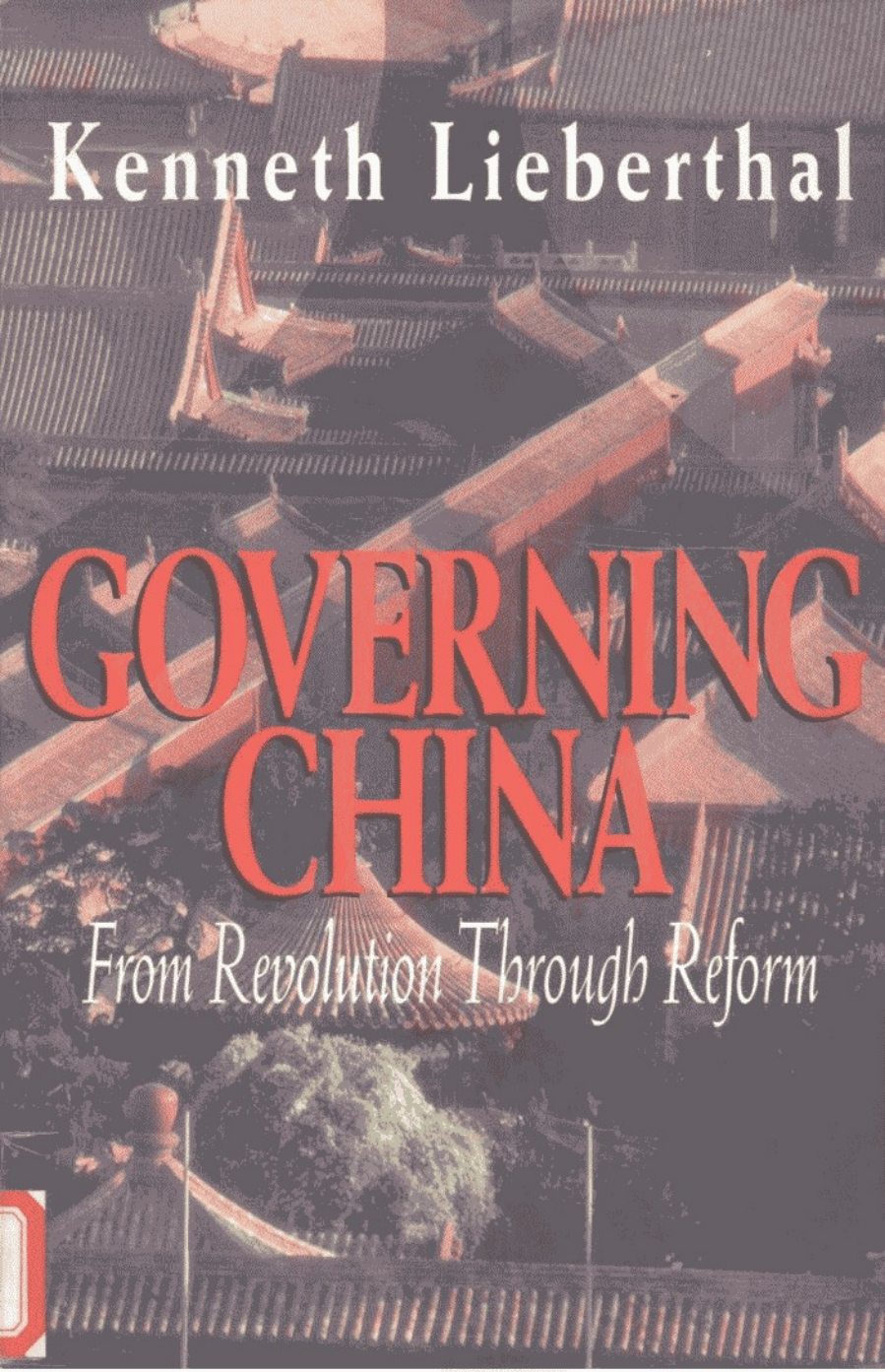
Kenneth Lieberthal
GOVERNING CHINA
From Revolution Through Reform

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Kenneth Lieberthal

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ISBN 0-393-96987-8
EAN
9 780393 969870
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Cover design by Paul Moran
Cover photograph © Thomas Hoepker/Magnum Photos, Inc.

Part One
LEGACIES

1

The Legacies of Imperial China

The post-1949 Chinese communist state* under Mao Zedong conveyed the impression that it could transform China's society almost at will. It repeatedly convulsed the multitudes with huge political mobilization efforts at the same time it marshaled this agrarian country's scarce resources for a prodigious push toward rapid industrial development. Until the launching of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, the People's Republic of China (PRC) seemed to epitomize worshipful loyalty to Mao, disciplined implementation of political

*Throughout this volume, the term "state" is used to include all the governing organizations and the bodies they directly control. When referring to the post-1949 Communist era, "state" thus encompasses the Communist party, the government, the military, and the social organizations that are either owned by the state, such as state enterprises, or under its direct control, such as state-sponsored "mass organizations" like the trade unions and Women's Federation. When only the government or the Communist party is meant, the text uses the terms "government" and "party" rather than "state."

decisions, a pliable population driven by ideological fervor, and disdain for the rest of the world.

Both this image and the more complex reality underlying it reflected the imprint of China's imperial past, a system of rule that began roughly two thousand years ago and evolved gradually up to the beginning of the twentieth century. For example, the imperial tradition nurtured the idea of basing the state system on ideological commitment, strong personal leadership at the apex, and impressive nationwide governing bureaucracies; the assumption in modern China that the government's influence should be pervasive because the government sets the moral framework for the entire society is also a product of the imperial era.

Additionally, the imperial system bequeathed contradictions and weaknesses that bedeviled Maoist China. The very majesty of the emperor's position, for example, produced tensions between the ruler and the bureaucracies of the government administration. The emperor's personal entourage often clashed with bureaucratic officials. Structurally, no national tax collection agency extended into the localities. Rather, taxes were collected by county magistrates, and each governing level (county, prefecture, circuit, and province) siphoned off a certain percentage as these revenues filtered up through the national bureaucracy. The central government's revenue base remained, therefore, sharply constrained. At the village level, moreover, a key stratum of local leaders referred to as the "gentry" divided their loyalties between the state and their own immediate constituencies. While the specifics changed, each of these and other underlying problems of the imperial era found their analogs in the Maoist period.

Within two years of Mao Zedong's death in 1976, Deng Xiaoping began an effort to reform the Maoist system. Deng's own initiatives, though, have also been shaped in many ways by the complex legacies of the imperial era. His post-Mao reforms address some of these, such as the need to elaborate a national tax bureaucracy. But in other areas, such as assuring the loyalty of local officials, the reforms are highlighting the continuing difficulties rather than providing solutions.

Imperial China had a monarchical system of governance and a patriarchal social system. The society was given a very distinctive style and aura by the official ideology of state Confucianism, but in many details it paralleled the multilayered dependent relations, sources of status, and modes of behavior found in Western monarchical societies of the premodern era.[1] The Chinese system distinguished itself from the others primarily by its enormous size, its relatively modern bureaucratic structures of state administration, and its explicit, detailed state ideology. It also lasted an extraordinary length of time. It is almost as if, in Western terms, the Holy Roman Empire had evolved but nevertheless survived into the twentieth century.

This past both shapes and haunts China. Many Chinese observers have blamed traditional ideas for their country's inability to defend itself against foreigners whose military strength had grown along with industrial power. These critics have felt China must reject traditional culture to become a wealthy, strong nation. They argue, for example, that the traditional system

discouraged the types of investment behavior and technological change that modern economic growth requires. They have a point. As far back as the Han dynasty (206 B.C. to A.D. 220), Confucian scholars argued that, "When profit is not emphasized, civilization flourishes and the customs of the people improve. . . . To open the way for profit is to provide a ladder for the people to become criminals."[2] This attitude did not prevent the emergence of flourishing commerce in China, but it did sustain a view of commerce as a low-status occupation that alone did not qualify one for prestige or power.

In imperial Chinese society, moreover, the superiority of the civilization eclipsed the idea of nationalism based on ethnicity. The Chinese referred to their empire as *tian xia* ("all under heaven"). *Guojia* ("nation-state") replaced this term only in the modern era.[3] As a consequence, foreigners could gain legitimacy as rulers of China if their actions conformed to the norms of Chinese civilization. When the Manchus conquered China and set up the Qing dynasty in 1644, for example, they started holding the traditional imperial examinations in the Confucian classics the very next year. During its final one thousand years, imperial China was under foreign rule for approximately half the time.

Nationalism has developed as a strong force in the West only since the 1700s. Western nationalists embrace their past as a source of pride, and more than a few have developed myths of a deep past in which they could then root themselves. By contrast, Chinese intellectuals have been wrestling with China's past since the end of the nineteenth century, and many have tried to forge a sense of patriotism by rejecting that past. Tensions over what it means to be Chinese have therefore troubled the country's politics throughout this century; these tensions draw variously on the notions of ethnic, or Han, Chinese, *hua ren* (people who are culturally Chinese), and *zhongguo ren* (citizens of the Chinese state).

The Imperial Chinese System

The traditional Chinese state was an awesome political achievement, the most advanced such governing body in the world. Featuring a centralized bureaucratic apparatus begun over two thousand years ago by Qin Shi Huangdi (r. 221–210 B.C.), the first emperor of the Qin dynasty (221–206 B.C.), China's system of governance evolved through the rise and fall of various dynasties until the early 1900s.

There is no reason to try to capture the evolution of the imperial Chinese system over this period of roughly two millennia. It changed a great deal. But there were fundamental features of that system that provide great insight into contemporary China's style, capabilities, and discontents.

The imperial system in China lasted so long in part because of its own self-confident sense of greatness. The *philosophes* of the European Enlightenment considered China's the ideal system, with rulers chosen for their intellectual strengths and virtue. China's emperors needed no convincing on this score. Their mentality at the height of the last dynasty, the Qing (1644–1912),

is captured in a letter written by the Qianlong emperor, who reigned from 1736 to 1796.

The Qianlong emperor wrote in response to an effort by King George III of England to gain China's consent for establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries and for developing trade ties. In 1793 the king sent an extraordinary mission to Beijing, headed by Lord Macartney. The Macartney mission brought England's best manufactures, along with skilled craftsmen and scientists, to impress the Qing court. The Qianlong emperor responded as follows to George III:

. . . the territories ruled by the Celestial Empire are vast, and for all the envoys of the vassal states coming to the capital there are definite regulations regarding the provision of quarters and supplies to them and regarding their movements. . . . How can we go as far as to change the regulations of the Celestial Empire . . . because of the request of one man—of you, O King? . . . The Celestial Empire, ruling all within the four seas, simply concentrates on carrying out the affairs of government properly, and does not value rare and precious things. Now you, O King, have presented various objects to the throne, and mindful of your loyalty in presenting offerings from afar, we have specially ordered the Yamen to receive them. In fact, the virtue and power of the celestial Dynasty has penetrated afar to the myriad kingdoms, which have come to render homage, and so all kinds of precious things from "over mountain and sea" have been collected here. . . . Nevertheless, we have never valued ingenious articles, nor do we have the slightest need of your country's manufactures. . . . You, O King, should simply act in conformity with our wishes by strengthening your loyalty and swearing perpetual obedience so as to ensure that your country may share the blessings of peace.[4]

The Qianlong emperor had reason to be smug. He was certain that Chinese civilization existed on a higher plane than any other. The Chinese believed that even those who achieved superior military power (such as, at times, the nomadic tribes to China's north) would inevitably adapt to their ways. The erosion of this confidence during the nineteenth century rocked the Chinese society to its foundations.

Overall, the imperial system did a remarkable job of ruling a vast country while employing only a modest number of officials (at the height of the last dynasty, the Qing, about twenty thousand in the formal bureaucracy, supplemented by many staff assistants). To understand the strengths as well as some of the more problematic legacies of this system, five key components warrant more detailed scrutiny: the ideology; the institution of the emperor; the bureaucratic structure; the society; and the economy. It is usually more useful to look first at a country's governing structure and then at the political ideology employed by its leaders to bolster their power, but in China the ideological underpinnings of the governing structure were so fundamental by the time of the Qing dynasty that they must be examined to explain the rest of the system.

CONFUCIANISM AS IDEOLOGY

Confucius (551–479 B.C.) was an itinerant philosopher who lived during the Warring States period, a time of incessant turmoil and warfare. He traveled from state to state, advising leaders how to assure order and prosperity in their

realms. Because he based this advice on fundamental precepts he devised concerning human nature, cosmology, rules of correct conduct, and principles governing social relationships, his teachings are called a "philosophy." But Confucianism also became a state ideology and, like Marxism and other political ideologies, it evolved over time in response to the changing political needs of its believers. As political ideology, Confucianism by the late imperial era had three core features.

First, it was a strongly conservative governing ideology. It aimed primarily at preserving order and looked not to the future but to a mythical state in the past to identify the ideal society (it therefore regarded anything "new" or "progressive" as untrustworthy). Long experience was the criterion of worth, and the wisdom of the ancients stood as the highest form of understanding. Confucius proclaimed that wise men "revere the words of the sages." Confucian officials sought to perfect the present by eliminating defects that had crept in since the ancient past.

Second, Confucianism valued hierarchy in both political and social spheres. It assumed that in the political sphere citizens were not and should not be equal. As summed up by Mencius, a disciple of Confucius, those who worked with their minds were fit to rule, and those who worked with their hands were not. Working with the mind required literacy first of all (no mean task itself with a language comprising over forty thousand characters, of which perhaps 10 percent were often used) and then mastery of the Confucian classics. Success required long years of study, and only a small percentage of the population ever succeeded. The ruling group thus remained small, and admission to it required learning a doctrine that justified the right of the few to rule the many. The only democratic component of the system was that, in theory, anyone who could master the ideology could join the ruling elite. Confucianism did not base rule on hereditary factors. But those from elite backgrounds had far greater access to the resources and support necessary to meet this key qualification for joining the political elite.[5]

Confucius taught that social relationships should be hierarchical as well, and that the key to social harmony lay in every person's understanding the mutual obligations that characterized each set of social ties. Typically, the lesser party—son, wife, student, subject—must show loyalty and obedience, while the superior party—father, husband, teacher, ruler—must reciprocate with empathy and acts of assistance.

Third, it was the essence of Confucianism that people should understand the "correct" conduct demanded by each type of relationship and should act accordingly, as this provided the key to a harmonious society. Indeed, although Confucians wanted everyone to understand the bases of the doctrine, they were on balance practical enough to recognize the even greater importance of correct conduct, whether or not it was grounded in profound learning. Following the rules of conduct, including the protocols of speech, became central to social harmony and might, over time, actually nurture correct thinking.

The Confucian emphasis on correct practice led naturally to an emphasis on ritual, the formal expression of the correct way. In the words of one contemporary student of this phenomenon, the Chinese stressed "orthopraxy"

(that is, engaging in prescribed practice) over "orthodoxy" (that is, conforming one's thinking to prescribed ideas).[6] Confucians felt that correct practice would itself shape ideas over time. Correct practice, in addition, conveyed one's acceptance of the prevailing official ideology and its associated social theory conveying legitimacy to the government that promulgated and enforced this ideology. One of the six ministerial bodies in the Qing was the Board of Rites.

In China today, mouthing "correct" formulations is still viewed as socially responsible even if all concerned know that there is little relationship between those formulations and the thoughts of the people using them.[7] This situation makes it potentially easier for Chinese leaders to elicit formal support and compliant behavior from the populace; it also makes it difficult for the leaders to know the real state of mind of their own citizens and of their political subordinates.

The superior-subordinate relationships defined in the Confucian doctrine largely stripped youths of initiative and generally placed social power in the hands of the older, more conservative segments of the population. Students deferred to teachers, children to parents, subjects to leaders, and all to the emperor. The emperor, as the key link between heaven and earth, secured prosperity for his country through right conduct toward his[8] subjects and through correct performance of the rites that propitiated heaven. No formal laws could bind the emperor, but, as explained below, most who held this position felt constrained to conform to correct conduct as prescribed by the basic Confucian doctrine. The emperor's virtue in mastering and practicing this doctrine, it was felt, assured the prosperity of the country and thus secured his mandate to rule.

During the imperial age, the Chinese made fidelity to Confucian precepts the defining characteristic of civilized society. Those further from the center of imperial power, who had less regard for Confucian norms, were considered less civilized. The Chinese tried to broker relations with foreign peoples by fitting them into a ritualized system of exchange of goods and pledges of loyalty that Westerners dubbed the "tribute system."[9] This system of diplomatic relations and foreign trade was managed on the Chinese side by the Board of Rites. It was structured so that the conduct of relations with neighboring peoples would utilize rituals that would bolster China's official political cosmology. For example, the kowtow, which was performed by both Chinese and foreigners, required those having an audience with the emperor to kneel down and knock their forehead on the ground three times, and then to repeat this act for a total of "three kneelings and nine knockings of the head on the ground." In this as in other ways in the imperial era, form became as important as substance in maintaining the ideological base of the system.[10]

Confucianism was not the only ideology that influenced China's traditional polity. At various times, Buddhism (which came from India, and reached its golden age in China during the Tang dynasty [A.D. 618–907]), Daoism, and other strands of thought have had significant impact. China's imperial history is also replete with tales of political intrigue, military skulduggery, bureaucratic degeneration, and social upheaval. These phenomena reflect in part another important political and philosophical doctrine called

Legalism. This approach advocated extensive use of material rewards and physical punishments to obtain desired behavior. Legalists premised their approach on the assumption that people are inherently selfish. For much of China's history over the past two millennia, while Confucianism was the official ideology, actual practice also made substantial use of Legalism.

The Legalist philosophy was applied most fully during the reign of Qin Shi Huangdi. One of imperial China's most powerful figures, the first emperor of the Qin dynasty acquired power through astute military campaigns and political treachery. He then established a central bureaucratic state that engendered the imperial Chinese system.

The first Qin emperor's approach to governance differed fundamentally from that of Confucius. The Sage (Confucius) believed that people are educable, and therefore that the state should stress education and rule by example. Qin Shi Huangdi and his notoriously cruel minister Li Ssu, by contrast, adopted the Legalist view that people are inherently selfish and boorish, and respond only to the blatant manipulation of rewards and punishments.

Qin Shi Huangdi's achievements suggest a man larger than life. In his reign there rose major parts of the defensive barrier in the north known as the Great Wall.[11] He oversaw the production of a huge army of nearly ten thousand life-sized terra-cotta figures installed near his massive tomb in Xi'an to protect him in his afterlife. His use of power was as startling in its scope as were all his other activities. He created a society characterized by widespread torture and political knavery. He decreed such excruciating types of execution that it became common for a condemned individual to plead for clemency in the form of a swift death (being beheaded with a broadsword) instead of a slow one (such as being quartered by four oxen pulling one's limbs in different directions).[12]

Qin Shi Huangdi's empire survived his death by less than four years, but his notion of powerful rewards and punishments—of the resort to extraordinary violence to achieve the goals of the state—became an integral part of Chinese governing practice. As a result, China's subsequent political system both extolled rule by virtue and example and made ready resort to cruel punishment. Put differently, the traditional system wedded lofty Confucian ideology and tough Legalist measures into an integral whole.[13] This blend of ideologically defined moralism and hard-edged coercion has long survived the destruction of the imperial Chinese system that spawned it.

THE EMPEROR

The notion that the political system headed by the emperor provided moral guidance for the society was fundamental to traditional Confucian thought. As the "son of heaven" and the "ruler of all under heaven," the emperor assumed responsibility for maintaining "civilized" society and for mediating the relationship between that society and heaven. "Heaven" was not identified with an anthropomorphic deity as in Western religions but rather was more akin to some combination of history and fate.

Confucian principles were not entirely supportive of imperial power,

however. These principles envisaged a central role for the emperor; however, in Confucian thought the emperor was accountable for his actions, which would be measured against the standards of the ideology, and those who could claim the most thorough grounding in the ideology were the Confucian scholar officials, not the emperor himself.

On the other hand, the ideology placed such emphasis on obligations to family that these officials were themselves confronted with some daunting dilemmas. Should they criticize the emperor when such criticism might bring great harm in retaliation against their entire clans? How much loyalty should they accord to the emperor and to their bureaucratic duties on his behalf when their families could benefit from a less strict approach to office?

The emperor headed not only the bureaucracy through which he governed but also an extended family and the life of the court itself. The tensions between the bureaucrats (the outer court) on the one side and those involved in the emperor's personal life (the inner court) on the other have been a perennial source of trouble for the political system.[14] Admission to the outer court was based largely on rigorous training in Confucian doctrine. Admission to the inner court, comprising imperial relatives and attendants, was based on blood ties (in the case of relatives), attractiveness (in the case of concubines), and surgery (in the case of eunuchs).

Typically, the early years of a dynasty saw a powerful inner court, as a new ruling house consolidated its power against officials held over from the former dynasty whose loyalty was suspect. The middle years were characterized by the relative flourishing of the outer court, which managed a complex and thriving society. The final decades usually saw the inner court reassert itself. Inbreeding produced weak emperors, and a dissolute life in the imperial palace, the Forbidden City, further eroded discipline. Intrigues among eunuchs, concubines, and court retainers contributed significantly to the decline of a number of dynasties. Overall, the tensions between the leader's personal relations and the formal governmental organs continue to rankle the Chinese system of the 1990s.

Because the emperor was to mediate between heaven and earth (and thus assure heaven's beneficence), the Chinese considered him personally responsible not only for actions under his direct control, such as government discipline, but also for those events over which he exercised only indirect or no control, such as floods and droughts. These latter were taken as signs of imperial incompetence or decay. When the emperor fell short, however, there were no clean political solutions. The emperor's position was so essential to the system (especially in the later dynasties) that no statutory limits could be placed on imperial power.

Among the scholar officials, a particular group, called "censors," was designated to ferret out problems in the political system. These members of the outer court were supposed to call the emperor's attention to poor performance of any officials, including the emperor himself. But since no official had an independent base from which to circumscribe the power and activities of the emperor, criticism had to take the form of remonstrance. The censor could only hope to make the emperor understand his problems and focus at-

tention on correcting them, all the while affirming the emperor's moral superiority. This type of criticism thus bolstered the position of the emperor at the same time that it sought to change his behavior.

Imperial performance so abysmal that nothing could bring improvement occasionally produced large-scale social unrest. Official corruption would bleed the population through excessive taxation, while failure to maintain granaries and dikes would invite disasters. Military forces lost their effectiveness through corruption and sloth, and court rivalries sapped the ability of such regimes to galvanize their energies in support of renewal. Under these circumstances, unrest often began in the peripheral areas of the country, where restless groups threw off the relatively weak yoke of imperial control. That unrest then spread to more central areas, sometimes abetted by strong outside military forces.

The successful overthrow of an emperor was understood as a sign that through poor conduct that emperor had lost the "mandate of heaven." The succession to a new leader and a new dynasty could then be considered legitimate. Should the challenge to the empire fail, however, the emperor retained the "mandate of heaven" in the popular view. Since all failed challengers had defied the most fundamental strictures on obedience and civilization, they suffered terrible retribution.

The imperial system thus left a legacy of strong personal rule at the top, unbounded by formal law or regulation. The emperor's role as propagator and personifier of the official Confucian ideology bolstered the emperor's right to rule. This system was rife with tensions between the emperor and the governing bureaucracies, the inner and outer courts, and those who would reform an emperor gone astray versus those who would let a willful emperor have his way. There was no resolution in this system to the contradiction between a powerful leader whose personal virtue was thought to anchor the entire system and a powerful administrative bureaucracy seeking to enhance its own rights and privileges and to assure stability and prosperity.[15] This contradiction became a crisis when the leader became highly erratic and/or unusually willful. This structural weakness has continued to plague twentieth-century China.

THE BUREAUCRACY

Over a period of centuries, the bureaucratic system initiated by the Qin dynasty took on characteristics that are associated with modern bureaucracy in the West: highly defined offices, merit-based appointments, clearly articulated reward structures, considerable specialization in functions, highly developed formal systems of communications, detailed rules concerning proper lines of authority, regularized reporting obligations, formalized structures for monitoring compliance and deviance, and so forth. Specific codes of dress and conduct reflecting the status of various bureaucratic positions buttressed this system.[16]

In theory, the bureaucracy was to administer the empire so as to assure

harmony in accordance with the Confucian precepts. County magistrates, for example, periodically gave public lectures on Confucian morals to the populace.[17] The system thus relied on a strong, ideologically motivated bureaucracy to lay a firm basis for a civilized, harmonious society. Officials might not live up to their obligations under this system, but the remedy would be their removal from office. The classical liberal preference for diffusing power and limiting the "reach" of the government in society is directly antithetical to the fundamental tenets of the traditional Chinese polity.

As in every bureaucratic system, reality departed to some extent from formal prescriptions, but overall the Chinese bureaucratic system was extraordinary in its scope, capabilities, and "modernity." It was a profoundly nonpluralistic system, based squarely on the notions of hierarchy, centralization, and the state as the propagator of the correct moral framework for the society. This centuries-long tradition of centralized bureaucratic rule was one of China's most extraordinary accomplishments. In this sphere, the legacies of China's past remain particularly strong.

Even China's concrete administrative system today bears a strong resemblance to its imperial forebear. During the Qing dynasty, the administration consisted of three hierarchies: the civil, the military, and the censorate. The civil administration in Beijing had six ministries, called boards. These took charge, respectively, of Personnel; Revenue; Rites; War; Punishments; and Public Works. Beneath these there were four levels of administration: counties or cities; prefectures; circuits; and provinces (there were twenty-two provinces in 1899). The total size of the civil administration remained small, however. As noted above, in the 1800s roughly twenty thousand individuals held official positions in the civil bureaucracy, less than 1 percent of the number of officials in 1990. Since the Qing dynasty was ruled by the alien Manchus, each board had both Manchu and Chinese heads and deputy heads.[18]

The military consisted of Manchu troops organized into banners, plus a Chinese professional army called the Army of the Green Standard that was held over from the Ming period and served as a constabulary force. The banner system, so-called because each force had its own pennant, grew out of a Manchu institution from the period before they conquered all of China. The emperor was considered the head of the military.[19]

The censorate attached officials to the six boards and to fifteen circuits in the provinces. Censors scrutinized the administration at all levels and reported problems to the emperor. When censors felt compelled to criticize the emperor himself, they proceeded at enormous personal risk.

Within the ranks of the imperial bureaucracy, mastery of the Confucian classics became increasingly important for admission to and advancement through the official hierarchy. By the later dynasties, the official examinations that largely determined elite recruitment and promotion concentrated overwhelmingly on mastery of the Confucian ideology. This body of knowledge may have had only limited utility for teaching officials how to handle flood control, revenue collection and transfers, and the myriad other duties they would assume when appointed to office. But there were distinct political ben-

efits to making mastery of political orthodoxy the core stepping-stone in a relatively meritocratic bureaucratic system.

The mature Confucian system required that politically ambitious younger people as well as those already in office devote a great deal of time to preparing for the next round of official examinations. People with political ambition, therefore, exerted much of their energies throughout their careers on immersing themselves in the highly conservative ideology that buttressed the regime, and this bound scholars and officials to the state rather than making them independent of it.

The examination system also created a common culture shared by officials who came from diverse parts of a large country. Even the official oral language of Mandarin Chinese, based on the Beijing dialect, added a sense of unity and distinctiveness to the small official class and the larger number of people who aspired to be a part of that class. The larger group of aspirants, moreover, generally assumed informal leadership positions in their local communities and helped to bridge the gap between a distant officialdom and the localities. As of the early nineteenth century, approximately 1.1 million people (out of a population of over three hundred million) had obtained the lowest level official degree and thus formed the lower gentry.[20] Altogether, the examination system was highly effective in indoctrinating the elite and the politically ambitious in the conservative values of the regime. Its legacy is the view that ideological indoctrination of officials is both natural and necessary.

CHINESE SOCIETY

Chinese society displayed the characteristics embraced by Confucian philosophy: it was hierarchical, family-focused, and ritualistic. The overwhelming majority of people made their living off the land, with village size and organization varying considerably in different parts of the country. In south China, single-lineage villages tended to be more common than in the north, and therefore prohibitions on marrying within the village were especially strong in the south. In many cases, clan organizations played powerful roles in the village economy and ritual life.

Since each county had only one official member of the national bureaucracy (the *zhixian*, or county magistrate), the system made extensive use of intermediate elites. The most important group consisted of those who were trained for the official examinations but who currently did not have an appointment to the national bureaucracy. This group included two types of individuals: those who had passed the exams and were awaiting appointment and those who held appointments but were in the midst of the mandatory three-year mourning period for each parent, which required that they stay home without official assignment for that period. Given the often close relationships between such people and the larger landholders in the locale (official office often brought with it the means to obtain land; owning land brought with it the resources to study for the official examinations), this group of trained individuals typically had prestige and power in the villages.[21]

The county magistrate often depended on this intermediate stratum of individuals for advice about local conditions and for assistance in assuring order and managing the economy. These individuals could speak the official language and were literate. They shared the magistrate's training in Confucian political ideology. They identified, on the whole, with the national elite. They thus formed a privileged and important segment of the nonofficial population. At the same time, they were integral parts of their own villages, subject to the strong social expectations of their relatives and friends. They thus had dual roles as informal extensions of the state apparatus and as protectors of their own locales from the demands of the central state.

In a landholding agricultural economy, land ownership formed a major base of social stratification. Studies have made clear, though, that land was considered a commodity and was not held intact from generation to generation. China did not have a system of primogeniture, wherein the eldest son inherited all the land of the father. Rather, the death of a father would trigger a division of the land holdings among the sons. Consequently, there was continuing social mobility, and huge concentrations of land in the hands of particular families tended not to last more than two or three generations.[22]

In this society, women were severely repressed. In the later dynasties a practice called footbinding became popular. When a girl reached about age six her mother would wrap her feet tightly, curling the toes under the ball of the foot. Keeping the feet tightly bound over the ensuing years produced bones that broke and curled under, so that the overall length of the foot ideally would not exceed three inches. The resulting "lily feet" were considered attractive and a sign of status, and only non-Chinese minorities and very poor women who had to work in the fields all day had natural feet. Footbinding was extremely painful, and it sharply limited the physical mobility of women.

Most women were kept out of sight in the women's quarters of the home. Their duties varied with the wealth and status of the family, but they in general were subservient to their husbands and their grown male children. Women were betrothed by their father and typically had barely met their husbands before the marriage. While wealthier men might have more than one wife (or a wife and a number of concubines), a widow was expected to remain chaste after the death of her husband, even if this occurred when she was still very young.

Wives lived in the husband's household and were under the authority of the mother-in-law, which often made for tense, miserable relations. Because women left the household while males brought new people (their wives and children) into the household, there was a very strong preference for male offspring, and female infanticide was not unknown. Women, indeed, were held in such low regard that often girls were not given names (they were merely called "second daughter" or something similar). Grandparents would not count the offspring of their daughters among their grandchildren. As in many patriarchal societies, female suicide was common.[23]

The communists from the 1920s to the 1940s sought to harness female resentment to the cause of the revolution. The slogan they used was that "women hold up half the sky." Gender relations have changed greatly in

China, as elsewhere, during the twentieth century but, as Chapter 11 explains, gender equality is still far from a reality.

The most enduring legacy from traditional society is the pattern of social obligations created by the Confucian value system. As noted above, Confucian doctrine placed tremendous emphasis on knowing the proper behavior—that is, the mutual obligations—attendant on each type of social relationship. The Chinese language itself reflects this emphasis, with its unique nouns to distinguish seemingly marginal degrees of relationship—such as "third cousin twice removed on the maternal side."

The Confucian understanding of human nature and society contrasts strongly with that of the Judeo-Christian heritage. The latter holds that each person owes every other person a general social obligation because of the very humanity shared by all. Underlying this view is the idea that every individual has a soul and therefore some inherent value. Although this tradition has often been more honored in theory than in practice, it has been quite fundamental to the development of Western society and culture.

Confucian society lacks this notion of abstract social obligation. Its obligations are concrete and determined by specific social relationships. An individual, indeed, never stands independently as Ms. Li or Mr. Zhao, but is always part of a web of social relationships: wife, mother, daughter, sister, husband, son, student. One deals with others through these personal connections, and one's social strategy is based to a considerable extent on building supportive webs of personal ties.[24]

This specificity of social obligation helps explain a paradox often observed by Westerners in China. A poor family living at bare subsistence level will take in any distant relative who shows up at their door needing help. The relative may live in the family's cramped quarters, share their food, and eventually find a modest job with their aid. This same family, though, would pass a starving beggar on their street every day and refuse to give him any money. More than that, they would seem amused by his plight, and when they saw him lying dead on the street one day they might crack irreverent jokes.[25] How could the same people appear solicitous in the one instance and callous in the other?

The family's defined social obligation toward the distant relative and lack of obligation toward the begger on the street explain this paradoxical behavior. A stranger without any "connection" (the current Chinese term is *guanxi*) is simply of no concern to the family. His travails are merely a diversion from their dreary everyday routine and the source of some potential interest and amusement.

Such sights remain common in contemporary China, even though Confucian ideology no longer holds sway. A traffic accident quickly draws a crowd, but only police officers help the victims. Others simply enjoy the break from their daily routines. A guide to behavior developed for Chinese visiting the United States in the early 1980s advised the visitors not to stand by and laugh if they saw someone injured in an accident. Rather, the guide explained, Westerners expect you to empathize and to offer help in such a situation. In other cases where Westerners would feel obligated to extend help, Chinese