

# The Everlasting Empire

The Political Culture of  
Ancient China and Its Imperial Legacy

Yuri Pines



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CHINA AND ITS IMPERIAL LEGACY

*Yuri Pines*

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

Princeton and Oxford



Copyright © 2012 by Princeton University Press  
Published by Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton,  
New Jersey 08540  
In the United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, 6 Oxford Street,  
Woodstock, Oxfordshire OX20 1TW

press.princeton.edu

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Pines, Yuri.

The everlasting empire : the political culture of ancient China and its imperial legacy /  
Yuri Pines.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-691-13495-6 (hardcover : alk. paper) 1. China—Politics and  
government. 2. Political culture—China—History. 3. Political science—China—  
Philosophy—History. 4. Imperialism—China—History. 5. Ideology—China—  
History. I. Title.

JQ1510.P56 2012

306.20951—dc23 2011036388

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available

This book has been composed in Garamond Pro

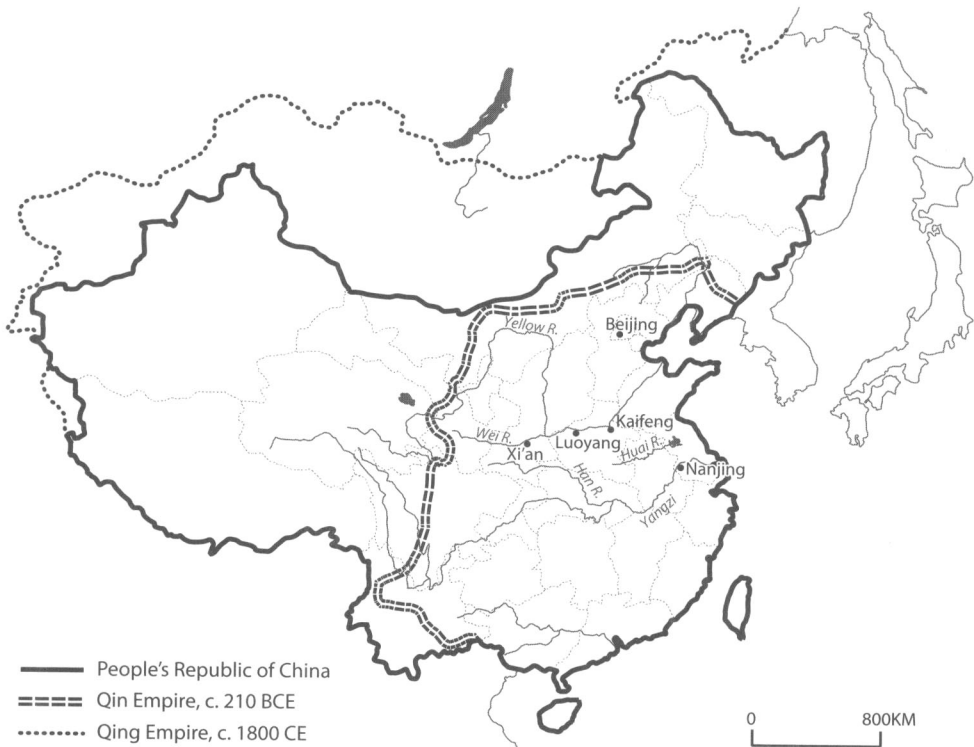
Printed on acid-free paper. ∞

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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## The Everlasting Empire



## Acknowledgments

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THIS BOOK IS WRITTEN as homage to two eminent scholars. First is my teacher, Professor Liu Zehua 劉澤華 of the Nankai University, Tianjin, whose remarkable ability to combine meticulous study of specific texts, periods, and personalities with bold generalizations and highly original analysis of Chinese political culture throughout the centuries serves as a source of constant inspiration for me. Second is the late Professor Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt, in whose workshops I was privileged to participate in the early 2000s, and who encouraged me to contextualize Chinese history and Chinese political culture in broader global patterns and to think in terms of comparative history. It is to these two great teachers that my book is dedicated.

In preparing this book I have benefited tremendously from the advice of my friends and colleagues: Zvi Ben-Dor, Michal Biran (whose illuminating remarks on nomadic political culture proved exceptionally invaluable), Elizabeth Perry, and Yitzhak Shichor. Paul Goldin and another reviewer for Princeton University Press contributed greatly toward the manuscript's improvement. I am deeply grateful to these scholars—and to many other colleagues whose advice on particular questions I sought and whose studies I have consulted. Naturally, I remain singularly responsible for any possible inaccuracies and imprecise interpretations of secondary research. I am grateful to Yitzhak Jaffe for preparing the map.

I am grateful to Rob Tempio of Princeton University Press for his constant encouragement; to the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, where the exceptionally stimulating intellectual atmosphere strengthened my determination to undertake this project back in 2006, and to my wife, Wang Yu, and my friends, who tolerated my partial default on social obligations during the years of writing and revisions.

This research was supported by the Israel Science Foundation (grant no. 1217/07) and by the Michael William Lipson Chair in Chinese Studies.

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## Introduction

Stability is in unity.

—*Mengzi*

WESTERN OBSERVERS seem always to have been fascinated with the durability of the Chinese political system. While attitudes toward the Chinese political model changed dramatically over the centuries, reflecting shifts and turns in Europe's political and intellectual history—from the Jesuits' admiration of China's stability to Hegel's derision of its stagnation, from Voltaire's praise of it as an exemplary enlightened monarchy to Karl Wittfogel's detestation of its "Oriental despotism"—interest in the Chinese empire's exceptional longevity persisted.<sup>1</sup> In turn it led Western scholars to investigate numerous aspects of Chinese political thought, values, and modes of sociopolitical behavior—what today may be called "political culture." While in the course of the twentieth century interest in the Chinese imperial model and in China's political culture diminished among nonspecialists, it remained intense among scholars of China who searched in the imperial past for explanations of China's turbulent present. Particularly during Mao Zedong's years in power (1949–1976) and in their immediate aftermath, scholars repeatedly debated the cultural roots of the vicissitudes of Chinese history, investigating imperial patterns of autocracy, dissent, submission, and rebellion and their impact on China's present.<sup>2</sup>

In recent decades this interest in Chinese political culture among Western students of China has gradually subsided. Many factors have contributed to this: emerging scholarly uneasiness with sweeping generalizations that all too often served hidden or overt political agendas; "decentering" shifts in the historiography that redirected scholarly gaze from the center to the periphery and from the rulers to the ruled; and, arguably, the seemingly dull and predictable state of contemporary Chinese politics, which makes the field of political studies of current—and, *mutatis mutandis*, premodern—China much less attractive than it was during Mao's twists and turns.<sup>3</sup> Yet curiously, just when Chinese politics became less "exciting" and Western scholars lost their interest in Chinese political culture, this topic gained unprecedented prominence in China's indigenous scholarship. Prompted by the need to reassess the traditional sources of manifold malpractices of Mao's (and not only Mao's) era, and encouraged by

relative relaxation of academic control, Chinese scholars produced dozens of monographs and thousands of articles on various topics concerning traditional Chinese political ideologies, values, and practices and their modern impact. Few are the topics on which the divergence of interests between Chinese and Western scholars is so marked.

My interest in Chinese political culture had been aroused since my first encounter with the leading Chinese scholar in the field, Liu Zehua, under whose guidance I studied in the 1990s, at Nankai University, Tianjin. It was there that I first began contemplating the need to address anew the political miracle of the Chinese empire—one of the largest political entities worldwide, which endured against all odds for more than two millennia. Unlike my Chinese teachers and colleagues, I was attracted to Chinese political culture primarily not because of its impact on China's current political experience, but as an explanatory framework for the empire's unparalleled durability. I believe that now, as ideological battles in which the Chinese empire served as a model or a foil for the Occident have long ended, the time is ripe to address its history anew, and try to understand how its architects and custodians were able to establish the longest continuous polity in human history.

The Chinese empire was established in 221 BCE, when the state of Qin unified the Chinese world after centuries of intensive interstate warfare. The nascent empire was then roughly contemporary with the Maurya Empire in India and with the Hellenistic and Roman empires in the Mediterranean area. The Chinese empire ended with the proclamation of the Republic in 1912 CE, almost simultaneously with the final collapse of three major empires in the West: the Ottoman, the Habsburg, and the Romanov. Between these termini, for 2,132 years, China underwent tremendous changes in demography and topography, in ethnic composition of the ruling elites and socioeconomic structure, in religion and means of artistic expression. It encountered—like any other comparable polity worldwide—periods of internal wars and foreign incursions, alien occupations, and devastating rebellions; not a few times the very survival of Chinese civilization looked precarious. Yet upheavals and transformations notwithstanding, we may discern striking continuities in institutional, sociopolitical, and cultural spheres throughout the imperial millennia. The monarchic political system; the powerful bureaucracy; the strongly pronounced social hierarchy, usually coupled with considerable social mobility; the extended family system; the uniform written language and continuous educational curriculum—all these features remained valid both under unifying dynasties and under regional regimes during the ages of fragmentation, under native and under alien rule. Moreover, underlying these common features were fundamental ideas and values, which shaped the imperial polity. The emperor should be omnipotent and

his rule should be universal; the bureaucracy should be staffed by men of proven talent and merit; and the commoners deserve utmost concern but should remain outside policy making. These ideas guided political actors in China from the beginning to the end of the imperial enterprise, from the Qin dynasty (221–207 BCE) to the Qing (1644–1911).

This study explores the ways in which the Chinese imperial system attained its unparalleled endurance. In this exploration, I outright reject the once-popular environmental deterministic approach, such as that advocated by Wittfogel, or the idea that the empire's success reflected some perennial Chinese “national character.”<sup>4</sup> And I do not pretend to provide a comprehensive answer, which would have to take into consideration a variety of geographic, economic, military, religious, and cultural factors, the detailed analysis of which goes beyond the scope of the present study (more on this below). Rather, I shall focus on a single variable, which distinguishes Chinese imperial experience from that of other comparable polities elsewhere, namely, the empire's exceptional ideological prowess. As I hope to demonstrate, the Chinese empire was an extraordinarily powerful ideological construct, the appeal of which to a variety of political actors enabled its survival even during periods of severe military, economic, and administrative malfunctioning. Put in other words, the peculiar historical trajectory of the Chinese empire is not its indestructibility—it witnessed several spectacular collapses—but rather its repeated resurrection in more or less the same territory and with a functional structure similar to that of the preturmoil period. This resurrection, in turn, was not incidental: it reflected the conscious efforts of major players to restore what they considered normal and normative way of sociopolitical conduct—the imperial order.

The peculiarity of China's historical trajectory starts in its preimperial age. In contrast with other imperial polities, the Chinese empire came into existence after a lengthy period of ideological preparation and preplanning. Centuries of internal turmoil that preceded the imperial unification of 221 BCE, and which are known ominously as the age of “Warring States” (453–221 BCE), were also the most vibrant period in China's intellectual history. Bewildered by the exacerbating crisis, thinkers of that age sought ways to restore peace and stability. Their practical recommendations varied tremendously; but amid this immense variety there were some points of consensus. Most importantly, thinkers of distinct ideological inclinations unanimously accepted political unification of the entire known civilized world—“All-under-Heaven”—as the only feasible means to put an end to perennial war; and they also agreed that the entire subcelestial realm should be governed by a single omnipotent monarch.<sup>5</sup> These premises of unity and monarchism became the ideological foundation of the future empire, and they were not questioned for millennia to

come. Furthermore, the ideological fertility of the Warring States period provided the empire builders with a rich repertoire of ideas from which solutions could be drawn to deal with a variety of problems and challenges. Thus, prior to the imperial unification, an ideological framework was formed within which much of the empire's political life continued to fluctuate.

Preconceived long before it came into existence, the empire remained forever not only an administrative and military entity but also an ideological construct. It was recently defined as "the best illustration of Gramscian hegemony,"<sup>6</sup> and it is certainly true that the imperial idea enjoyed political-cultural hegemonic status. The empire's basic ideological premises were shared by every politically significant social group and even by its immediate neighbors; no alternative political structure was considered either legitimate or desirable; and even those rulers whose ethnic or social background must have encouraged them to be critical of the imperial polity were destined to adopt it and adapt themselves to it, enriching and improving its functioning rather than dismantling it. Until the late nineteenth century, the empire was the only conceivable polity for the inhabitants of the Chinese world. Even during periods of woeful turmoil and disintegration, major political actors—from the emperor and his aides down to local elites and rebellious commoners—all vied to restore and improve the imperial order rather than replace it.

The power of the imperial ideology is undeniable, but it would be grossly inaccurate to reduce the study of the empire's durability to analysis of its ideological guidelines. Rather, the imperial political culture developed amid complex interaction between ideological stipulations and practical requirements. The empire's longevity derived not just from the solidity of its ideological foundations, but also from its leaders' ability to adjust their practices and adapt to changing circumstances. This flexibility—just like the ideological rigidity—was built into the empire's genetic code from its very inception. Preimperial thinkers bequeathed to the empire builders not a ready model, but rather a set of basic principles and a variety of conflicting policy recommendations. The resultant ideological synthesis was fluid enough to allow constant readjustment of manifold policies. When new challenges came into existence—such as the appearance of nomadic tribesmen as the empire's most formidable rivals or the emergence of powerful local elites (see chapters 1 and 4)—the empire's leaders were able to introduce the necessary modifications without compromising the essentials of imperial rule. This flexibility amid preservation of the basic ideological and institutional framework became the true source of the empire's vitality.

In light of this understanding, the present study is built so as to stand at the nexus of intellectual and political history. While my earlier studies focused primarily on the formation of the imperial ideology,<sup>7</sup> here I shall

try to elucidate the dynamic interplay between the empire's ideological guidelines and their practical adaptations. Each of the first five chapters starts with a brief analysis of the background on which specific principles concerning the empire's maintenance—the concept of political unity, the idea of monarchism, behavioral norms for politically involved intellectuals, and rules for dealing with local elites and with the commoners—were formulated. After these introductory sections, which largely summarize my previous research, I go on to explore how the ideological principles laid down in the preimperial or early imperial period were implemented and modified in the process of their actualization. The discussion, while roughly chronological, is not intended to present a systematic history of the empire (a task that is beyond this book's scope), but rather provides historical illustrations of the complex pattern of transformation and evolution of ideas and practices throughout the imperial millennia. I have intentionally selected my illustrations from different periods, trying to introduce, even if briefly, every major dynasty (and not a few minor ones), rather than confining the discussion to a few well-known dynasties and personalities. In this way I hope to present a sufficiently complex picture of Chinese history and to avoid haphazard generalizations, which are still quite popular in many synoptic studies of China's past.

It is a crucial premise of this book that Chinese political culture cannot be understood in simplistic, monochromatic, or unilinear terms.<sup>8</sup> Rather, it was full of paradoxes and tensions, reflecting what Liu Zehua aptly names its “*yin-yang* structure.”<sup>9</sup> Adoration of monarchism coexisted with extremely critical views of individual monarchs; intellectuals were perceived as both the ruler's servitors and his moral guides; a hierarchical mind-set coexisted with strong egalitarian tendencies; while the commoners, who were declared the “root” of the polity and the kingmakers, were also firmly excluded from participation in political processes. Even such an unshakable principle as the ideal of political unity of All-under-Heaven was sometimes compromised in practice by redrawing the boundaries between the “internal” and “external” realms (see chapter 1). Yet as I shall try to demonstrate, these persistent “creative tensions,” to borrow Tu Wei-ming's term, have further contributed toward flexibility of the empire's functioning, its adaptability to a variety of domestic and foreign challenges, and its ultimate durability.<sup>10</sup>

My focus on dynamism and complexity of Chinese political culture, I hope, will allow me to overcome the widespread mistrust of broad generalizations as intrinsically superficial and/or leading to reductionist, essentialized, or ahistorical perceptions of Chinese culture. It is surely not my intention to reduce China's history to a set of immutable principles and rules (see note 8 to this introduction), or to some neat “evolutions” (e.g., toward “ever more efficient authoritarianism”; see chapter 2). Hence, rather than glossing over instances of discontinuities and ruptures, I shall

highlight them whenever appropriate, and rather than looking for primordial explanations of basic ideological and institutional patterns, I shall explore their emergence and evolution. I hope to demonstrate that each of these patterns was a product of reasonable choices made by statesmen and thinkers at different stages of the empire's development; and many of these choices were repeatedly reinterpreted, renegotiated, and readjusted in the face of a variety of challenges. However, I also believe that beneath temporal variations we can discern common underlying principles, which, in my eyes, constitute the fundamentals of China's imperial model, and which I hope to foreground in this book.

Aside from the danger of superficial generalizations, my study faces yet another potential pitfall—that of overreliance on traditional Chinese historiography as the major source for understanding the imperial past. As is well known, this historiography in general, and its core, the so-called dynastic histories in particular, suffer not just from political biases but also from ideological conventions that at times result in a skewed presentation of the past. Many historical works tend to perpetuate the illusion of unified rule during the ages of *de facto* fragmentation, and the illusion of China's superiority over aliens during the ages of dynastic weakness; most of them focus on the center at the expense of the periphery; and the desire of many history writers to seek moral lessons in the past causes some to cross the line between descriptive and prescriptive narratives. More substantial biases permeate not just the official historiography but the entire ideological and historical production of the literati. Thus not just the absolute majority of the empire's subjects—the lower strata, women, ethnic minorities, and the like—remain outside the focus of historical production; what is worse for the study of political culture, even elite and subelite groups other than the literati—military men and alien conquerors, eunuchs and harem women, merchants and monks—remain woefully under- or misrepresented. This intrinsic bias in the writings of the literati dictates utmost caution in the analysis of, for instance, the persistence of fundamental political values, which are explored throughout this book. Is it possible that ideological and political phenomena that did not correspond to the literati's worldview were simply glossed over? Such a question poses an implicit challenge to the validity of my research.

To moderate this challenge, I offer two observations. First, the sheer richness of Chinese historical production and the abundance of primary documents incorporated into historical works allow a sensitive historian to reconstruct a much more nuanced picture than is often assumed. Thus, in addition to official histories, we possess—especially from the late imperial period—a variety of local histories and personal accounts, which were produced outside the court and which elucidate many topics that

remain beyond the scope of official historiography. Furthermore, numerous literary works, epigraphic sources, accounts of foreign travelers, writings by members of other ethnic groups (most notably the Manchu archives), and even material objects—all these further enrich our understanding of the complexity of China's past and allow us to go beyond the confines of the official histories, which, as Etienne Balazs derisively said, were written “by officials for officials.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, while our picture of the Chinese past may remain incomplete and inaccurate in some details, on balance, I believe, it is possible to restore a sufficiently reliable view of China's political and ideological trajectories.

Second, and most important for the present study, the biases of the literati are less detrimental to an understanding of Chinese political culture than to other research endeavors. Since political culture in China was from the beginning designed by the educated elite, and since this elite retained cultural and ideological (even if not always political) hegemony throughout the Chinese imperial age, its viewpoints naturally constitute the major source for my research. As these viewpoints can be reconstructed with considerable precision from the extant sources, it may be argued that the general picture presented in this study remains largely reliable.

## GOALS OF THIS BOOK

My exploration of the strengths and weaknesses of the Chinese empire pursues three distinct goals. The first and perhaps the most audacious of these is an attempt to outline the essentials of China's political culture. I am aware that this undertaking will face the inevitable skepticism of “a generation of historians that has been training its eyes on smaller and smaller temporal and geographical chunks of Chinese history, . . . working to get beyond East/West generalizations.”<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, I hope to demonstrate that historical sensitivity should not preclude readiness to generalize, and that awareness of the immense variability of Chinese history in time and space should not prevent us from discerning long-term patterns and modes of functioning, the combination of which was peculiar to China. I hope that by outlining fundamental principles of the empire's functioning, this study will benefit both historians of China, by providing a possible framework for discussions of specifics of China's imperial history, and colleagues and students who deal with other civilizations and are interested in understanding the patterns of China's past for the sake of comparison.

This brings me to a second goal: namely, to locate the Chinese example more firmly within the nascent but rapidly developing field of “imperialogy”—that is, the study of an empire as a historical and sociopolitical



phenomenon. Comparative studies of imperial formations were undertaken by both historians and social scientists in the past, and in recent years interest in the topic has visibly burgeoned.<sup>13</sup> With the increasing theoretical sophistication of these studies, particularly evidenced by Goldstone and Haldon's recent insightful analysis of the empires' developmental trajectories, the possibility of creating a viable cross-civilization comparative framework increases as well.<sup>14</sup> Yet while the Chinese case is duly present in most of the comparative studies (and is very prominent in some), research is still overwhelmingly dominated by the Occidental (Roman or, less frequently, Near Eastern) perspective. I think that the time is ripe to reverse this trend, taking into account the Chinese imperial experience in its full complexity. My study in particular may contribute to this end by exploring the importance of the ideological factors behind the empire's sustainability and addressing thereby what appears to be one of the crucial factors behind the differences in the empires' life spans.<sup>15</sup>

To be sure, the present monograph is but a preliminary contribution to comparative "imperiology." Establishing a more rigid comparative framework would require more systematic discussion of a number of questions that are only cursorily dealt with in the present study, such as the impact of geographic, economic, religious, ethnic, and military factors on the empires' different trajectories. To what extent did China benefit from its relative isolation from other civilizations of comparable economic and ideological prowess—for example, those in western and southern Eurasia? To what extent did it benefit from its relative economic self-sufficiency, which allowed China's rulers to moderate contacts with the outside world more efficiently than would be possible elsewhere? How did the Chinese empire escape major religious challenges to its structure and to its mode of functioning? What were the costs and benefits of the empire's strongly pronounced tendency to subjugate the military to civilian control? Were the ethnic identities in the Chinese world more malleable and less politically potent than those elsewhere? These and manifold other questions will require further studies.

My third, and perhaps most contentious goal, is to reassess the role of the imperial experience in the modern history of China. For two centuries, the empire's exceptional stability was reviled as the major impediment blocking China's access to "progress" and "modernization." It is not my intention to dispute the intellectual validity of this perspective, which was—and is—shared by the vast majority of Chinese intellectuals and statesmen throughout the twentieth century and beyond. Nor do I intend to err in a different direction, as a minority of ultrapatriotic Chinese scholars do, obliterating obviously negative aspects of the empire's experience.<sup>16</sup> Yet I think today we should liberate ourselves from teleological perspectives and weigh the empire's strengths and shortcomings on its



own terms: that is, against the goals set forth by its architects and custodians. There is no doubt that many of these goals were never realized: periodic disastrous collisions, widespread corruption, the inadequacy of many rulers and of their officials—all these persistent weaknesses of the empire were readily recognized not only by modern but also by traditional scholars. On the positive side, however, few if any premodern polities worldwide were able to provide such a fair degree of stability, peace, and relative prosperity to so many people as did the Chinese empire. The very fact that China—despite obvious ecological challenges<sup>17</sup>—remained the most populous country on earth through much of the imperial period speaks highly of its success.

Eschewing a “modernization” perspective does not mean, however, ignoring altogether the question of imperial China’s disastrous performance vis-à-vis Western (and Japanese) challenges in the nineteenth–twentieth centuries. The empire’s collapse was very real, and it involved profound changes in the structure and underlying ideological norms of the Chinese polity. In the final chapter I address these events by offering a new assessment of the fate of the imperial political culture in the modern age. I focus in particular on the following questions: Which aspects of the imperial model were abandoned altogether? Which were modified, and which were retained? Does the end of the monarchy in February 1912 mark the end of imperial China or just another—more radical than ever—modification and readjustment of the traditional system? Is it permissible to speak of political continuities during the age of revolutions and rupture that spanned most of the twentieth century? What—if any—are the lessons that the current Chinese leadership may draw from the imperial experience, especially in the early twenty-first century, as China appears to be irresistibly advancing toward an age of renewed global prowess and self-confidence? Inevitably tentative, my answers, so I hope, will add another dimension to the ongoing debates about China’s cultural identity in the modern age and the connections between its past and its present.

Today, as the economic center of gravity of the modern world shifts back toward Asia, and Western narratives of historical progress are increasingly questioned, blind faith in the supremacy of European sociopolitical and intellectual models gives way to more sober reflections. While we remain deeply enmeshed in our own hegemonic discourse—that of democracy, equality, and human rights—it may still be refreshing to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of alternative political formations and alternative hegemonic ideologies, of which the Chinese empire presents one of the most interesting examples. Without either embellishing or disparaging it, we may reflect upon its strengths and weaknesses and reassess its value, not only for a better understanding of the history