

## THE CHINESE WORLD

### THE UNIFYING ELEMENTS OF CHINA

What made the Chinese unifying model much more compelling than the European one? What were those unifying ties that ultimately held China together? Why was China the only early civilization able to maintain its cultural and linguistic unity? And even its political continuity across such a huge territory and over a period of three thousand years?

First of all there was the writing system, common to the elites of the whole territory.

When both the Roman and Han empires crumbled, the Chinese Classical written language persisted much more than Latin. From the 10th century, Romanic languages begin to appear in Europe, even if Latin retained its importance in official and church documents until modern times. But not in Literature. Instead Classical Chinese was alive until the 20th century, as can be seen in this English Chinese Nanjing treaty that closed the First Opium War in 1842. And the Chinese script is still in use today.

As a system that represents words rather than sounds, the Chinese script did not need to rely on a common spoken language, which would have been much more difficult to achieve and was certainly beyond the capacities of any state of that time.

The Chinese script unified the Chinese territories, but it also unified Chinese historical culture. Texts that had been in existence for more than a thousand years could still be read and understood perfectly even if the language had evolved and people pronounced the words in quite a different way.

It could even be read by people with languages that were mutually unintelligible and totally unrelated to the Chinese, like Korean and Japanese. The Chinese script not only unified China, it also gave East Asia its cultural unity.

The similar educational background of the elites **also fostered China's unity**. Once the exams were definitively in place with the Song, and were almost the only path to government office, the scholars who took them studied the same classical texts, and shared a classical language, an exclusive access to high culture and a similar way of life.

Then there was the growing prevalence of Confucianism, an extremely hierarchical system of thought that reinforced the power of these elites, and provided them with tools that carried over from one dynasty to the next. And if we look at Chinese society not from the elite point of view but from the bottom up, then we find that even before Confucius, ancestor worship as the foundation of all moral virtues and as a system through which cooperation was enabled also provided a strong element of continuity to Chinese civilization.

Other causes may also have played a part in the consistent trend towards unification. There were the religious components of the imperial state that focused Chinese loyalties on the Emperor, thus avoiding the fights between Church and State that would poison European politics for centuries. And there was also the great Chinese skill for organizing tasks and relocating people on a large scale.

This was already evident in the very first Chinese dynasties in the second millennium BCE. And we also ought to take into account their capacity to harness the mighty Chinese rivers, both for irrigation and for communication purposes.

One of the greatest cultural heroes in China, the great Yu, obtained enough power and glory to found the first Chinese dynasty, not through supernatural powers or divine help of any kind, but because he was the best hydraulic engineer of his time and the only person capable of putting an end to the devastating floods of the Yellow River.

The first Chinese empire, the Qin empire, established in 221 BCE, joined up the key economic zones in the Chinese territory through a series of hydraulic projects. The Lingqu canal connected a tributary of the Yangzi in central China to a tributary of the Xijiang in the very south.

The Dujiangyan irrigation system ensured the lasting incorporation of Sichuan into the Chinese empire. The Zhengguo canal connected two main tributaries of the Yellow river. It is worth noting that these three hydraulic projects are still working twenty-three centuries later.

The historical boundaries of China were drawn and redrawn over and over down the millennia, mostly affecting the territory of what is known as China Proper. Fujian was not effectively incorporated into the Chinese empire until the Tang, in the 7th century.

It was an important acquisition for the future of maritime China. Significant additions to the Chinese territory took a long time to come. In the 13th century, the Mongols conquered China and with them, of course, came Mongolia.

They also conquered Yunnan, where they put in place an important Muslim contingent coming from central Asia. The incorporation of Yunnan reinforced China's ties with continental South-East Asia.

The biggest enlargement of Chinese boundaries came with the Manchus and the Qing dynasty. Manchuria, however, was a forbidden territory for Chinese migrants until the 19th century. And with the Manchus also came Taiwan that at that moment was home to an impressive pirate empire.

The 18th century saw the bloody takeover of Xinjiang, a Muslim territory, and a light incursion into Tibet, although at that moment that did not entail a heavy Chinese presence.

**So, to finish this lecture, let's recall that, apart from the loss of Mongolia, China today retains the basic shape of the last imperial dynasty, the Qing or Manchu.**