

THE CHINESE WORLD
CHINA IN ANCIENT WORLD HISTORY

In this lecture we focus on China's interaction with the rest of the world.

Our aim is to understand how China has influenced global history and has in turn been influenced by it. By the middle of the first millennium BCE all the great civilizations of Eurasia had reached a point of maturity that allowed them to cast an objective view on their own beliefs, and to respond to the social and political changes that their societies were undergoing.

It was then, that the great central traditions of Greece, Persia, India and China were laid down with highly elaborated systems of beliefs and values that gave coherence to their civilizations. And each of them was clearly distinct from the rest.

What distinguished the Chinese from the others was that they looked at the Cosmos, Nature and Man as an interrelated whole that came into being and was maintained by its own connected forces, without any supernatural explanation or divine creator.

Theirs was a world in which both progress and backwardness were attributed to human decisions, not to gods or divinities. This is the world, in which Confucius was born, and hence his insistence on ethics rather than on metaphysics as the preeminent tool to organize society, and on education as the means to foster it.

From this point on, Chinese tradition will argue endlessly about how best to organize human societies. This focus on collective issues differs strongly from the equally intensive focus on individual problems that characterizes the western tradition. From the 3rd century BCE through to the 6th century CE, the political landscape at both extremes of the Eurasian continent showed clear similarities.

The first Chinese empire was founded in 221 BCE, and the Han Empire that followed it was the exact contemporary of the Roman Empire. Both empires had a population of about 60 million and both occupied huge territories of more or less three million square kilometers.

Both empires had educated and urban elites and both promoted the cultural solidarity of those elites, through the writing of great general histories that exalted their origins.

Tacitus did it in Rome and Sima Qian did it in China. Both empires built roads to foster centralization and to facilitate military movements. Both were agricultural empires, but Chinese productivity was much higher. The fertility of the loess plateau, the widespread use of cast-iron for agricultural tools and the intensive use of irrigation allowed the Chinese to produce crops from the same piece of land every year, without having to leave fields fallow, as was the case in Rome.

The Chinese were much better fed than the Romans. During all these centuries, Chinese technology advanced at a much quicker pace than the rest of Eurasia. The impulse exerted by hydraulic engineering for the taming of the great Chinese rivers could provide an explanation for this, especially for the development of the metallurgical technology.

Iron casting and steel were produced by the Chinese 15 centuries before Europe. On the other hand, the intensely bureaucratic Chinese government and its centralization could in turn explain the development of the textile industry, because silk was the main form of payment to both bureaucrats and barbarians. It was the Chinese superiority in textile and metallurgical technology that fostered its contacts with the urbanized states that appeared at many points of the Eurasian continent.

Chinese silks and Chinese iron traveled across Eurasia responding to the demands of central Asia, Persia, India and ultimately Rome. But finished products travelled much more quickly than inventions, and even if most of Chinese devices did finally find their way to Europe, they did it with a delay of centuries or even millennia.

This was for instance the case of the efficient harness for horses, the use of water power applied to metallurgical bellows, and also the case of paper, that the Chinese had already invented by the end of the first century but took a thousand years to reach the west, because the feudal world that came after Rome had no need for it.