

## CHAPTER ONE

# Introduction

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Everyone should know something about China's history. One could justify this statement purely on the banal grounds of China's considerable and rising importance in the contemporary world. But this approach ignores the many other more interesting reasons why the study of Chinese history is important and relevant today. New research on China's past is challenging broadly held ideas about the norms of development of human societies and contributing to the emergence of whole new fields of historical knowledge. It is offering new ways of thinking about and new tools for addressing present-day concerns such as the status of women, climate change, and rule of law. An understanding of Chinese history is essential moreover to making sense of critical political debates in China today. This *Companion* aims to provide a wide range of readers with an understanding of the state of the field of Chinese history, of some exciting recent developments, and of promising future directions. We hope the chapters will appeal not only to scholars of Chinese history but also to China specialists in other disciplines; to scholars who work on other parts of the world or with other disciplinary approaches that can be enriched by the new approaches presented here; to teachers, present and future, and to a general interested readership.

The *Companion* is timely because Chinese history—in the sense of the scholarly effort to understand China's historical experience—is changing rapidly. Everyone knows about the dramatic changes that have taken place in China in the four decades since the death of Mao Zedong. But the remarkable transformation in the study of China's past is less well known. Each of the chapters in this volume conveys this transformation from a different point of view. Together they convey the diversity and ferment of the field as a whole.

How is China's history changing? First, core assumptions of the field have been shaken. These assumptions include some of the most high-level generalizations—such as the idea that China's history in the centuries before the arrival of the west was one of stasis and isolation—as well more specific arguments. Lu shows in her chapter for example

that the history of women in China can no longer be told as a simple tale of unending suffering and victimization; Alford and Schluessel show in theirs that China, far from being an exemplar of imperial tyranny and rule by fiat, actually has a long tradition of law and legal culture. Some of these assumptions and generalizations about Chinese history, while largely abandoned by scholarly historians, linger in the general public, and the chapters of the *Companion* should also help teachers encourage their students to question what they think they know about China.

The ways historians work is changing. Among the most obvious of the changes is the explosion of source materials for the study of the Chinese past. Wilkinson's chapter demonstrates that this is true for virtually any period and theme of Chinese history. For some periods and issues, new sources have been literally unearthed. For others, historians can now access sources that were previously unavailable. For still others the prevailing views of what constitutes a historical source have expanded. Tackett's study of the changing character of Chinese elites about a thousand years ago offers an example of how new digital tools make possible new analyses, even using sources that have long been part of the historian's toolkit.

The methodological approaches of previous generations of historians have been undermined. Rather than looking at China as a whole as the only meaningful unit of analysis, historians are proposing new geographical units—local society within China, the Eurasian landmass, even the entire world—to frame their analysis. Rather than accepting conventional approaches to periodization, meaning the way in which historians divide their subject of study into different periods, scholars are suggesting new ones.

The kinds of questions that historians are asking are also changing. In the light of the changes since the Deng Xiaoping era, questions that previously animated the field—Why did China fail to make the transition to rapid economic growth? How has Maoism reshaped the lives of the Chinese people?—today seem irrelevant, trivial, and even misguided.

New networks are developing among scholars working in different parts of the world, among historians of other parts of the world, and even among scholars in different disciplines. Chapters in this volume by Shiba, Ching, and von Glahn illustrate the fruitful interaction of Chinese historians in Japan, China, and the United States in the field of economic history. Perdue proposes even wider forms of collaboration, suggesting that the future of China's environmental history lies in networks encompassing historians, natural scientists, and activists.

The field's sense of its own significance and relevance is changing. For most of the twentieth century knowledge of China's past seemed utterly irrelevant to China's present and future. But a number of developments today, including the revival of popular religion described by ter Haar, and the revitalization of informal networks of Chinese Overseas described by Yu, challenge this assumption. New interest in global history (on which see Blue's chapter) has generated new historical subfields in which China's role cannot be ignored: environmental history (Perdue) and comparative legal history (Alford and Schluessel) are examples.

Historians are also exploring how China fits into the larger task of historical theorizing. Whereas previous generations of historians typically sought to show either how China stood outside the patterns of world history or fit squarely into theories of historical development derived from the western experience, Blue's chapter shows younger scholars increasingly seeking to use China to challenge and ultimately to contribute to and revise broader theory. There is a growing sense that China's historiographical significance lies not simply in confirming or refuting historical theories but in generating them.

Finally historical narratives and historical claims also figure in contemporary politics in interesting and distinctive ways, as Barmé and Szonyi show in their chapter. (This itself is nothing new; Chinese history has always been political, as several authors show.)

We have deliberately conceived of this *Companion* as speaking to a wide and diverse audience, even at the risk that not all of its parts are equally accessible or equally of interest to everyone. Among the goals of this work is to address the lag—mentioned above—between recent scholarly developments on one hand and the conventional wisdom and the picture to which students are typically exposed on the other. Popular understandings of China often confuse and conflate normative and empirical dimensions of China's past. For example, the tribute system—a normative model for the conduct of foreign relations—is often equated with the actual conduct of foreign policy, an error that Wills's chapter serves to correct.

The conventional wisdom and the picture given to college students converge in journalist Fareed Zakaria's extraordinary account, cited in Blue's chapter, of a meeting with Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. Lee handed Zakaria some photocopied pages from an old college textbook as a way to convey his ideas about Chinese distinctiveness. Specialist scholars might use these same pages to convey everything that was wrong with previous perspectives that oversimplified and essentialized Chinese culture and history.

The authors treat their subjects from a variety of approaches: chronological, historiographical, and at times even personal. The chapters are organized into three sections. Part I consists of overviews of the field from different perspectives: the changing sources for the study of the past (Wilkinson); China's changing position in global and world history (Blue); the role of history in contemporary Chinese politics (Barmé and Szonyi); and three geographically defined chapters on the state of the field in Europe, China, and Japan (Zurndorfer, Ching, and Shiba). Why these three and only these three? Since North America is the default perspective for many of the contributors (and much of the expected audience) it did not seem helpful to give further representation to this already much over-represented set of scholars. The absence of chapters on other continents is obviously a product of the unequal distribution of educational resources around the world; no comment is intended on the value of scholarship produced by scholars working in areas not represented in this Part.

The general conclusion that emerges from these chapters is that while scholarship is increasingly globalized, the world of Chinese history is far from flat. The trajectory of historical studies in different places has been profoundly different. To give one example from Zurndorfer's chapter, unlike in the United States, where a 'regional studies' approach that was driven by Cold War funding priorities is the norm, in many European universities the philological tradition with which China studies began remains central. Important differences persist to the present day, rooted in different professional and intellectual constraints and institutional traditions.

Differences in approach mean different research outcomes, as becomes evident in the historiographical sections of later chapters. For example, PRC scholarship aimed at identifying the 'sprouts of capitalism' was intended to contribute to a vision of Chinese history consistent with Marxism and the agenda of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). But this scholarship generated new knowledge of economic prosperity and dynamism in the last five centuries. This in turn helped fuel some exciting debates in Japan and the west about Chinese economic development and in turn new studies of social and economic organizations and practices.

Of all the geographic areas discussed, the growth of the historical profession in China both quantitatively and qualitatively has been most striking. As Ching's chapter shows, new freedoms to move beyond narrow politically shaped scholarly agendas have had a huge impact on the field. That being said, there are still limits. As in most other countries, national history is the dominant form of history in China. Scholars in the PRC must still be cautious when writing and teaching about many topics, including the history of the Chinese Communist Party (and especially its leaders), religion, minorities, and border regions (and, needless to say, specific topics such as Taiwan, Tibet, and the Tiananmen movement of 1989).

Part II consists of nine chapters on the chronology of Chinese history. Individual authors have decided the appropriate balance between narrative, historiography, and their own interpretations. The organization of the section as a whole reflects the diversity of current opinion about how best to periodize Chinese history. Had the *Companion* been published some decades ago, this section might have been organized in terms of dynasties, with one chapter for every dynasty. Biran and Guy explore why the imperial dynasty is no longer seen as the natural unit for historical analysis. Or it might have been organized, according to a periodization scheme derived from the European experience, into subsections labeled Ancient, Medieval, and Modern. But Holcombe shows that China cannot easily be assimilated into such models. Instead, the boundaries between the chapters of this section are defined by a multitude of overlapping, cross-cutting, occasionally contradictory periodization schemes. Indeed, virtually every chapter situates itself in relation to one or more different schemes. There are chapters defined in terms of a meaningful phase in the history of Eurasia as a whole (Puett on "Early China in Eurasian History"); in terms of a period derived from the European experience (Holcombe on "Was Medieval China Medieval?"); in terms of a specific historical shift (Tackett on "A Tang-Song Turning Point"); in terms of the ethnicity of the imperial ruling house (Biran on "Periods of Non-Han Rule"); and even in terms of the policy priorities of a single regime (Cheek on "The Reform Era as History"). Paul Cohen's chapter on the nineteenth century seems almost a relieving break, with its chronological limits specified in a way that is clear and familiar. But even Cohen, like his co-authors, asks tough questions about the meaningfulness of the temporal limits of his chapter. This is part of the larger challenge of placing Chinese history in a truly comparative framework rather than, as has been done so often in the past, simply assuming that Chinese history is derivative of the universal western experience, passing through a series of stages dictated by the course of European history.

In their attention to periodization the chapters in this section address the tension between the impulse to cross temporal divides and resistance to the old notion of an unchanging China, in which chronology becomes virtually irrelevant, or other simplistic approaches to chronology. One such simplistic approach in contemporary China is the Great Revival of the Chinese People, a central motif of the current leadership. The idea rests on a three-part schema of past glory, decline in the face of imperialism, and recovery that harkens back to modes of understanding chronology that seem ludicrously simple today.

The resolution of this tension lies in more precise attention to what is changing and when. Broadly speaking, the chapters challenge two conventional understandings about the periodization of Chinese history. While the period of imperial rule all the way from the Qin unification to the 1911 revolution was once seen as basically of a piece, today scholars identify a fundamental shift in politics, society, the economy, culture, and

thought at about the midpoint of this period. This shift is mentioned by Holcombe, Guy, and Shiba and is the main focus of Tackett's chapter. The other dramatic rethinking of continuity and change concerns the question of 1949 as a dividing line. Current scholarship discussed in Chen's chapter on the Republic and Smith's on the Maoist period shows that despite the revolutionary break there were many ways in which life under the new regime resembled life under the regime it replaced or even under its predecessors. This historiographical change is more than just about finding change where once there was thought to be continuity and vice versa. It also means reevaluating the historical register in which events are situated. The reform movement of 1898 used to be seen as an aberration in the dying years of the Qing; today scholars see it more as part of a long upswell of reformism that culminated in 1911 (which in turn set off a new chain of reformist and revolutionary impulses).

Part III turns from chronology to thematic approaches. These chapters do a different type of work, and generally focus more on new historiographical questions. Several of the chapters in this section—Alford and Schluessel on law, Lu on gender, Mullaney on ethnicity, and Perdue on the environment among others—bear directly on contemporary debates in China. They are shaped by, derive much of their energy from, and in turn contribute to pressing concerns facing the Chinese people today, and thus show another way in which knowledge of history is relevant. Turning the issue around, Rigger's chapter on Taiwan shows how seemingly academic historical questions can become wrapped up in contemporary politics. Among other things, the modern historical experience of Taiwan provides an important empirical challenge to claims from the PRC about the appropriate mode of political organization for Chinese societies.

Part III is where editorial decisions were heaviest and gaps in coverage most obvious. Certainly a volume of this kind cannot aim to be comprehensive, and there are many topics missing that I would have liked to have included. Some important topics, like the history of Confucianism, of ideologies in general, or of the political system, did not lend themselves easily to the format of the *Companion* chapters. Other did not seem to have the critical mass of interesting recent work that would justify a chapter. Topics such as demography or the history of print culture could easily have been the subject of their own chapter but are instead touched on in other chapters. Several topics that could have been in this book are covered instead in the recently published *Companion to Chinese Religions* and *Companion to Chinese Art*. The decision to include two chapters on Chinese literature was in part a gesture to a sinological tradition that is important in the history of the field, that is, of efforts to understand China *in toto* rather than as simply the particular object of study to be studied within a specific discipline. But this is not the only reason. As Sanders's chapter illustrates, sources which are broadly literary are among the most relevant for historical study, especially for the premodern period, and the very division between history and literature is artificial. Wang's chapter likewise shows that the rise of Chinese literature is inseparable from the story of Chinese nationalism.

While the format of the *Companion* means that there are inevitably gaps in the coverage, it also allows for interesting juxtapositions. Both Puett and Guy, writing of the early and late imperial periods respectively, discuss the notion of Sinicization, the idea that conquest dynasties established by non-Han rulers typically adopt many of the attributes of the people they have conquered, won over by the superiority of Chinese civilization. In her chapter Biran shows how the assumption that Sinicization is inevitable has profoundly colored the historiography of non-Han dynasties. Perdue adds an environmental dimension in his chapter, suggesting that the relationship with the natural world was part

of how the boundaries between Han and barbarians was constructed. This in turn sheds light on Mullaney's discussion of the creation of ethnic categories in the twentieth century.

Many of the chapters point to the importance of attending to the complexity of key terms, both Chinese-language terms like *Zhongguo* and *Han*, and English-language terms like China and Chineseness. None of these terms has meanings that are self-evident or unchanging. There are inconsistencies and internal contradictions to their common usage, and long histories of debates over their meaning within China. A single term may serve, in different contexts, as a geographic, cultural, linguistic, ethnic or historical descriptor, and as both autonym and exonym. At times key terms are used as political designations; at others as deliberately non-political terms. Each of these different meanings and valences needs to be disentangled. Even the seemingly straightforward term "China" has often been and continues to be used as an expression of nationalist propaganda, asserting historical continuity and unity, rather than a neutral description. This assertion can be linked to deliberate programs of identity construction with political implications. More broadly, many chapters seek to question categories and binaries that to previous generations of historians seemed self-evident or universal. The divisions between civil and criminal in law or between sex and gender turn out both to be historically contingent and to operate very differently if at all in the Chinese context.

Just as the chronological chapters challenge traditional schemes of periodization, several contributors ask questions about the most appropriate geographic and political units for historical analysis. The *Companion* points to numerous contemporary shifts in the registers in which historians situate China. Some shift the register up to the global or continental level—as Puett does when he interprets the Qin unification in terms of a Eurasia-wide phenomenon. Others shift it down to the regional level, as Ching does when she points to the significance of local history in leading developments in social history in China. Regional divisions and identities can be straightforwardly geographic or more abstract; that they endure even after centuries of political unity raises many interesting questions.

Several chapters speak to the contemporary relevance of history and historical understanding. Some debates, for example on the significance of the Chinese institutional matrix for economic development, rule of law, and political stability, hinge on particular historical interpretations that need to be assessed critically. Historical narratives of community matter to identity. This is particularly evident in Rigger's chapter on Taiwan and Mullaney's on nationalism. In other areas, such as women's history or the history of the environment, a knowledge of history can be a useful tool in identifying resources for better policies in the future. The Chinese state also deploys historical arguments explicitly and implicitly in support of current policy. Thus history is relevant as a tool to understand, engage, and perhaps critique the dominant political power, the subject of Barmé and Szonyi's chapter.

There are many reasons why everyone should know something about China's history. It should now be clear that by this I mean more than that everyone should know something about what happened in China in the past. I also mean that everyone should know something about how the past in China has been studied and written about, and how historical narratives are implicated in contemporary China. Scholars in the field today are engaged in complicating monolithic and oversimplistic accounts, overturning cherished assumptions, and generally seeking to convey the complexity of China in times past. Its practitioners are studying China's interaction with other places, exploring comparisons

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between China in different times and between China and other places, and seeking to use China to refine existing theories and even to develop new ones. The chapters in this *Companion*, whether read individually or as a whole, convey some of the exciting changes in the field. They show how history matters in China, and how China matters to history.

### Conventions

Two essential sources for China's history are the *Cambridge History of China* and the Harvard *History of Imperial China* series. For material that can easily be found in either of these series, no citations are provided. The suggestions for further reading at the end of each chapter are also highly abbreviated. The first place to turn for sources is contributor Endymion Wilkinson's *Chinese History: A New Manual*. For secondary scholarship, consult also the *Oxford Bibliographies Online* in Chinese studies.

