A CHINA PRIMER:
AN INTRODUCTION TO A CULTURE AND A NEIGHBOUR

Introduction: Why Another Book on China?

Do we need another book on China when so much has been written about that country? Don’t we know all that we have to about its economic achievements and its future greatness which, we are assured, is so obvious and beyond debate? That could be the first question asked about this book. Yes, there are several reasons to write another book, a book that describes China from our, a really Indian point of view.

What is attempted here is an essay that would tell the reader about China’s history and culture, its habits of behavior that emerge from that history and culture, how these characteristics impel the way that country works and how it conducted itself and does so now. The attempt is to integrate the flow of China’s history with current affairs. Such an attempt is necessary because most of China scholarship in its comprehensive best is developed in Western countries. Is that good or not from our perspective? The great historian and philosopher of history Arnold J. Toynbee opens his magnum opus *A Study of History* with the statement that ‘historians generally illustrate rather than correct the ideas of the communities within which they live and work’. All scholarship originates from the points of view and interests of the society that produces that scholarship and its results are invariably tinged with the assumptions and beliefs that are predominant in that society and, if that scholarship is effective and of high quality, it will promote the larger aims and agenda of that culture. It goes without saying that Western scholarship on China cannot be an exception; it is not based on universally accepted foundations but reflects both the specific biases and the broader objectives of that society vis à vis China.

It also follows that, while we in India could use such scholarship as is available – and it is abundant and rich in quality – we have an obligation to develop our own point of view and draw our own conclusions. I also hope to demonstrate later that we have fallen woefully short of developing our own perspective on China despite the high quality of research done in India on those specific areas that we have chosen to focus on. We need to be liberated from outside perspectives so that alien logic and alien agenda do not infiltrate our thinking and usurp our interests. I see the current effort as a modest contribution in that direction.

In India we have a new generation of internationally minded youth growing up and working in environments that are influenced by global events and trends. What happens in the world matters to them in a way that cannot be grasped by their elders because those developments affect the way they live and work in our country or wherever they may go to earn a living. It is an inescapable necessity for them to have access to and knowledge of international relations as part of their working environment also for them to make informed inputs in debates about our relations with other countries and choices that we make in the development of such relations. China has forever been a great country, was, is and will be a major force that has to be understood well by the broadest public of our country. It is therefore natural for us to develop our own perspective on China well beyond the usual comments on China’s GNP and our border with them and have a broader debate beyond the arcane concerns of official diplomacy.
Chapter I

China and the Chinese: Their Origins

We could say that the Chinese were always there in China and did not get there from anywhere else, at least by the time they developed their civilisation several thousand years back in the flat plains of the Yellow River in what is northern China today. The most interesting thing about this location is that it is far away from all the other parts of the world where what is called civilisation developed, based on agriculture, settled population, organised governments with record keeping, taxation and a military machinery that was used to protect from attack by outsiders or to control the people within. Further, Chinese civilisation grew and reached full bloom without contacts and exchanges with other similar entities. On the other hand, the Egyptians, Greeks, the people of the Indus valley, and Mesopotamia knew something at least about some other cultures, influenced others and were influenced by them. But China was different. In the description of Amaury de Reincourt, “far away from the other great centres of human population, beyond the highest and bulkiest mountains of the world, beyond eternal snows, steaming jungles, inaccessible swamps and parched deserts, China was essentially a self-enclosed area – an isolated subcontinent, at the far end of the known world beyond whose shores there was nothing but an infinitely vast ocean, leading nowhere, fading away into the boundless space”.

Only the cultures of Central and South Americas like the Aztec, Maya and Inca grew in comparable isolation. However, they were wiped out for all practical purposes by the Westerners who discovered them. China sustained itself as a distinct entity and a very different one from all others right into the 20th century.

For others who came in contact with them, somewhat sporadically and in a limited way, it was very far away, the end of the known world, especially for the Europeans, as illustrated by the phrase ‘from Cathay to Peru’, from one extremity of the world to the other, not only by geography but by psychological remoteness. The geographic nomenclature of ‘Far East’, which also suggests the same idea of remoteness survived into the second half of the 20th century as in the UN Economic Commission of Asia and Far East, the previous designation the Economic and Social Commission of Asia Pacific. One result was that China was never colonised, no alien faith ever conquered that country, and its ethnic composition never altered significantly through substantial mixing of races. China was always China.

A unique autonomous civilisation

Of course, being far away or nearby is a matter of perspective. The Chinese naturally did not feel that way about themselves. They did not feel that they were at the end of the world but were certain that their country was right at the centre. It was a closed world where the only other inhabitants were a few nomadic bands, all of whom were designated ‘barbarians’ and given different names depending upon whether they were amenable to being civilised or not. These bands periodically burst into the Chinese space only to get absorbed and ‘civilised’ by China. It followed logically that they called the area they inhabited the ‘Zhong Yuan’ (चुंग युआन) or ‘middle plains’ which eventually became ‘Zhongguo’, (चुंग को) the ‘Middle Country’, still the name for China in the Chinese language.
Chapter II

Confucius: The Founder of an Ethical System and a Philosophy of Government

Confucius is perhaps the best known Chinese in all history. His name was latinised by admiring western scholars of the 17th and 18th centuries to confer on him a rank and honour similar to that enjoyed by great thinkers of their society. It was this admiration following the introduction of his thought in the West, originally by the Jesuit missionaries who travelled to and lived in China in the 17th century, that elevated Confucius to the status of a sage whose teachings were of universal significance. It also created the image of China as a perfect and harmonious society where everybody lived happily in perfect attunement with nature, a country at the very acme of refinement, of the most elegant and gracious culture. Therefore it was the image of Confucius rather than what he actually said or did that happened to become far more meaningful and effective in the wider world, especially because, in that era Western thought appeared to set the norm and establish the agenda for all humanity.

Confucius is the latinised version of Kung Fu Zi (孔夫子) or The Great Master Kung. Kung was his surname. He is believed to have been born in 551 BCE in the state of Lu which approximately identical to the modern province of Shandong (山東) in eastern China. It was a time when the China of the Zhou dynasty had broken up into many units ruled by powerful nobles constantly at war with one another and oppressing their people with forced labour and heavy taxes. Naturally, the era was designated by later historians as the ‘era of the warring states’. Although Confucius was acknowledged as one of the wisest men of his times, his wish to be the advisor to his ruler so that he could put his ideas into practice mostly came to naught. Therefore he took to teaching and training younger men in the hope that they at least would assume positions of authority and implement his ideas. He did get some positions in later years but he moved from area to area, to finally come home where he died in 479 BCE.

The three great ancient societies of India, China and Greece produced three wise men, the Buddha, Confucius and Socrates, at approximately the same time, when all the three societies were facing similar challenges of collapse of traditional faiths, questioning of traditional rituals, division of the society into warring states and the resultant political instability and internecine wars. All of them are known for their wisdom imparted through their lectures and conversation which were reduced to writing by faithful disciples. Confucius was mostly ignored by his contemporaries, the Shakyamuni was honoured by the rulers of his generation, and Socrates denounced for his alleged crimes of atheism and corrupting the young and put to death. All of them spoke the language of rationality and refused to speak of the world beyond the human ken. It would be interesting to compare and contrast the three thinkers and the societies that produced them in fairly similar stages of political and social disintegration and try to account for their differing experiences, the different impacts they had on their contemporaries. However, here we will limit ourselves to presenting some of the thoughts of the Chinese sage, how they evolved under later thinkers, and how they influenced China over a very long period of time. Readers can draw their own conclusions about the three sages and their very different impacts on their own societies and the world at large.
Chapter III
Creation and Growth of the Chinese Empire

The Zhou unification laid the foundation for the unification of China and the concept of an emperor who ruled the entire Chinese universe. The horrors of the period of the warring states only proved the validity of this concept because the absence of a united government caused much misery for the people. During this period the Chinese started to spread their settlements beyond the Yellow River valley. Being cultivators, they moved southward to the Yangzi (यांगझी सेते) valley and beyond, reclaiming land, mixing with the communities already living there, and gradually making them Chinese in language and habits. New kingdoms were established in the regions south of the Yangzi of which some like Chu (चु) were powerful as well as centers of culture. Liu Bang, the founder of the Han dynasty who overthrew the Qin and created the first all-China dynasty was from Chu. The Chinese never tried to settle in the steppes of the north, always retaining the distinction between the steppe and the sown. However, the people in the south who spoke different languages or dialects were not quite dissimilar and could be absorbed and made into Chinese. The southerners also accepted this change with hardly any resistance unlike the nomads of the steppe. China, the state, thus spread to the very limits of China, the continent, establishing a repeatedly demonstrated political and emotional compulsion for the state to fill the geographical spread of the continent. The existence of many states within that sphere was deemed an aberration, an unnatural state of affairs requiring correction even when it existed for decades or centuries. The creation of a centrally administered state that controlled a very large area also produced, inevitably and necessarily, a heavily governed state, a hard state quite the opposite of another piece of advice from the Second Master, Mencius, “a state should be governed like cooking a small fish – very little”.

In this matter too, readers can mull over the difference with India where the emperor who brought the entire subcontinent under one umbrella was a theoretical concept hardly ever realized in practice, a country that has maintained willy nilly a multistate system with logical consequences of varying habits of people, uneven quality of governance and administrative conduct in different areas, multiplicity of languages, inescapable demands of federalism and respect for multiple identities, not to mention the existence of several sovereign states within one geographic, and may we say the same cultural and strategic, space in uneasy balance at best and outright hostility at worst.

As they spread southward, the Chinese turned their face away from the northern nomad, considering it profitless to conquer their country while ensuring that the dangerous barbarian was prevented from entering China. However, they did enter China repeatedly, only to be absorbed in their turn and becoming Chinese. Different kingdoms built small walls both to stop the barbarians and to prevent their people from getting out. The irony is that the Qin who conquered China were themselves semi-barbarians from the northern edges of China. The Great Wall is associated with Qin Shi Huang Di who linked many existing walls and extended the whole thing using forced labour. The defensive nature of the construction is clear from the Chinese name that translates as the ‘long fort’.
Myths about the Great Wall

There are many myths about the Great Wall and its present situation is overly hyped. One of them is that it is the only human construction that can be seen from the Moon. This is nonsense because even large natural features of the earth cannot be seen from our satellite. (Armstrong mistook a cloud formation for the Wall) The Chinese astronaut acknowledged that he could not see anything like the Wall. Yet this canard is much repeated including ad nauseum during the Beijing Olympics. Most of the wall is in ruins and only a small portion of what was built survives. Another myth is that the Qin emperor had the whole original wall built. Actually, the portion tourists go to see near Beijing was constructed during the late days of the Ming dynasty about 500 years back making it pretty recent among great monuments. What one sees now is actually a reconstruction by the Communist government that was opened only on March 19, 1960.

It was also a somewhat pointless structure because it repeatedly and consistently failed to do the assigned job of defending China. There were many invasions across it and two major successes in breaching it, by the Mongols and the Manchus, who conquered and ruled China respectively as the Yuan and Qing (淸) dynasties. For such a failure it cost an inordinate amount of money and lives. A folk song from the Qin times lamented that the Wall was ‘propped up on human skeletons’. The cost of the Wall was one of the causes of the collapse of the Ming dynasty.

As with Confucius, the image of the Wall was also manufactured in the West, once again starting with the Jesuits who lived in China. The ‘long fort’ became the ‘Great Wall’ and it was just another step to aver that the people who built something that ‘great’ were surely ‘great’. This suits the present day Chinese fine as they put the name in everything from matchboxes to luxury hotels, because it is a rare item from the wreckage of China’s past that is usable. The structure that was once reviled as the symbol of oppression is now the sign of China’s greatness, just as Confucius who once stood for all that was regressive in China is now the icon of Chinese civilisation.

Unity of China: A Unique Phenomenon among States

The unity of China and its repeated unification after each breakup is a unique phenomenon among large countries. It is something of a truism of geopolitics that countries that spread north-south have a harder time remaining under a united government than those that stretch east –west. The spread across latitudes produce significant differences in climate, leading to different agricultural practices, styles of living and temperaments. ‘Annadbhavati bhutani says the Gita wisely. Even relatively small countries like Britain and Italy that are stretched north-south are no exception to this general principle as is seen in the difference between the Scot and the English or between the Milanese and the Neapolitan. As our history shows, empires based in the north Indian plains not only ran into difficulties but even faced threat of collapse every time they made the fateful decision to cross the Vindhyas in a drive for expansion. Further, unlike Italy and Britain where mountains lie along the country, India has a major mountain barrier across the country. Geography is not the only problem. Even the USA, a state created by an ideology rather than geographical factors alone, had well known problems in remaining united.
The two regions of the USA have always remained divided politically and the South has its distinct personality as it does in India too.

In the case of China, north-south differences do exist and there have been regional prejudices but being Chinese overrode such considerations at least among the educated and the elite. There are several reasons for this. Most important, people of the north migrated south and were large enough in number to have absorbed the local population to create a homogenous mix. The hills of China were not forbidding barriers like the Vindhyas. There are other causes unique to China like the Confucian ideology which eliminated local aberrations in favour of a standard product. The second element is the written language with ideograph characters which ensured that dialectal variations did not lead to different written languages and break the country up as happened in Europe post-Latin and India post-Sanskrit. We will return to this in detail later.

The importance of History in China

It is necessary to spend some time not only on the facts of Chinese history but also on why history is so important for us to know China better. Primarily, it is important because the Chinese consider it important, they talk about it, refer to it for precedents, and use events of the past as allegories for current political and economic debates. Only in China would one have to read ancient history to unravel current political quarrels. The Cultural Revolution started with a denunciation in 1965 of a play *The Dismissal of Hai Rui* which dealt with the tribulations of an honest high official who lived a thousand years back. One had to learn the history of the Song dynasty and draw parallels between the historical personalities and contemporary leaders to decode the signals that the play conveyed about inner party conflicts to understand that the play was a veiled attack on Mao’s policies during the late 1950s and the punishment meted out by him to Marshal Peng Dehuai, who commanded the Chinese troops in the Korean war. The Chinese quote history; we in India quote epics.

By the time Confucius started to put together his ideas in an integrated system, the Chinese had more or less given up their traditional beliefs and methods of worship which lasted more than a thousand years. Their mythology faded away and died. Rituals were replaced by worship of ancestors. Even those rites were seen by scholars as purely symbolic with no spiritual content. The peasant, on the other hand, has their superstitions and a dash of Buddhism to keep his spirits alive. We have already seen the way the Chinese made gods of the old days into ancestors who, they asserted, actually lived once upon a time and were thus eligible to be worshipped. To worship the ancestors one has to remember them, record them in annals, thus placing history on a special pedestal. In Greece, history was a grand art form with its own Muse Clio along with other arts like Tragedy, Comedy and Lyric poetry. In China, history was made to fit the official moral philosophy and, in the absence of myths and legends, historical events and personages became examples. Past was observed and studied for the sake of the present and the future.

While presenting his historical work to the emperor, Sima Qian (सिम चियौन), the father of Chinese historiography who lived in the 2nd century BCE, wrote, “Your majesty may pardon this vain attempt for the sake of his loyal intention, and in moments of leisure will deign to cast a sacred glance over this
work so as to learn from the rise and fall of the previous dynasties the secret of the successes and failures of the present hour.” Much later, the famous Tai Zong Emperor of the Tang dynasty wrote, “By using a mirror of brass you may see to adjust your cap; by using antiquity as a mirror you may learn to foresee the rise and fall of empires.” Thus, everything that was done by a ruler was recorded. In fact, one of the Classics associated with Confucius is a somewhat dry record of the happenings of the kingdom of Lu during the time of the sage which was used by later writers for much subtle commentaries and extraction of moral ideas through the kind of textual criticism and exegesis that was used in other societies for the study of their sacred texts.

Chinese historiography was also tied to the rise and fall of dynasties. Official histories of dynasties were written after each of them fell, after a decent interval, under the sponsorship of the next dynasty. It was a carefully doctored effort because the aim was not to research, record and analyse events and trends but to explain how the ‘mandate from Heaven’ was withdrawn from the previous dynasty so that the seizure of power by the current dynasty stood justified. This process took a few decades and the result was frozen, sealed in amber. It was never an independent effort of research but a planned attempt to arrive at predetermined conclusions. As Balasz puts it, it was the ‘most massive monument ever raised to glorify a social class’ which never criticised the way the previous dynasty came to power, This authorized text was called ‘shi ji’ or authentic record and no other attempt to study the past was allowed once the sole record was compiled. It is this process carried out throughout China’s history under the guidelines of Confucius laid down in 5th century BCE and never amended that is extolled by others a China’s great sense of history and long range vision and contrasted with a touch of condescension with what is called the absence of historic vision in India! This view held rather widely though uncritically and has acquired the position of conventional wisdom if not sacred text status deserves searching examination.

History in India and China

As seen from the views of the founder of Chinese historiography and a great emperor quoted above, history was seen in China as a guide for future and not as an analysis of the past. In other words, it had a moral role through offering examples, both positive and negative. History in China took the place of moral codes that arose from religion in other societies, to fill the vacuum left by the elimination of religion from the central position enjoyed it enjoyed elsewhere. It is not acceptable that the recording of the doings of dynasty after dynasty by the next one in an officially sanctioned political exercise is elevated to long term perspective about the future. There is no logical connection between the two. There is no logic to the argument that careful recording of the past is evidence for long term view of future.

Nor can we so arbitrarily condemn India as without a sense of history. A society which claims to fix the start of the Kali era exactly was certainly capable of counting years and months and days. The optical illusion here is that Chinese history was about the whole of China and there is nothing parallel in India with a similar centralised perspective. That is why Amaury de Reincourt who wrote books on the ‘souls’ of China and India says that China was a historian’s paradise but something similar happened in India only after the advent of Islam here. He evidently neglected to note that India, thanks to its more open
geographical location and physical features, was neither a centrally administered political entity nor 
thought of itself as the Middle Kingdom with none but barbarian tribes abutting it but was an area with 
vast contacts all around with exchange of goods and ideas on an uninterrupted basis. The centralised 
perspective of the court historians who were primarily concerned with the activities of the Sultans and 
the padishahs, several of whom styled themselves as the ‘ruler of the world’, was not substantially 
different from that of the court historian of China working for the universal emperor and would not 
have appealed to the writers in the earlier multistate system within the Indian civilisational space who 
accepted that there was a world out there beyond theirs and, therefore, such a centralised 
conceptualisation and narrative was neither desirable not viable.

Chinese historiography was always that of the dynasty and served state interests. It did not provide 
for any narrative other than that of the dynasty and by the dynasty. On the other hand, the Indian 
multistate system allowed telling of stories from the various regional points of view in their own 
languages. Once written down, the Chinese narratives were neither challenged nor amended. There was 
no scope for the people without access to the written word to tell the story. In India, those without 
access to the written word could realise their own version of history through folklore, legends, stories of 
local heroes, and tales of individual communities. All these devices of self-identification were beyond 
the pale in the Chinese system which privileged the written word to the exclusion of the spoken word 
and the elite at the expense of the masses.

Chapter IV

The Chinese System of Government

We have found that China broke up into many small kingdoms after the collapse of the Zhou dynasty. 
Despite the constant warfare it was a very dynamic time socially. Feudalism collapsed at the same time 
because inheritance by the eldest son fell into disuse and family land was divided up, spreading 
ownership rights wider. This was one of the reasons for the push of the Chinese from the Yellow River 
southwards. The oldest Chinese crop was millet followed by wheat and, in the southern regions, rice. 
Large scale irrigation works also became necessary with extensive cultivation of the superior grains. The 
next step was the building of small fortified towns which became the administrative centres of small 
states. The Chinese ideograph for ‘state’ is guo (宮) which is the picture of an enclosed space with the 
symbols of a weapon and a mouth inside. It was such a society that was brought under a single ruler by 
Qin Shi Huang Di when he completed his conquests in 221 BCE.

The First Emperor, the Creator of Chinese Government

Though shortlived, the Qin established the pattern of government in China. He called himself the First 
emperor aiming to abolish the past. The times preceding his conquest was an age of warfare but it was 
also an age in which many philosophic schools also conducted battles of ideas. The Qin terminated all 
such debates and silenced the scholars. He was the original book burner in all history, because he 
thought that all books were useless except that dealing with agriculture and divination. When Confucian 
scholars protested the destruction of books, he ordered them buried alive. To ensure uniformity of 
administration over his huge domains he standardised weights and measures and even fixed the length