

# The rhythms of Chinese history



## BOOK REVIEW

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Michael Wood, the author of *The Story of China*, is a well-known historian, film maker and broadcaster who did a popular history TV series with the same title. There are several published histories of China but this is a most readable and absorbing narrative. It has a scholar's rigour but manages to avoid pedantic prose, focussing attention on what really makes Chinese civilisation distinctive. Structured chronologically it flows smoothly, highlighting templates from the past that continue to influence the present.

The opening chapter on Roots looks at prehistory, the contours of which

have become clearer with recent archaeological finds. While the centre of Chinese civilisation has generally been located in the plains of the Yellow River, it appears that there were earlier fortified settlements in the upper reaches of the Yangzi River further south dating to the second millennium BCE. Subsequent chapters take us through a succession of dynasties from the Shang around 1500 BCE down to the Qing dynasty, the latest and most extensive of Chinese empires which came to an end amidst revolution in 1911.

The two most extensive empires whose legacy modern China has inherited were both foreign, the Mongols who ruled as the Yuan dynasty in the 12th and 13th centuries, and the Manchus who ruled as the Qing from 1644 to 1911. The periods of political centeredness and cultural cohesion were invariably interspersed with decades, even centuries of fragmentation, chaos and acute economic disruption and it is

noteworthy that down to the modern era, instances of cannibalism often surfaced during famine and pestilence. There is a coincidence of popular and political unrest and economic distress and this is a lesson that resounds through China's long history. The famous Chinese novel, *Romance of the 3 Kingdoms*, reflects the cyclical nature of power transitions, "The empire that is united will one day fall apart and what is divided will come back together again. So it has always been."

This rhythm of Chinese history finds reflection in its political culture and patterns of thinking. Emperors rule because they enjoy the mandate of heaven and mediate between heaven and earth. The solidarity of the family unit is the basis of social harmony and stability. Ancestors mediate with the heavens for the welfare of their families and ancestor worship is one of the most enduring cultural practices in the country. So there are codes that govern family relationships and those which regulate social relations and relations

between ruler and the ruled. Over several centuries, as the book indicates, we have a deeply entrenched acceptance of a strong centralised

political authority which gives assurance of order, prosperity and peace. Its mirror image is the patriarchal family where, too, authority is layered and hierarchical.

The author relates the fascinating story of "dragon bones"

which were used for divination in the Shang period. These were usually scapula of sheep or cattle in which holes were made and fire sticks inserted to induce cracks which were then "read" for messages from beyond. These evolved into primitive forms of picture writing which eventually gave the Chinese people a unified but complex form of writing. In China the spoken word may sound different in different

parts of the country but the written word does not change. In India, the Sanskrit word has only one proper way of pronunciation but could be written in

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Brahmi, Kharosthi or Devanagari. A common script played a most significant role in the emergence of a shared identity and consciousness among the Chinese people. It is a civilisation that has consistently drawn from an

enormous pool of written documents, including family archives, and history serves as a perennial point of reference for current affairs. That is why in China the writing of history was always under scrutiny because history could be used to subvert the present. This, too, has not changed in modern China.

For readers in India there should be special interest in the spread of Buddhism in China. Mr Wood points

out that Buddhism provided a new sense of geography and questioned "the hitherto assumed centrality of Chinese culture." Xuan Zang's well-known journey to the West brought India and its alternate culture into Chinese consciousness. It triggered what Mr Wood calls an exploration into "new territories of the mind." But Buddhism was either contested or Sinicised, and China today brands itself as an alternative Buddhist universe with its own places of pilgrimage and sacred landscapes.

Mr Woods ends his story with China's current display of expansive power and its sense of renewed centrality. But he discerns a certain moral anchor which Chinese intellectuals through the ages have emphasised as integral to their culture. He believes that this may restrain yet again the ambitions of its rulers and warn them that the mandate of heaven may yet be withdrawn from the reigning emperor.

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