The Heritage of Chinese Civilization

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For Sarah Craig (1960–1992)
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China was a birthplace of civilization. Of the original world civilizations, only China has continued down to the present. The civilizations of ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, and India were all submerged or supplanted by subsequent waves of very different cultures. Chinese civilization, to be sure, was not static. It continued to evolve; but while absorbing outside influences, it was never wholly swamped by them. During the seventh and eighth centuries A.D., China’s writing system, philosophy, and technology spread to Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, defining the area known today as East Asia. Its poetry, literature, and arts were no less influential. Today, China is a nuclear power with a fifth of the world’s population. Its economy is growing apace. To understand today’s world, one must understand China, and for that, we must understand its past.

This volume originally began as an expanded version of the China chapters of *The Heritage of World Civilizations*. In the second edition, the chapters were extensively revised, and the Romanization of Chinese names and terms was changed to *pinyin*. In this third edition, further changes and additions have been made in each chapter.

This work attempts to give a chronological framework and a short narrative of the sweep of Chinese history. It does not neglect the ruling dynasties, but it also treats social, economic, and cultural developments that cut across dynastic lines. For the instructor who wishes to approach Chinese history topically and assign monographs, documents, novels, and movies, the brevity of this text may prove an advantage.

Since brevity was a goal, the author asserts with seeming confidence many things that may be true only in the balance. Proper qualifications would take up many pages. The author has picked key historical variables for his reconstruction of the past. In doing so, he has inevitably left out other variables that are not without merit. Further readings from the works listed in the bibliographies at the end of each chapter may provide a counterpoint to the story told in the text.

Written history is an abstraction. In any society, change or stability is a consequence of the feelings and actions of hundreds of thousands or millions of people. Each person lives in a family, has social ties extending to the larger society, works for a living, and is protected and constrained by a structure of rule. The totality of such relationships shapes the course of a nation. The historian, at best, grasps bits and pieces of this past. In China, despite the fact that its written record in the premodern era surpassed that of any other nation, the vast majority of the people lived in obscurity and left no traces. Writing its history from surviving sources is like doing a jigsaw puzzle with most of the pieces missing.

It is always difficult to see the past in the terms in which it saw itself. Our contemporary assumptions intrude. Even studying the West—our own civilization—we catch only glimpses of what it meant to be, say, a merchant in medieval Hamburg.
Preface

How a Hangzhou merchant during the Southern Song dynasty saw family, society, and the universe is even more difficult to ascertain. But some inkling may be gleaned from original sources. To this end, poems, philosophy, essays, and scenes from novels are presented both in the narrative and in boxed quotations. The immediacy of these writings provides windows into the actual thought and feelings of the actors in China’s history. They illuminate the history, and also remind us that Chinese living a thousand years ago had many of the same hopes, fears, joys, and sorrows that we have today. We recognize these shared feelings despite the powerful shaping of human experience by cultural modalities and social organization.

This volume contains many maps. Beijing in China’s north is as different from Guangzhou in the near tropical southeast as Boston is from El Paso. Most place names that appear in the narrative may be found on chapter maps. The final section of each chapter attempts to place chapter materials in a larger historical or comparative perspective. Such comparisons advance our understanding but can only be taken so far.

A note on Chinese, which is not an easy language. Until twenty or so years ago, most Western scholarship on Chinese history used the Wade-Giles system to romanize Chinese names and terms. Today, most scholars and all newspapers use the pinyin system, which is the system used in China. I have used pinyin throughout. Thus, I write Mao Zedong, not Mao Tse-tung. On the whole, pinyin is not difficult for an English speaker. The “Way” in pinyin becomes “Dao,” not “Tao,” and that is what it sounds like in Chinese. But since the pinyin system was devised in the 1950s with Russian speakers in mind, several letters have values different from English. Their pronunciations should be kept in mind:

1. The old “hs” (as in Hsia dynasty) is now written “x” (so the dynastic name becomes Xia).
2. The old aspirated “ch’” (as in Ch’ing dynasty) is written “q” (so Qing dynasty).
3. The old “ts’” (as in Ts’ai Yuan-p’ei, a modern thinker) is now romanized as “c” (So Cai Yuanpei).

In China, as in Korea and Japan, the family name comes first. So the person in the previous example is Mr. Cai, not Mr. Yuanpei. Now and then, to bridge the transition to pinyin romanization, I put a more familiar name in parenthesis after the pinyin. For example: Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek) or Guangzhou (Canton). Some book titles in the Suggested Readings use the old Wade-Giles system. For example, they use “Sung,” rather than “Song” for the dynastic name. These can usually be understood by context.

In writing this book, I have drawn on many fine studies; my intellectual debts are legion and, as usual in a text, largely unacknowledged. But I would like to mention those persons to whom I owe a particular and personal debt: my first teachers in Chinese history—Benjamin Schwartz, Edwin Reischauer, Lien-sheng Yang, and
John Fairbank—and also the colleagues from whom I have learned so much over the years—Peter Bol, Paul Cohen, Nicola DiCosmo, Ronald Egan, Mark Elliott, Merle Goldman, William Kirby, Philip Kuhn, Dwight Perkins, Michael Puett, Ezra Vogel, and Robin Yates. And the following reviewers offered valuable suggestions: Henry Antkiewicz, East Tennessee State University; Yongtao Du, Washburn University; and Xiaorong Han, Butler University. I must also mention my wife, Teruko Craig, for her constant moral support and editorial advice. All errors are my own.

NEW TO THIS EDITION

In this edition, there are changes in every chapter:

- There is new coverage of early Buddhism
- New materials have been added on sea routes to China
- There is new coverage of the Ming and Manchu dynasties
- Coverage of contemporary China has been updated
- In Chapter 4, in response to suggestions from reviewers, the following changes were made:
  - The Ming and Qing dynasties are presented chronologically (in contrast with the thematic approach found in the second edition)
  - The Manchu elements in Qing rule are more clearly delineated
- Chapter 6 has been brought up to date and in some ways revamped.

It is not easy to keep up with the dynamism of contemporary China.

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Albert M. Craig is the Harvard-Yenching Research Professor of History Emeritus at Harvard University, where he has taught since 1959. A graduate of Northwestern University, he received his Ph.D. at Harvard University. He has studied at Strasbourg University and at Kyoto, Keio, and Tokyo universities in Japan. He is the author of Choshu in the Meiji Restoration (1961), The Heritage of Japanese Civilization (2011), and, with others, of East Asia: Tradition and Transformation (1989). He is the editor of Japan, A Comparative View (1973) and co-editor of Personality in Japanese History (1970). At present he is engaged in research on the thought of Fukuzawa Yukichi. For eleven years (1976–1987) he was the director of the Harvard-Yenching Institute. He has also been a visiting professor at Kyoto and Tokyo universities. He has received Guggenheim, Fulbright, and Japan Foundation Fellowships. In 1988 he was awarded the Order of the Rising Sun by the Japanese government.