THE STUDY OF CHINESE CIVILIZATION *

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When Westerners in the late XVIIIth and early XIXth centuries first turned to the serious study of Chinese civilization, they were influenced by a well-developed image of the object of their study. The Jesuits had, for their own reasons, given European man a peculiarly colored picture of that distant land, and the men of the Enlightenment had, in turn, put that picture to their own uses.1 Objects from the hands of Chinese artists and artisans had been brought to Europe and proved to have an immediate appeal to the taste of the European upper classes.

Western scholars were persuaded that they were contemplating the oldest continuous socio-political order on earth with a record of that continuity so vast, detailed, and complex as to reduce any researcher to despair. They drew from the writings of the Jesuits and the Enlightenment the impression that Chinese civilization had an order, a stability, a symmetry, a "rationality" in strong contrast to the divided, uneasy, strife-ridden world of the West. This complex of impressions, together with the aesthetic appeal of Chinese objects of art, set the tone of the early European study of China. If it is true, as Max Scheler suggested, that the aficionado is the forerunner of the researcher, it would be correct to say that the sinophile is the forerunner, if not the father of the sinologue. As Europeans,2 influenced by this sort of sinophilia, began their arduous progress toward some understanding of this remote cultural entity, they were guided in their choice of subject and in their methods and interpretations by the traditions of Chinese scholarship. After all, who could speak with more authority than those Chinese scholars who, as officials, had built and maintained that vast socio-political edifice and who, as writers, had celebrated its values, recorded its history, and organized its literary heritage? Thus the Europeans, in their early studies, were in a sense the captives of the tradition they studied and of the self-image of Chinese civilization which the perpetuators of that tradition had developed over the millenia.

From another vantage point, Japanese scholars continued, as they had for some thirteen centuries, to contemplate with awe the great

* This essay was first presented on the kind invitation of Professor Milton Singer and the late Robert Redfield to the Seminar on the Comparative Study of Civilizations held at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences during the Spring months of 1958.


2 Cf. Max Scheler, Vom Ewigen im Menschen (Leipzig, 1921), I, 94–5.
civilization of China to which Japan owed an inestimable cultural
debt. Despite signs of restiveness in the XVIIIth and early XIXth
centuries, the dominant tradition of Japanese scholarship was Con-
fucian; Japanese scholars of China (Kangakusha [“Chinese Schol-
ars”] or Jusha [“Confucianists”]) shared with Chinese literati a
commitment to many of the ideas, the values, and the methods of
study which had been evolved through the centuries in China.
Japanese scholars tended to select the same problems for textual
study, the same poetic models for appreciation and imitation, the
same philosophic values by which they aspired to order the self and
society. The intellectual and cultural context of their view of Chinese
civilization was utterly different from that in which the early Euro-
pean sinologues worked, but both were subservient to the Chinese
self-image; both were in thrall to the literary and cultural traditions
of the Chinese elite.

If these scholars from China, Europe, and Japan had been able
to meet and talk together in the years from 1800 to 1850, or even
later, they would have been in general agreement about the history,
the literature, the philosophy, and the society of China: they would
have agreed with the Chinese scholar on what Chinese civilization
was and what it meant; they would have been agreed on how that
civilization should be studied. In what follows, we shall first attempt
to describe as briefly as possible the Chinese self-image that imposed
itself on Chinese and foreign scholars alike, forming and limiting
what they thought and said about this civilization. Second, we shall
sketch some of the complex ways in which this self-image broke up
under the impact of catastrophic events and gradually lost its au-
thority over Chinese and foreigners alike. Third, we shall suggest
some of the new ways of looking at and evaluating this civilization
which emerged in the wake of revolutionary change in China and in
response to developments in the intellectual world of the West. Last,
we shall attempt a brief appraisal of recent scholarship and of trends
which suggest possibilities for future development.

The Self-image of Chinese Civilization
in the Early XIXth Century

In speaking of the self-image of Chinese civilization at any given
time, we must introduce a number of qualifications. First of all, there
was no word in Chinese which carried quite the same freight of mean-
ing and of ambiguity which our term “civilization” does. When
the time came for the Chinese to translate our word ‘culture’ and
‘civilization,’ the common element in both the terms chosen was wen
—a word with a galaxy of meanings: the ornamented as opposed to
the plain, the written as opposed to the spoken, the suasive as op-
posed to the coercive, the refined as opposed to the crude, etc. But the root *civis*, citizen, or *civitas*, city, is nowhere expressed or implied. This is simply to caution that in none of the Chinese talk of their culture and its characteristics is "cityfication" implied or hinted at. Further, in the literature of imperial China there is little to suggest that concept of progressive, unilinear movement towards "civilization" which has been so prevalent in Western thought since the XVIIIth century. But one does find *wen* used in combination with other terms to mean something close to our 'civilize,' i.e., "to bring out of a state of barbarism, to instruct in the arts of life; to enlighten and refine." The reference of such phrases is generally to the aborigines and the peoples of the steppe frontiers whom the Chinese, through force and suasion plus the attractive power of their culture (*wen*), 'converted' to the Chinese way of life.

The Chinese, in writing of their common culture, common traditions, and common social order, used the word *T'ien-hsia*, 'under-heaven.' And in naming the things which this concept included, Chinese of successive centuries, like other civilized peoples, simplified and sifted out of the plethora of known facts about their commonality those things which they felt to be important and essential to it—a body of myth by which they thought, acted, and judged. The structure of these successive bodies of myth changed from age to age, and so did their constituent elements. But at all times certain elements persisted that would appear in the myths of any generation of imperial China, and about which they would say, "Without this, our Chinese order would cease to exist." If we look in upon the Chinese literati between 1750 and 1840, we may be able to sketch the outlines of the body of myth by which they lived, the self-image of their civilization which they accepted and imposed upon neighboring states and upon those in distant lands who attempted to study Chinese civilization.

Before turning to some components of this self-image, we must emphasize that it was the literati, the perpetrators and chief beneficiaries of the Chinese order, who formed it; it was they who made the selection from the literature and from the facts of experience; it was they who propagated it among the masses of the Chinese people; it was they who, through writing and the exercise of power, minimized or glossed over the cracks, the fissures, the tensions and deviations which were as characteristic of China as of any other society in the continuous process of development. In the same way, the literati as a whole tended to resist or ignore those occasional radical critics who challenged some but never all of the assumptions of their class about the nature of Chinese society.\(^3\) The result is a self-image of

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\(^3\) As examples of such critics one might mention Huang Tsung-hsi (1610–1695), Ku Yen-wu (1613–1682), and Wang Fu-chih (1619–1692). For a summary of their
the civilization which has a deceptive symmetry, a self-consistency that belongs to myth and not to history.

In the interests of brevity, we shall attempt an outline of the self-image as it was about 1800, with the caution that on many of these items a voluminous literature exists and on the inter-relationships of these components far more could be said than the limits of the present paper permit.

1. China was a broad and populous and prosperous land located in the center of the flat earth and covered by the canopy of heaven. It was 'the central kingdom' (chung-kuo), the 'central land' (chung-t'u). (Jesuit maps of the world found acceptance only when they were revised to present China in the center of the page.)

2. China was 'central' in a cultural as well as a geographical sense (Chung-hua: 'The Central Cultural Floreascence'). The Chinese had long conferred the blessings of civilization—writing, morals, rules of propriety, political institutions—upon those who had the misfortune to live beyond her borders and on those within who clung vainly to a more primitive way of life.

3. China was 'central' in politics as well. Through conquest and occupation, the Chinese imposed culture and political stability upon Central Asia, Tibet, Mongolia, and other lands far from the heart of the Empire. (These conquests were usually referred to by one or another euphemism suggesting that the subjugation of alien, often tribal, peoples was accomplished through 'the transforming virtue of the Son of Heaven,' i.e., through moral-cultural magnetism rather than military power.) Tributary states such as Korea adopted Chinese institutions, received the benefits of Chinese culture and protection, and showed their gratitude for the paternal concern of the Chinese emperor by sending regular tributary missions.

4. China had been and was self-sufficient, economically, ideologically, and in all other ways. "We have everything in abundance and require none of your manufactures," is the repeated reply to early Western requests for trading privileges. And to the Macartney mission's request (1793) that permission be granted to propagate Christianity, the Ch'ien-lung Emperor said, "Ever since the beginning of history, sage Emperors and wise rulers have bestowed on China a moral system and inculcated a code, which from time immemorial has been religiously observed by the myriads of my subjects. There has been no hankering after heterodox doctrines." 


4 Cf. Bland and Backhouse, Annals and Memoirs of the Court of Peking (Boston, 1914), 330.
5. China’s centrality, prosperity, and pre-eminence within the four seas were the legacy of the wise rulers of remote antiquity, of sages and their followers over innumerable generations who had formulated and developed the moral principles which were valid for all times and all peoples. Literate and responsible men of each generation were the guardians of the wisdom of the past; it was their duty to see that present reality was measured against immutable moral norms and that the history of China, seen as the record of men striving to realize the ideals of the sages, was scrupulously written and intensively studied.

6. Men discharging these responsibilities through study, contemplation, and writing perfected their character and became not only a learned but a moral elite. And, on the authority of the Classics, it was such men and only such men who should be entrusted with the management of the Chinese polity and society. Thus the scholar-official of 1800 saw himself as both guardian of the cultural heritage and the rightful wielder of power in state and society. Towards the masses he was to feel a paternal concern; the masses, on their part, were to feel gratitude and follow the directives and moral example of their betters.

7. The knowledge which, in its acquisition, perfected the character and gave the learned man his right to wealth, power, and status was varied, but the core was the Confucian Classics many of which he memorized in his youth. The Classics taught the cardinal virtues of filial submissiveness (hsiao), adherence to the rules of propriety (li), righteousness (i), loyalty (chung), etc. Historical works showed the working of these principles in past events. Poetry and painting, to be well regarded, should reflect the moral perfection of the poet or artist. Thus the cultural legacy of the past was the repository of wisdom, of guides to self-perfection and right action.

8. There were many ways to study this legacy. Since the phrases of the Classics contained all wisdom, commentaries on them contributed to self-development and guided posterity in understanding the words of the sages. Since the past was a repository of morally meaningful experience, the reconstruction of the past through the study of monuments, inscriptions, and historical texts was an estimable occupation for a man of learning. And, since it was a duty to express in a pleasing and proper style the truths one discovered, the study of literary exemplars was highly esteemed. Many more pedestrian studies were valued for the ways in which they rediscovered or reorganized segments of China’s cultural past. Among these were bibliographical studies, collections of scattered works, local histories, collections of inscriptions, and encyclopedias. Such studies, bringing social prestige and often the rewards of public office, served to reinforce the accepted image of Chinese civilization in the minds of the
scholars and to perpetuate it from generation to generation.

This self-image was, as we have suggested, a simplification of the past and of the present. Like all such images, it had a symmetry and coherence which neither past nor present reality, in its fullness and variety, would confirm. It was the object of emotional commitment, and, in its composition, glossed over, ignored, or rationalized data and experience tending to impair its symmetry. Thus, for example, there had been centuries when the Chinese lost their cultural self-sufficiency and "hankered after heterodox doctrines" on a massive scale. And there had been many periods when the barbarians were ungratefully resistant to the meliorating influence of Chinese culture and instead imposed their harsh rule on the Central Kingdom itself; there were other periods when the tributary vassal states had failed to show grateful respect to their overlord. Under innumerable regimes, men of learning and character had been denied their proper status and public rôles or had been humiliated, driven from power, or killed. But these cases were rationalized into a martyrology meant to strengthen the moral fibre of the literati. In the world around him the scholar-official of 1800 saw much that was at odds with his image of Chinese civilization. In the earthy life of the villages, norms of propriety were often ignored, and the country gentry, however pre-occupied with learning they might be, often failed to set the moral example which it was their duty to do. In hundreds of county seats the classically trained and presumably morally cultivated magistrates were less 'fathers and mothers of their people' than conscienceless exploiters. Evidence on every side testified to the power of the alien Manchu rulers—barbarians who, until recently, had resisted the supposedly irresistible magnetism of Chinese culture.

The literati's self-image of Chinese civilization survived—as all such images do—despite obvious conflicts with reality. It was sustained by the self-assurance of those who held it, by their cultural pride and relative isolation from external challenges. It was strengthened by the evident power of the Chinese state, the patent viability and prosperity of its socio-economic order. Even serious weakness and dislocation were rationalized in terms of a cyclical theory—a biological life-cycle analogy—which was itself a part of the body of myth we have just described. Such then are some of the aspects of the Chinese self-image of the years just before and after 1800, and some of the ways in which it sustained itself against the onslaughts of reality. It governed Chinese scholars' study and evaluation of their own civilization. Let us turn to its effects on sinologues in Japan and the West.

In the XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries, Japanese specialists on
things Chinese (Kangakusha) were far more than academic 'sino-
logues.' As professional Confucianists (Jusha) many of them served
the Tokugawa Shogunate and the feudal lords as ideologues, advisers
on statecraft and ceremony, specialists on political economy, and
teachers of Chinese morality and literature. The Kangakusha re-
seemed the Chinese literati in having an interest both in scholarship
and in the sphere of social and political action even though their field
of action was limited by the warriors’ monopoly of power. Despite
the fact that these Japanese scholars lived in a strikingly different
society, much in their outlook shows the imprint of the image we
have described; similarly much of their scholarship is motivated and
directed in ways characteristic of the Chinese scholarly tradition.

For the Kangakusha, study of the Chinese Classics was the key to
self-cultivation and to the welfare of state and society. Here are the
fundamental principles of education as seen by Ito Jinsai (1627-
1705), one of the greatest of the Kangakusha, whose school continued
in operation until 1904: “First: education should perfect not only the
mind but above all the will; in other words: it is more important to
be a good man than to be a learned man. Second: education can only
be achieved through the study and practice of the Way of the an-
cients, especially Confucius. This Way is their works, above all the
Analects.” Ito regarded history, the Chinese histories, as the re-
positories of human experience, demonstrations, at their best, of the
working of the moral dynamic in individual and collective life. The
curriculum of Ito’s school also included intensive study of the so-
called “eight great prose writers of the T’ang and Sung Dynasties.”
This was intended to develop a feeling for Chinese literary style and
to perfect the student’s ability to write in the only language proper
for “civilized” men—Chinese.

There were various schools of Kangakusha, but disputes among
them centered only on how and where to discover the true, correct,
uncorrupted principles of the Chinese sages and on what interpreta-
tion of those principles to accept as authoritative. We should say
then that the Kangakusha tradition in Japan was unanalytical, save
in moral-philosophic terms, of Chinese civilization. Its favorite
medium was the commentary or interpretative essay on a Chinese
work, a passage in the Classics, or an idea advanced by some Chinese
thinker. It is thus in large part an exegetical tradition accompanied

5 John W. Hall, “The Confucian Teacher in Tokugawa Japan” in David S.
Nivison and Arthur F. Wright, eds., Confucianism in Action (Stanford, Calif., 1959),
268–301.
7 Ibid., 173.
8 Cf. William T. de Bary, “Some Common Tendencies in Neo-Confucianism” in
Confucianism in Action, 25–49.
by the same concern for the discovery and preservation of every item about China's past that is characteristic of China's own scholars in the same period. The Kangakusha perpetuated in Japan the image of Chinese civilization we have described and the mode of studying that civilization which the literati tradition decreed. The emotional commitment to China which this involved and the disdain of the Japanese heritage which went with it did not go unchallenged, and the following attack suggests some of the points on which the nativists attacked the Kangakusha:

The perversity of the Confucians is that they know only China and are ignorant of our country. They grossly mock and sneer at things Japanese. While they are eating Japanese rice, wearing Japanese clothes, and living on Japanese soil, they praise China to the skies and have the deepest scorn for Japan. . . . Such iniquitous Confucians are constantly praising China and prattling 'Chûka, Chûka' (Chinese Chung-hua, central cultural florescence) whilst they scorn Japan and talk of 'Wazoku, Wazoku' (customs of the dwarf barbarians—a classic Chinese way of referring to Japan). . . . Though they are born in this country they know nothing of its morality, its practices, its ancient ways, its customs. They may be called 'men of wide learning and many talents' (a Chinese cliché, po-hsueh to-ts'ai), but they are of no use to this country. Let them cease eating the rice produced in this land and starve to death, the sooner the better.9

In the very different society of Western Europe, the first serious study of China began, as we have suggested, in an intellectual climate where Romantic sinophilia lingered on as a legacy of the early Jesuit missionaries and of the Enlightenment. Yet, compared to the Japanese Kangakusha, living in a highly sinicized environment, the early European sinologues found the object of their study remote and perplexing. When Abel Rémusat (1788–1832) became the first holder of the Chair of Chinese at the Collège de France in 1814, he was wholly self-trained in Chinese and had developed his own vocabulary and grammar with only the dubious help of those earlier missionary writings that were available to him. The young Rémusat was by no means uncritical of the writings of missionaries, casual travelers, and the philosophes, but the literati self-image cast a part of its spell upon him: "Les Chinois sont une nation polie, paisible et laborieuse, et l'on peut dire qu'après les Européens il n'en est aucune qui ait fait d'aussi grands progrès dans la civilisation. Depuis la plus haute antiquité le savoir y a toujours été en recommandation, et l'ordre social fondé sur des institutions calculées d'après l'intérêt général. Libre de ce despotisme militaire que le musulmanisme a établi dans le

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rest de l’Asie, ignorant l’odieuse division des castes qui forme la base
de la civilisation indienne, la Chine offre à l’extrémité de l’ancien con-
tinent un spectacle propre à consoler des scènes de violence et de dé-
gradation qui frappent les yeux partout ailleurs. La piété filiale y est
surtout en honneur. . . . La vénération même et l’obéissance qu’on
doit au souverain et aux magistrats sont adoucies par une sorte de
sentiment filial qui les inspire et les anoblit. . . . Il n’y a aucune caste
privilégiée: tous les Chinois peuvent aspirer à tous les emplois aux-
quels on arrive par la voie des examens. . . .”

The Chair of Chinese established in 1814 was regarded as comple-
mentary to the older posts in Arabic and Syriac, and thus Chinese
studies were begun as a branch of ‘Orientalism.’ This ‘Oriental-
ism’ was the immediate intellectual context of Sinology in the early
XIXth century and affected the growth and orientation of this new
branch of learning. We might therefore inquire briefly into its ori-
gins.

One of the problems of late XVIIIth- and XIXth-century his-
torical thought, influenced by the steadily increasing power and pros-
perity of Europe and by the idea of progress, was to categorize the
histories of non-European peoples. This was done in several related
ways. It was argued that Europe had the only ‘history’ worth con-
sideration, that is, the only continuous series of stages in which the
cumulative development of higher and higher forms of life could be
discerned. In contrast, the civilizations of the Orient had a hier-
archical and despotic organization which secured the changeless per-
petuation of social and political institutions and of religion, mores,
literature, and the arts; they were thus immune from change and exempt from history. A corollary to this view was that these time-
less structures were formed and perpetuated by certain basic ideas

11 Cf. Henri Maspero, “La Chaire des Langues et Littératures chinoises et tar-
tares-mandchoues.” Extract from the jubilee volume on the occasion of the Fourth
Centenary of the Collège de France (Paris, 1932), 355. In this section I shall con-
centrate on the development of Sinology in France because a) it is more self-con-
sciously scientific than British Sinology which has continued to rely until recently
on the occasional gifted amateur; b) it has greater unity and continuity than any
other European tradition of Sinology; and c) it was long regarded as the center of
methodological innovation.
12 V. V. Barthold, La Découverte de L’Asie, translated from the Russian by B.
Nikitine (Paris, 1947), 30. Barthold cites the statement of this position from the
introduction to F. C. Schlosser, Geschichte der Achtzehnten und Neunzehnten Jahr-
hunderts . . . (Heidelberg, 1835). Herder as early as 1774 had argued that non-
European civilizations were essentially static and thus irrelevant to any study of
J. S. Mill, writing in 1838, spoke of “Chinese stationariness.” F. R. Leavis, ed.,
and modes of thought. Some maintained that there was indeed a single ‘altorientalische Weltanschauung.’

These views influenced the development of Sinology as a branch of Orientalism in the first half of the XIXth century and later. Negatively they tended to isolate ‘Orientalists’ from the rising tide of historical thought, and positively they tended to focus the attention of these scholars on the ancient books—the Zend Avesta, the Vedas, the Confucian Classics—assumed to contain the key ideas which would make the timeless cultures of the East intelligible. The concentration on the Classics was further justified by the authority of native scholarly opinions which Europeans reported; any Chinese literatus would have insisted, as our sketch of the self-image has intimated, that the Classics contained the fundamental principles on which the Chinese system had always rested and operated. Moreover, it was clear to any beginning student that the phrases and the metaphors of the Classics invariably recurred in every kind of Chinese writing.

For all these reasons, early European Sinology was concerned with Classical texts, their explication and translation. During Abel Rémusat’s tenure at the Collège de France his three weekly lectures were divided between grammar and ‘explication des textes.’ Among these texts Rémusat, like the Chinese literati, preferred the Confucian to the Taoist which, however, he occasionally dealt with. In attempting to bring order into the Chinese collections of the Royal Library, he launched a massive bibliographical project which was planned to include a translation of the bibliographic chapters of the XIIIth-century encyclopedia Wen-hsien t’ung-k’ao.13 The annotated translation favored by Rémusat and his successors may be regarded as the normal and accepted genre of writing among Orientalists, whether Assyriologists, Arabists, or what not. But in the case of Sinology, this type of work seems to me to be also in part a transplantation and an extension of the Chinese exegetical tradition and thus to suggest one of the ways in which the Western sinologue was subservient to the scholarly values of the Chinese literati. Rémusat’s successor at the Collège de France, Stanislas Julien, began his teaching in the first semester of 1832 with an explication of one of the primers of a Confucian education, the San-tzu ching, and in the succeeding years translated in his classroom nearly all the Confucian Classics, often with reference to the orthodox commentaries of Chu Hsi.

Along with the dedicated study of the Chinese Classics and the acceptance of much of the literati self-image of Chinese civilization,

these pioneer sinologues had begun by looking at China from the out-
side and in doing so turned to the study of China’s cultural relations 
with other countries. Rémusat’s study of the record of a 5th-cen-
tury Chinese Buddhist pilgrimage to India, followed later by Julien’s 
studies of the Chinese pilgrim Hsüan-tsang, brought into doubt the 
myth of China’s self-sufficiency and immunity to outside influence. 
As Rémusat’s literary executor remarked in the introduction to 
Rémusat’s greatest work, “A la Chine, même, où tout est immuable, 
de graves innovations s’introduisirent avec la secte nouvelle [i.e., 
Buddhism]; elles attaquèrent à la fois les moeurs, la philosophie, et 
jusqu’à la langue.”

As books and travelers’ reports poured into Europe in an ever-
increasing volume, descriptions of the Chinese Empire in operation, 
of its rebellions and repeated capitulations to the Western Powers, 
multiplied. Biased and imperfect as many of these were, they served 
on many points to contradict or undermine the bland self-image 
which the sinologue imbibed through his Classical texts. Though 
varieties of popular literature disdained by the Chinese literati were 
studied by Julien, his successor’s principal work was an exegetical 
work, the translation of a section of the Wen-hsien t’ung-h’ao devoted 
to China’s barbarian neighbors to the east and south. And perhaps 
the most ambitious sinological enterprise by a European was James 
Legge’s translation of the Chinese Classics which appeared between 
1861 and 1872. In these, as Legge’s necrologist said, the Classics were 
first given the meticulous attention usually reserved for Holy Writ, 
and in them the commentaries of Chu Hsi—orthodox in China from 
the XIVth through the XIXth century—were generally taken as au-
thoritative.

The exegetical mode, the subservience to traditional Chinese 
scholarship continued to characterize European sinology until the 
1890’s. The change to another way of approaching Chinese civiliza-
tion was prefigured by some of the developments noted above. It 
came in the late XIXth century when profound changes had oc-
curred in the object of study and in the intellectual climates of China, 
Japan, and the West. This does not mean that the ancient self-
image we have described or the modes of study it sanctioned and in-
fluenced were immediately destroyed. Rather it means that these 
things were slowly eroded by events and lingered on fragmented and 
dispersed, attracting the sympathies of individuals but never again 
dominating scholarly communities and traditions.

14 Cf. C. Landresse, Introduction to Foe Koue Ki ou Relation des Royaumes 
Bouddhiques (Paris, 1836), xvi. Italiccs mine.
15 Cf. Maspero, op. cit., 361. Reference is to the popular dramas of the Mongol 
period.
The End of Imperial China and the Fragmentation of Its Self-image

The successive phases of China's retreat before a series of internal dislocations and external catastrophes (nei-luan wai-huan) are relatively well known and need not be detailed here. One of the striking features of this unplanned retreat to unprepared positions is that each withdrawal meant a relinquishment of more elements of that body of myth by which the Chinese literati had lived and rationalized their position in time, space, and culture. Chinese armies collapsed before the superior armament of the 'barbarians of the Western Ocean,' Chinese territory was relinquished to these same barbarians, trade was forced upon a country which cherished the illusion of self-sufficiency, and the propagation of a foreign and subversive religion was imposed in treaties exacted by force. As principles were conceded that had once seemed immutable, the Chinese literati divided their culture into its essence or basic structure (t'i) and its functions (yung) and maintained to themselves that compromise was possible on the functions but never on the basic structure. But as crisis followed crisis and the corrosive ideas of the West made dissidents of the younger literati, more and more was consigned to the realm of yung and what a few years before had been held to as essential was now seen as expendable.10

When, in 1897, the reformer K'ang Yu-wei published his volume Confucius as a Reformer, he painted the "peerless sage of ten thousand generations" as a reformer who sought authority for his program by extensive tampering with historical fact. K'ang's was perhaps a master-stroke for reform, but it further undermined the authority of the Classical tradition by which the Chinese literati had lived for centuries. When, a few years later and after a humiliating defeat at the hands of the Japanese, the 'dwarf barbarians of the Eastern sea,' the examination system was remodeled, the principle that classically educated and morally perfected men were the proper holders of power was finally abandoned. Western 'virtues'—military spirit, technical skill, patriotism—were to be fostered and rewarded. Shortly thereafter, the monarchy, which had successively shown that its charisma failed to sway the barbarians, that its moral influence could not sustain its subjects against the onslaught of alien ideas, that it was as ineffective in civil government as in military organization, was abandoned and replaced by a republic. The great millennial edifice of institution and myth had at last collapsed. Its real and imagined

coherence was gone, but elements have survived until today, both in
China and abroad, as objects of loyalty or nostalgia, as components of
innumerable movements and ideologies which have sought to deal
with the problems of modern China, and as conscious or unconscious
elements in recent characterizations of Chinese civilization. This is
why this debacle should be seen as the fragmentation and not the
destruction of a self-image.

The Changing Image of China in XXth-Century Scholarship

For the reasons we have indicated—the authority of the literati
self-image, the incubus of Orientalism, and the mass and complexity
of documentation—the sinologue was slow to respond to the growth
of historical and social sciences in XIXth-century Europe. Studies
in the humanities and the social sciences evolved theories out of the
common experience of Western man, theories for which the sinologue
found, if he looked, scant confirmation in the isolated cultural entity
with which he was concerned. Striking advances in philology and
linguistics had been applied to many languages of the 'orient' but
not to Chinese.17 These experiences tended to perpetuate the illu-
sion, common to the literati self-image and to much of Sinology, that
China was unique. Historical science, perfecting its instruments of
research and analysis, was at the high tide of its authority among the
disciplines, but its Europocentrism was unabated; Hegel and Marx
had reaffirmed the static a-historical character of Asian civilizations
and Ranke had given his immeasurable authority to the same view:
“At times the conditions inherited from ancient times of one or an-
other oriental people have been regarded as the foundation of every-
thing. But one cannot possibly use as a starting point the peoples of
eternal standstill (den Völkern des ewigen Stillstandes) to compre-
hend the inner movement of world history.” 18

17 Barthold, op. cit., 153 remarks: “Toutefois même jusqu’à présent [1911], les
sinologues n’ont adopté les méthodes de recherche élaborées par la science européenne
que dans une proportion encore moindre que les représentants des autres branches
de l’orientalisme.” He goes on to suggest that the civilizations of the Near East
have come within the scope of Western methods more readily because of the com-
mon roots shared by them and the West.

18 Weltgeschichte (1881–88), part 1, quoted in Otto Franke, Geschichte des
Chinesischen Reiches, vol. 1 (Leipzig, 1930), x. Franke, viii, quotes from Hegel’s
Philosophie der Weltgeschichte (1837): “The history of China itself does not de-
velop anything and on that account one cannot engage in details of that history.”
And again: “We have before us the oldest state and yet no past, but a state which
exists today as we know it to have been in ancient times. To that extent China has
no history.” Jules Michelet represents an exception to the prevailing view. Pro-
fessor Meyer Schapiro has called my attention to a long rhapsody in which Michelet
speaks of China as “une autre Europe au bout de L’Asie,” and dreams of the possi-
bility of a common culture of all mankind, Asian and Western. Cf. Histoire de
The breaks in this impasse did not occur all at once nor at all the points along the frontier between Sinology and other disciplines; indeed the process is incomplete today. But when, in the academic year 1899–1900, Édouard Chavannes (1865–1918) first lectured on the history of China at the Collège de France this was the beginning of a major change. And it was Chavannes who led the way towards a new critical method in dealing with the Chinese past. As the late Henri Maspero said of Chavannes' work, "... là où avant lui on avait vu 'la Tradition' comme un bloc, il montra qu'il y avait à distinguer des époques et des auteurs chacun avec ses caractéristiques individuelles. Ce fut une des originalités de ses cours et de son oeuvre, les premiers où la sinologie européenne sut se dégager de l'emprise que la science indigène avait toujours exercée sur elle."  

Marcel Granet (1884–1940) broke through the barriers we have described at still another point and proved that the sociological study of Chinese antiquity was both possible and rewarding. With remarkable brilliance and virtuosity he read through the formalized Classical texts which on the surface mirrored the literati view of the culture and into the social reality behind them. Yet Granet was convinced that he could characterize Chinese society and thought with little reference to their development after the IIIrd century A.D. In this a-historical view he may possibly have been affected by the residual influence of the static conception of Asian civilizations and unquestionably was by the Durkheimian school of sociology to which he owed much of his method.  

In the 1920's and '30's the use of the new methods for the study of China was broadened and deepened. The first history of China deriving its methods from European historiography and not from the literati tradition was that of Otto Franke which began to appear in 1930. Yet the focus or theme of this work was the history of the

19 W. A. P. Martin, the American friend of Chinese modernizers, seems to have been the first to recognize the great possibilities of the study of Chinese history through Western historical methods and a Western sense of problem. In his "Discourse on the Study of Chinese History," a presidential address presented to the Peking Oriental Society in 1886, he pointed to three key problems in Chinese history, to "three immense movements, each of which is as indispensable to the understanding of the present condition of China as are Kepler's three laws to the explanation of the solar system. . . . they are: 1. The conquest of China by the Chinese; 2. The conquest of China by the Tartars; 3. The struggle between the centripetal and centrifugal forces of the empire." He remarks that "... no native writer appears to have grasped the significance or even formed a conception of any one of them." Extract from the Journal of the Peking Oriental Society (Peking, 1886), 10.


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Confucian state and of the efforts of the literati to realize in institutional arrangements their ideal policy. Such a focus plus heavy reliance on the standard histories made the work far less destructive of the old literati-image than the cross-sectional sociological studies of Granet. Henri Maspero, whose critical study of Chinese antiquity used and developed the methods of Chavannes, also pioneered in other fields of research outside the orthodox limits of earlier Chinese scholarship. His were the first systematic studies in economic history and in the history of Taoism, the dissident tradition so long disdained by the Chinese literati.22

These must serve simply as examples of the ways in which Western Sinology began here and there to break out of the walls which had isolated it from the main currents of European intellectual life. The barriers were also attacked, as it were, from the outside. Max Weber boldly carried his sociological studies to India and China. In so doing he did not pretend to attempt total characterizations of those societies but to investigate "the relations of the most important religions to economic life and to the social stratification of their environment, to follow out both causal relationships, so far as it is necessary in order to find points of comparison with the Occidental development." 23 The analytical forays of Weber and other scholars with problem interests slowly demolished the old illusions that Chinese civilization was unique, without a history, understandable solely in terms of its immutable Weltanschauung. It became increasingly apparent to the world of Western learning that Chinese civilization had many characteristics which were analogous to those of other societies and that these characteristics—as the collapse of the old order so dramatically demonstrated—could change through time.

Analysis went forward with the use of one new discipline after another. But analysis implies "breakdown into components," and as this process proceeded, the holistic characterization of Chinese civilization once so easily made by reference to the literati's self-image—began to appear more formidable. We shall return to this problem at the close of this essay.

In Japan, the modernization which was pushed so rapidly after 1868 meant a turning away from China as sole cultural mentor. This

process, together with the closely observed collapse of China's imperial order, shattered the image of China held by the Kangakusha and those whom they influenced. If the traditional learning of the Kangakusha was inadequate to explain a China where the old order was crumbling and where Japan, rapidly modernizing, saw herself as having 'vital interests,' then what should be the tools of interpretation? Clearly the historically oriented social sciences of the West, associated with the West's superior power and Western effort to understand its rapidly changing society, were the answer.

Significantly the Japanese did not call upon Western sinologues, isolated from the main currents of Western thought, to modernize Japanese studies of China. Rather they invited Dr. Ludwig Riess, a young German historian of the English Middle Ages and a devoted disciple of the school of Ranke, to introduce Western historical methods at Tokyo University. Riess arrived in 1887. Within three or four years young Japanese scholars were applying this newly learned Western historiography to the study of China, thus perhaps disturbing the shade of Ranke for whom the Chinese were a people of "eternal standstill." Pioneer studies broke with many of the stereotypes which the Chinese literati and their Japanese representatives, the Kangakusha, had long maintained. Chinese history was no longer accepted as the literati had written it; other sources and the histories of Korea, Mongolia, and Central Asia were studied and used to criticize the official capital-centered accounts of the Chinese dynastic histories. Chinese history was no longer periodized according to dynasties but by developmental stages often grouped under that strange tripartite division of time which Westerners had stumbled into: ancient, medieval, and modern.

The records of China's past were no longer seen as priceless repositories of relevant moral experience but as documents to be tested as to authenticity and credibility and then analyzed for the light they might shed on the development of some Chinese idea or institution.

24 Cf. Aoki Tomitaro, Toyogaku no seiritsu to sono hatten ("The formation of East Asian studies and their development") (Tokyo, 1940), 146. Riess was born in 1861 and his doctoral dissertation presented at Leipzig in 1885; it was published in English translation by K. L. Wood Legh in 1940 as The History of the English Electoral Law in the Middle Ages. The work was dedicated to "the man who, of all my university teachers, has done most to lead me to understand the methods of research of the school of Ranke, and to think objectively, Dr. Hans Delbrück."

25 A recent essay attacking this unfortunate invention of "a very indifferent German scholar, Keller or Cellarius ..." is to be found in Geoffrey Barraclough, History in a Changing World (Oxford, 1956), 54–63. The great Chinese historiographer Liu Chih-chi (661–721) had used an analogous scheme to segment China's long past, but these conventions were not adopted by Chinese historians generally. Cf. Edwin Pulleyblank, "Ancient, Medieval and Modern," paper read before the 9th Annual Conference of Junior Sinologues, Paris, 1956, mimeo., 2 pp.
And in the writings of many of these historians, China was not the sole object of attention but was placed in the context of Asian history. Significantly the first professorship at Tokyo Imperial University to be occupied by one of the new historical scholars of China was called a chair of 'Eastern History' (tōyōshi), and scholarly nomenclature for referring to China abjured the old Sino-centric terms chūgoku (Central Kingdom) and chūka (Central cultural florescence) and used the simple transliteration 'Shina.' It should be noted, however, that with all this dramatic and rapid reorientation, Confucian moral texts were a required subject in the new national school curriculum, and kambun, the construing of classical Chinese texts in Japanese, was seriously studied in the new schools. The ideological needs of Japan's modern government made possible the perpetuation of fragments of the old Chinese learning within an entirely new context.

In the period from 1911 to 1925, stimulated by the Chinese Revolution, there was an increasing interest in the study of modern China, and an increasing number of new disciplines imported from the West were applied to the study of China: historical geography, archaeology, phonetics, social and economic history, and others. In the 1920's historical materialism began to have a pervasive influence on Japanese scholarship, and studies of China were at the vortex of controversy between Marxists and non-Marxists. Modern sociological and economic field-work was pressed forward as Japan's ambitions on the continent took shape, and interpretative links were forged between the living society of China and its past. The increasing volume of specialized studies tended to leave Chinese civilization atomized in discrete segments which were not readily assembled into a coherent characterization. Yet for the Japanese government, on the eve of continental expansion, characterization was needed as a basis for policy. Scholars became involved in the controversy over the nature and political evolution of modern Chinese society, and the view which won official acceptance—not without strong dissent—held that China was a culture, a way of life, that its peoples' loyalties were to these and not to the shaky nation-state of Republican China nor to its leaders. Hence China might once again be brought under alien (this time Japanese) rule providing the conquerors restored and respected the ancient culture. Another feature of this interpretation, traceable to Western origins, was that China was over-age, over-ripe, and incapable of any drastic change; all that was possible was a restoration.

26 According to Aoki, op. cit., 148, one of the most influential of the early histories which did this was the middle school text-book of East Asian history (Tōyōshi) published by Professor Kuwabara Jitsuzo in 1899. This text was used for the new subject of Tōyōshi introduced into the middle school curriculum in 1895.
of its old culture. The lingering influence of the literati self-image can be detected in the first part of this interpretation, and it is less a synthesis of all that had been learned through scholarly analysis than a return, under the pressure of events, to old simplifications which study and field work had brought into doubt. This interpretation proved to be catastrophically mistaken as a guide to policy, and the post-war period has seen in Japan a rather feverish and searching reappraisal of scholarly views and analyses of Chinese history and society. Marxist theories of developmental stages, reinforced by a dynamic Communist regime in Peking, have exerted a powerful influence on Japanese studies of China. In some quarters one may discern the lineaments of a new 'Central Kingdom' image, but it is too early to predict how this will develop.

In China, unlike Japan and the West, the fragmentation of the old self-image was seen and felt in every aspect of life. Older men clung tenaciously to one or another fragment of the myth by which their ancestors had lived, while the young denounced it all as delusive and responsible for the sad plight in which China found itself. Politicians and reformers of every persuasion ceased to assess China's plight in terms of its ancient ideals. Rather, they held up Western institutions, Western history as norms from which China had deviated in disastrous ways. In the first quarter of this century the dominant mood of the younger intellectuals was critical and destructive of their native heritage, receptive to each of the successive waves of Western thought which broke over China. Their energies were absorbed first by the struggle for a viable polity, and later by the feverish effort to build a new popular culture on the ruins of the classical tradition. Controversies raged over the conflicting claims of science and humanism, over pragmatism and materialism, over democracy and authoritarianism. The underlying question in all these heated debates was: How can China survive in the modern world? Thus, every attempt to appraise Chinese civilization was made in the heat of controversy, and attacked or defended by those who saw this appraisal as part of a diagnosis leading logically to a prescription for China's ills. There was little time for research or reflection in a climate of opinion which favored the hasty polemic over the balanced analytical judgment.

Nevertheless, in the 1920's and '30's there were scholars who per-

sisted in the orderly and systematic study of Chinese history and society. In doing so they risked the scorn of the activists on one side and the surviving literati scholars on the other. When we consider some of these men and their work, it is clear that, as in the case of Japan, the new methods and concepts which they used seldom derived from Western sinology but usually from the historical and social sciences developed out of European society and European intellectual needs; much that was imported came to China via Japan. The progress which this handful of men made in the twelve or fifteen years before the Japanese invasion of 1937 is astonishing. Their first task was critical: the skeptical and disciplined reappraisal of every datum of China's past or present society and culture. The second was analytical: the search for patterns, frequencies, and continuities in the almost limitless body of data at their disposal. The third, for some, was an ultimate synthesis which would put Chinese civilization in a new and clearer perspective and thus enable reformers and activists to proceed on a sounder basis towards the building of a new culture and a new society.

In the field of history Ku Chieh-kang exemplifies the reorientation of the study of China in these years. His critical spirit and his use of new methods for the study of China's past reflect an emancipation from the myths on which the culture of imperial China rested and from the methods of inquiry which the old order sanctioned. The Confucian Canon was looked at afresh and each text was studied, not as a repository of wisdom but as a document with a history, with a greater or lesser degree of authenticity and credibility, with an analyzable relation to its time and authorship. As a corollary, much greater attention was given to the non-canonical works of the past which had been ignored or undervalued by the Confucian literati. In their critical approach to the past, Ku and his co-workers sought to free themselves from the tyranny of long-established schools of interpretation which, as Ku points out, presented the young scholar with approved 'hypotheses' and required of him only their further substantiation.

Studies of this critical sort mean the abandonment of any belief in immutable truths, or in the possibility of their final discovery. Ku says, "I can never experience the joy of being able to say 'Truth has
at last revealed itself to me, hereafter there is nothing left to do.’”

Guided by hypotheses, Ku and others sought to identify and eliminate forgeries, to rediscover and evaluate lost or neglected works. And, in response to the demand for ‘national’ scholarship accessible to a wider audience, Ku and men like him sought to make the records of the past and their own studies of the past intelligible. They published punctuated and annotated versions of ancient works, and translated some of them into the vernacular language, thus outraging the traditional scholars who would preserve the hallowed works of the past as the sole property of an erudite elite. The new scholars, under the influence of Western social sciences, saw that the traditional classifications of Chinese literature were useless as guides to the study of problems in Chinese history and society. The manifold uses of a single text were discerned, and articles and bibliographies began to sift from the traditional records materials for economic history, for historical geography, for sociology and all the many other fields of modern Western scholarship.

The introduction of comparative methods in this period was as fruitful of new insights as it was destructive of the ancient myth of China’s uniqueness and cultural homogeneity. Ku says of this innovation, “... our eyes have been opened to a new world of hitherto uninvestigated and unorganized materials; questions which once were believed to have no significance now take on an entirely new meaning.” As Chinese scholars began to find analogues in other cultures for what had been for ages regarded as uniquely Chinese, they found stimulation in the works of men like Granet and Maspero who had helped bring Sinology out of its isolation and into the realm of comparative studies. And they were inspired by Western experiences with field work to turn to the living sub-cultures of China for the study of linguistics, phonetics, folklore, sociology, and ethnology. In the 1930’s field surveys of great importance were pushed through by newly trained Chinese social scientists. The analysis of both the historical society and the living society of China proceeded apace.

30 Hummel, op. cit., 124.
31 Among the many journals reflecting this development were: Yu-Kung (“The Chinese Historical Geography”) which appeared from 1934 to 1937 [the first journal of historical geography appeared in Japan in 1900]; Kuo-hsueh chi-k’an (“Journal of Sinological Studies”) which began to appear in 1923; Shih-huo (“Journal of Economic History”) which began in 1934; Chung-kuo jung-tsaao hsueh-she hui-k’an (“Bulletin of the Society for Research in Chinese Architecture”), I, 1 (July 1930).
32 Hummel, op. cit., 161.
33 Some pioneer works of this type are: Hsiao-t’ung Fei, Peasant Life in China (London, 1938); L. K. Tao, Livelihood in Peking (Peking, 1928); S. Yang and L. K. Tao, Standard of Living in Shanghai (Peking, Institute of Social Research, 1931); Li Ch’ing-han, Tsing Hsien; She-hui kai-kuan chiao-ch’e (“A Sociological Survey of Ting Hsien”) (Peking, 1933).
Yet the very progress of cultural analysis, bringing into play one after another technical discipline, seemed to make the day ever more distant when a new synthetic view of Chinese civilization could be soundly established. Such a synthesis, however preliminary, was a felt need not only for the continuous appraisal of special studies but for the practical purpose of planning China’s transformation into a viable modern state and society. There thus appeared in Chinese scholarship a serious cleavage: the fact-finders, analysts, historical and textual critics pursued their specific lines of inquiry; those who felt the need of a new synthesis, undaunted by warnings that this was premature, embarked on system-building and attempted sweeping characterizations of China based on one or another theory imported from the West. By the end of World War II the gulf had widened between these two groups; a leading Chinese historian observed that the scholars committed to disciplined and limited research lacked any standard of relevance, while those committed to interpretation lacked that command of the data which alone could give their theories validity.34

The Chinese Communist state has imposed a resolution of this problem by decreeing a standard orthodox interpretation of Chinese history and society and ordering Chinese scholars to relate their work to it. A relatively integrated self-image of the civilization has been developed out of the Canons of Marxism-Leninism, and Chinese history is once again interpreted in the light of an official ideology. In a few fields of study such reinterpretations may prove fruitful, but in most fields the past record and present reality are warped and forced by reference to this new body of myth, and the foregone conclusion has replaced the hypothesis. The new self-image, like the old, is a simplification of the past and present; it has a symmetry and coherence which neither past nor present reality, in its complexity and variety, would confirm. Perhaps, a people long adrift from ancient moorings require such a myth for the conduct of their individual and collective lives. Whether China, with its new power in the world can impose this new myth on scholars and laymen outside the Communist world is a matter for speculation.

In the light of the history of the study of China, which I have sketched, it is not surprising that Chinese studies remain a retarded and underdeveloped field of Western scholarship. Let me point to some of the ways in which this history bears on recent Western sinology. The incubus of Orientalism is still with us. As late as 1937 American scholars interested in the development of Chinese studies urged that the first step should be the establishment of “depart-

34 Ch’i Ssu-ho writing in the magazine Ta Chung (May 1946).
ments (which) would resemble in plan well-organized departments of Classical or Near Eastern languages. . . .”35 And the commentarial tradition still dominates a great deal of serious scholarship.

Fragments of the ancient self-image linger as unacknowledged assumptions in scholarly work, are blandly accepted in semi-popular writings, or are reasserted in writings and pronouncements from Fomosa.

In the West the intellectual need for some synthetic view, linked to the practical necessity of finding a basis for dealing with the Chinese, has stimulated theoretical constructions which often, ironically, serve as substitutes for substantive research. Northrop’s ‘undifferentiated aesthetic continuum’ and related notions purport to explain ‘the East’ in terms of an altorientalische Weltanschauung, but ignore the vast body of accumulated knowledge about the different civilizations of Asia. Lily Abegg’s ‘envelopmental logic’ offers another ‘key,’ but it opens a door into a dream world. On a more serious level Wittfogel’s concept of hydraulic society is used to interpret the life and institutions of the Chinese and other historic civilizations. But the very title of his book, Oriental Despotism, is straight from Hegel, and enough data are now available to cast in grave doubt the picture of the Chinese as caught from the dawn of their history in an immutable complex of institutions explicable as the consequences of the need for water-control.

On the other hand, the West has made striking progress in many fields of Chinese studies. Linguistics, art history, the study of literature, social, economic and intellectual history are advancing slowly towards the standards which generally prevail in these disciplines. Modern Japanese scholarship on China is no longer ignored. Great enterprises such as the Sung Project centered in Paris,36 the Modern

35 “Memorandum on the Present Needs of Sinological Scholarship in America,” May 17, 1937, signed by James R. Ware, George A. Kennedy, Ferdinand D. Lessing, and Peter A. Boedberg. The memorandum speaks with some condescension of providing “men whose primary interests are in other fields, such as history, political science, or philosophy, with a certain minimum training in the languages of the Far East,” and of placing such men in the colleges. “We recognize the value of such activities, both for humanistic studies as a whole, and specifically for the development of Far Eastern studies. They enlarge academic and popular interest in the Far East, and prepare the ground for intensive cultivation of the field. From the point of view of Sinology, they may be classed as worthy and valuable propaganda.”

36 Professor Etienne Balazs who heads this project describes the reorientation of French Sinology: “The increasing interest in New China on the one hand, and the general tendencies developing in the humanistic sciences on the other, are not without repercussions in the domain of Chinese studies where the specialists will no longer be able to confine themselves to some eccentric corner of their private curiosities. The preceding generation’s preoccupations with external forms, with the unique event and marginal contacts is giving way to the desire to seize structures, the content, and the significant facts and relations.” A paper entitled “The Present
Chinese History Project at the University of Washington, and Modern Chinese Economic and Political Studies at Harvard complement the work of an increasing corps of scholars in many disciplines. These studies promise to lay the groundwork for more valid working hypotheses and general statements about Chinese civilization than were possible in the earlier stages of Sinology or are likely to develop in the shadow of the new Chinese self-image.

From this survey there arise some tentative conclusions relevant to general problems of the characterization and comparison of civilizations. One is that a great living civilization may impose its self-image on those who study it and affect the ways in which studies are conducted. Another conclusion is that characterization may be affected by a wide range of factors many of which are almost irrelevant to the object being studied: greater or lesser aesthetic appeal of the cultural products of the civilization; the vagaries of international politics and ideologies; the changes, intellectual and social, in the society in which the student of a civilization lives; the fortuitous organization of learning which may place the study of a particular civilization in an intellectual backwater.

All this suggests that characterizations of civilizations are conditioned by time, culture, and circumstances and that they have at best only a very provisional validity. Yet our survey indicates that men who are a part of a given civilization seek always to simplify it into a myth by which they can live and act. And those who study the same civilization from a distance are forever driven towards some simplified general view of the object they study. Sometimes this is a purely intellectual demand for some broad conception which will give importance and meaning to the study of some particular problem. At other times the demand for some holistic view may spring from considerations of international politics, from the need suddenly to ‘understand’ a whole people so that we can ‘deal with them.’ And the tendency in such cases is not to attempt the formidable task of the synthesis of available knowledge but to fall back on some earlier simplification or upon a passing intellectual fad.

In sum, the holistic characterization of such a civilization as the Chinese is a necessity for those within and those without its orbit. But our survey would suggest that simplification is always at war with analysis, that only rarely is a simplified image of this civilization held as a hypothesis; rather, it usually tends, for a variety of reasons, to devolve into an article of faith.

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