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# THE CHARACTER OF FAR EASTERN HISTORY

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## THE CHARACTER OF FAR EASTERN HISTORY

'THEIR distant prospect of the extreme and inaccessible parts of Asia was clouded by ignorance or perplexed by fiction. But those inaccessible regions are the ancient residence of a powerful and civilized nation . . . which is able to verify a series of near two thousand years by the perpetual testimony of accurate and contemporary historians.'[1]

In this passage from one of the far ranging digressions in the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* Gibbon has perfectly defined the task and the opportunity that are offered by the study of Far Eastern history. For the 'extreme and inaccessible parts of Asia', which lay beyond the clear knowledge of the Greeks and Romans, is the region now known as the Far East, a name which still echoes, in muted tones, the ancient epithet 'extreme', and hints at 'inaccessible'. Far Eastern history indeed seems hardly fitting for the name of a department situated in an Australian university, but the natural conservatism of academic tradition rebels against the description 'Far Northern history' or even 'Hyperborean history'.

By whatever name the study is called, it has the task of blowing away the clouds of ignorance to which Gibbon refers, and substituting intelligible facts for the perplexing fictions; for this task we do indeed have the 'perpetual testimony of accurate and contemporary historians', the historians of that 'powerful and civilized' nation, China. But this testimony has to be understood, interpreted, and placed in the wider setting of human experience before it can contribute to our enlightenment, and change the hazy outline of that 'distant prospect' into a sharply focussed picture of Chinese society. We must take account of the character of Far Eastern history and of the characteristics of the civilization which it chronicles and in which it flourished.

Geographically the Far East is usually defined as the part of Asia that lies east of the Bay of Bengal; more narrowly as China, Indo-China, Korea and Japan. This more limited area also corresponds exactly to the region that drew its civilization from ancient China and that has continued to the present day to

[1] *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Everyman ed.), III, 13-14.

receive, with more or less enthusiasm, the cultural influences emanating from China itself. Until steam navigation and the invention of aviation overcame the natural obstacles – distance, mountain and desert—this region was largely isolated from those other parts of the world in which mankind had risen from savagery to civilization. The Pacific Ocean was a useless sea to the early mariner. It was too wide to cross, led to nowhere in particular, and was, on its western coasts, anything but pacific. The Chinese seafaring population could never experiment with oar-propelled ships upon a calm sea as did the more fortunate inhabitants of the Mediterranean coasts. Once you embark upon the East China sea, you either sail or sink. To the north, steppe and desert stretched for vast distances between China and the western centres of civilization. West and south were mountain ranges among the highest in the world.

The Chinese civilization thus arose in an area that rarely received any external influences, and such as were received were weak and late. This isolation must not be exaggerated. The Chinese were not like the Peruvians and Mexicans in a continent cut off by great oceans from the rest of the world; it is clear that in very ancient times the Chinese world did accept processes and techniques which we know to have been far older elsewhere, and which must be assumed to have reached them across the desert routes from the West. But it is not at all clear that they received any ideas by this or any other route in high antiquity.

The Chinese neolithic sites exhibit pottery that is closely related in technique and decoration to types found across central Asia right into eastern Russia. The ancient Chinese had certain tools, notably the socketed celt, which are found throughout northern Asia and all Europe, but not in south Asia – again a pointer to communication with the West across the deserts. It seems most probable, although not proved, that the Chinese derived the art of making bronze by the same route. Bronze came late to China, to judge by known examples; more than a thousand years later than its use in Mesopotamia and Egypt. But if the Chinese learned the technique of bronze casting and metallurgy from the west, very little in the decorative motifs that the Chinese used upon their antique bronzes has any rela-

tion with the art of the bronze-using peoples of western Asia. We have no examples of the early Chinese production of bronze vessels, which must be presumed to have preceded, perhaps by several centuries, the magnificent work of the late Shang dynasty, *circa* 1100 B.C. In this period, the earliest for which archaeology has so far provided copious documentation, the Chinese people had already evolved their distinctive system of writing and had elaborated the technique of bronze casting and decoration to a point never subsequently surpassed.

The contact that may have existed between the Chinese neolithic culture and that of western Asia and eastern Europe had apparently ceased, or ceased to be influential, before the rise of the Chinese civilization which, at the point at which we first know it, is already far removed from the primitive. Literary records,[2] themselves composed many centuries later, take the story of the Chinese civilization much further back, to the traditional date of 2205 B.C. Unfortunately there is no archaeological confirmation of these early accounts, and their character is such that no modern scholars would regard them as authentic records of the distant past. Firm fact and archaeological evidence begin around the twelfth century B.C. These, relatively recent, discoveries have confirmed some of the facts, usually royal names, recorded in the literary histories, and they have shown that Chinese civilization had already attained a stage of sophistication that suggests a long anterior period of growth. Of that growth, and in what area it took place, we have no knowledge at all.

In the period when the Chinese civilization first becomes known and its history tentatively recorded it is already clear that it was self-contained and had no contact with, or knowledge of, the civilizations of India or western Asia. Only a small part of what is now China was controlled by the civilized kingdoms of the early Chinese, and these areas were well inland, in the middle valley of the Yellow River, and surrounded, even on the coasts, by barbarian tribes. In so far as physical obstacles and the hostility of alien peoples could isolate the early Chinese, these difficulties prevailed for many centuries, perhaps for fully one thousand years after the Shang period.

[2] Ssu-ma Ch'ien, *Shih Chi* [Historical Records]. *Circa* 136 B.C.

It was in this long formative period that the Chinese evolved their institutions, their philosophies and their religions, and they gave these things the same distinctive stamp, the same unmistakable character, that marks the products of their hands as well as of their brains. A work of art or an artifact made by Chinese is never mistaken for the work of any other culture: they can be picked out with ease among the most random assortment; equally, within the wide context of human reasoning, the ideas of the Chinese were distinctive, their interpretations of human experience were original – they show no sign of a common heritage derived from other civilizations.

The first characteristic of Far Eastern history is therefore that it deals with a civilization that has been less influenced by alien high cultures than any other that has survived into later times. The west traces its heritage from many sources. Egyptians and Babylonians handed on their knowledge to the Greeks and Hebrews; Rome synthesized it all. Religion comes from the Near East; art and thought look back to Athens; law and government derive from Rome. But China in the Far East was the Holy Land, the country of the philosophers, and the seat of the mighty empire: Palestine, Greece and Rome all in one, unique in her world, the unchallenged source of all civilization.

This may have been a proud boast, but it was also a severe limitation. The Chinese, in their day and world, rightly called their country the Middle Kingdom – the centre of the civilized world. Truthfully, or as near truthfully as men will go, their rulers claimed that the Empire was 'all that is under Heaven'. There could be, after the unification of the ancient Chinese kingdoms in one empire, 'No two suns in one sky', no two legitimate sovereigns in the Chinese world. And consequently there could be no two civilizations. Those peoples who lay near to hand were indeed barbarous, or else had acquired Chinese civilization, which they sometimes enriched and changed. But that was all; beyond these there was nothing, nothing but still more distant barbarians who could be assumed to know even less of civilization – Chinese civilization. Real isolation and still more real superiority bred insularity and arrogance.

When, fully one thousand years after the Chinese civilization had risen and flourished in the Yellow River valley the Chinese,

now united in a powerful empire, came into long-range contact with western Asia and the Roman Orient, they were sufficiently assured of their own unique quality to treat the reports they received with intellectual curiosity. The rare travellers and infrequent embassies left their accounts, and these were incorporated in the dynastic history[3] to be read, by the learned, much as we might today receive authentic reports of intelligent beings on Mars – something extremely interesting, hitherto thought impossible, and in any case far removed from practical life and political realities.

Yet not very long after this tenuous contact was made, China did receive from abroad one really potent intellectual stimulus, perhaps the only example before modern times. The introduction of Buddhism at the end of the Han period, in the third century A.D., seemed at one time likely to play the part in the Chinese culture that Christianity was at much the same time playing in that of the west. It seems at least possible that this resemblance has been the source of much misunderstanding about the later development of Chinese civilization. It is tempting to observe that the introduction of Buddhism coincided with the decay and collapse of the Han empire, and with barbarian incursions that overran much of the former empire's northern provinces. The parallel with almost contemporary events in the Roman empire appears striking and more than coincidental.

Yet closer examination of the facts would show that the resemblances are superficial and the differences profound. The Roman empire, even after it had borrowed much from eastern custom, had no real affinity with the empire of the Han. Rome was in origin a city state: ideas derived from that origin long continued and deeply affected later developments. Her empire was built from many differing peoples without common language or traditions. The Chinese centralized empire which the Han consolidated in the beginning of the second century B.C. had been constructed by the conquest, over some centuries, of numerous independent Chinese kingdoms, all of which shared a common written language and a culture that was largely uni-

[3] *Ch'ien Han Shu* [History of the Former Han Dynasty], and *Hou Han Shu* [History of the Later Han Dynasty].

form over a very wide area. After four centuries of the Han empire the spoken as well as the written language had become common to all parts of the empire, the last traces of earlier separate national states had been wholly eliminated, and it is probable that the Chinese people at that time were more united in culture and language than they are today.

The empire was the expansion to the limit of Chinese power of the ancient kingdom, an organization that had arisen before the dawn of recorded history and that, at the earliest period of which we have knowledge, already covered a considerable area, perhaps an area very little less than that of a modern European state. It has been suggested, with much probability, that this state form arose as an answer to the problem of irrigation and flood control in a region such as the Yellow River basin. Only an organization covering a wide area could plan and execute the massive earth works for which central direction was essential, and the power to command large numbers of men a practical necessity. The evolution of the city state in such a society was not possible; only a large kingdom could make a viable community, and such kingdoms must always grow until one absorbed all others and created the unified empire of China.

Centuries later the opening phrase of one of the best-known of the early Chinese novels expresses the age-old truth of Chinese political organization: 'The Empire when united tends to break up, and when divided tends once more to unity'.[4] It was this tendency for an overgrown bureaucracy to exhaust and batten upon the people as a whole that, with other causes, brought the Han empire to disunion and destruction; and the same tendency that brought about events so comparable to the fall of Rome was renewed throughout later Chinese history down to modern times.

It is clear that the cause of this recurrent Chinese catastrophe was not identical with the cause of the unique Roman disaster. As the author of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* put it, 'when divided [the Empire] tends once more to unity'—a tendency enforced by facts of geography, economy and demography, and enhanced as the centuries went on by an ever more

[4] Lo Kuan-chung, *San Kuo Chih Yen I* [Romance of the Three Kingdoms]. *Circa* 1380.

powerful tradition. The history of the West since the Roman Empire has been one of increasing fragmentation into national states; in China it has been one of increasing and more enduring unity under a central empire. Here is the second characteristic of Far Eastern history: it must deal with a political development that in many respects runs counter to the experience of the West, and thus calls in question some common assumptions.

Although the Chinese did not receive, before the introduction of Buddhism, any cross-fertilization of ideas from another civilization, they themselves, being human, evolved institutions and elaborated concepts that are found among all other peoples of the earth: in politics the Chinese built their system around monarchy; in ethics they treasured the same virtues as other peoples; in religion they also recognized, above a throng of minor gods, one supreme being. But although the fundamental human response was the same or similar, the development and the emphasis were different. Monarchy is the normal form that emerging political organization has taken in all countries, but in China it was never later questioned or opposed. The Chinese until the modern age had never even conceived of any other form of political power; no ancient Chinese words for democracy, oligarchy or republic exist; no thinker ever questioned the form of government.

Instead, the critics concerned themselves with its content. The Chinese philosophers did not seek some alternative to the rule of an autocratic king; they sought to find means of ensuring that his rule should be just and benevolent. From a very early period right down to the end of the empire the political scientists of China were solely engaged in this quest, nor were they wholly unsuccessful. The philosopher Mencius, *circa* 370 B.C., had already proclaimed the first of these constitutional rules, that a bad king ceases to be a king and can be legitimately opposed, overthrown, and put to death. Thus two deep-rooted western concepts concerning monarchy had no place in Chinese thought. The emperor of China was neither a god nor had he divine right. On the contrary, he was human, and he ruled by virtue of a commission issued by the deity – the Mandate of Heaven – that could be revoked if he failed in his duty. The evidence of failure was the loss of his subjects' loyalty and their

successful rebellion. Then it was held that the Mandate of Heaven had passed to the successful rebel, and the fallen monarch and his kin were no longer royal nor deserving of loyalty and support.

The Chinese cherished the virtues common to the human race, but among these they selected for the highest esteem virtues that have not in the West received this special value. Loyalty in China was the highest political virtue on which the state must rest. The subject must be loyal to his superior, who, in turn, was loyal to the monarch. And loyalty meant obedience to all commands, even when these conflicted with the highest of the social virtues, filial piety. Chinese history abounds in tales of the loyal minister who knows that it is his duty to reprove his prince for some misconduct, but foresees that by doing so he will suffer death or disgrace, which in turn will bring distress upon his aged parents. This moral crisis, very often resolved by choosing the higher, dangerous path, is characteristic of the Chinese outlook and, it may be observed, is fundamentally opposed to the point of view of the Western democrat. Few examples can be found in our history of statesmen faced with this problem, or even aware of it. The idea that it is right to suffer, and involve your relatives in suffering, from the caprices of a tyrant rather than combine with others to end his authority, is foreign to our tradition.

If the subject must at all times be loyal, even to death, his sovereign must be sincere and benevolent, lest he lose the Mandate of Heaven. By sincerity, the great virtue of the ruler, the Chinese meant very much what we call straightforward dealing, or good faith. It is related of the Emperor T'ai Tsung of the T'ang, whom the Chinese consider one of their greatest sovereigns, that one of his courtiers, knowing that he was concerned to discover flattery and avoid being deceived by his ministers, suggested to him that he should propose some foolish policy and see how many of them would at once endorse it. T'ai Tsung refused; he said that this would be a lack of sincerity and if he acted in such a way he could not expect loyalty from his subjects. He added, 'when the source is corrupted, the water flowing from it will be impure'.

The ruler must also be benevolent. He must treat his subjects



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with paternal care, and be kindly to strangers and barbarians who would thus be led to adopt Chinese civilization and become friends instead of enemies. To raise troops for war was a mark of imperfection in the government, for the perfect benevolent ruler would need no soldiers to defend him: his virtue would bring all his subjects and neighbours into willing submission. An ideal, alas, never realized.

But from these ideals which were universally accepted, if, as elsewhere, imperfectly practised, arose a striking difference between Chinese and western thinking. The Chinese had until the most recent age no idea of what we call patriotism. Even today this western concept has to be translated by the Chinese into two words, meaning 'love country'. As an illustration of the consequence of this difference, it is related that during World War II a certain American general was called upon to address the military cadets of the Chinese Nationalist Army. He chose as his subject, 'Patriotism', and proceeded to enlarge upon this topic with many comparisons and illustrations. 'Patriotism,' he said, 'what is Patriotism? It is above all love of country.' The general did not speak Chinese, and he had been assigned as an interpreter a Chinese officer competent in English, but unfortunately without much imagination. Presently the general noticed that his audience, far from being intent and responsive, was restive and giggling. The truth was that Chinese having no word for patriotism, the interpreter, faithfully following his brief, was making a sad mess of the general's oratory. *Ai Kuo* is the Chinese for 'love country', and the interpreter thus rendered the glowing words of the general: '*Ai Kuo, Ai kuo shih shen-mo, Ai Kuo shih ai kuo, chiu shih ai kuo*' and so *ad infinitum*.

Patriotism as opposed to loyalty to one's prince had no place in Chinese thought because it was not a meaningful concept in ancient China. There was China, the civilized world, ruled by the sole, unique, legitimate emperor. Beyond this was barbarism. Clearly everyone, unless he were a criminal fleeing from justice, preferred to live in the civilized world, and it was his natural duty to be loyal to his legitimate emperor. There was no nation state opposed by other nation states. A man was naturally loyal to civilization, which meant to China, and which in turn meant,

except in times of rebellion, loyal to the reigning dynasty. No alternative existed or was conceivable. No one would choose to be loyal to a Tartar tribe. The idea of national patriotism, lacking any contradiction, simply never arose.

When, as sometimes happened, a Tartar people overran China, they hastened to make use of the Chinese civil service to govern the country, abandoned their own ways and adopted Chinese custom, and very soon, speech also. In a short time they were indistinguishable from their subjects, and often they were anxious to achieve this amalgamation as fast as they could. The Chinese did not object to this process. Until modern times, and until the last invaders, the Manchus, insisted on retaining some of their own national customs and refused to intermarry with the Chinese, the old attitude was that the reigning Chinese dynasty having lost the Mandate of Heaven, the new rulers, foreign though they were, had clearly won it, and so long as they ruled in the Chinese way, through the Chinese civil service, no one need feel unhappy about the change. One of the famous popular novels of the Ming dynasty,[5] itself a Chinese régime that had driven out the alien Mongols, sets the story at the end of the Sung dynasty. In the closing chapter the corrupt court and officials are swept away by the furious invasion of the Kin Tartars, described in vivid terms of slaughter and rapine. But the book ends with remarks that once more there was a Son of Heaven; new officials were appointed, who were too much in awe of the Emperor to oppress the people, peace returned and men went about their business. The new emperor was a Tartar.

The ancient Chinese, like other peoples, worshipped a number of deities, and recognized a vague Supreme Being. They did not, however, make images of their gods, but represented them by rather abstract symbols, often of a geometrical form, made of jade. Later, when the art of writing was more widespread, the deity is simply represented in his temple by a tablet inscribed with his title. This practice also continued as the way of representing the presence of the ancestor in the ancestral temple. This abstract representation was matched by a similar lack of form in the concept of the deity itself. Heaven, *Tien*, the supreme power of the Chinese world, is described more by its function than in

[5] Anonymous, *Chin P'ing Mei. Circa* 1600.

any other way. Such and such conduct by the ruler or the people is abhorrent to heaven or accords with heaven's decree, is punished by the wrath of heaven or rewarded by the bounty of heaven. But who or what punishes and rewards, is conciliated or roused to wrath, is never really plain, and certainly meant differing things to different ages. It may be – lack of documents makes it all unsure – that in the most ancient times heaven was a being, a father in heaven so to speak, or a supreme ancestor – perhaps a supreme royal ancestor. By the time of Confucius or those who compiled the books attributed to the Sage, the early centuries B.C., *T'ien* or heaven had become more abstract, and was gradually acquiring the character of moral law. In the Han period, the early central empire, the philosophers and scholars saw that some very powerful force was needed to act as a counter-check to the unlimited power of the now single sovereign lord of their world. So heaven became still more imposing: an inexorable force that brooded over the earth, and in particular over the emperor, watching as it were, for mistakes and faults, and ruthlessly punishing them with famine, pestilence, war and earthquake. The operation of heaven's wrath tended to become automatic, a result of misconduct on earth. This idea was strengthened and refined by the Sung philosophers of the tenth and eleventh centuries.

They now had to compete with Buddhism, the great popular religion with its wholly different cosmology and doctrine. Under the Sung heaven finally loses all traces of anthropomorphism and becomes moral law pure and simple, but in a continuum with natural law. It is now conceived that moral and natural law are one, that any disturbance in either sphere is reflected in the manifestations of heaven, so that moral delinquency on the part of the ruler or rebellion by his subjects are equally likely to cause a natural catastrophe. The last and greatest of the Sung philosophers[6] finally buried the old sky god with the words 'There is no man in Heaven judging sin'. From that period onward the Chinese intellectuals have lived in what is in fact an atheistic system. Moral law must be obeyed, the virtues practised, but for no eternal reward; simply because if these rules are contravened the balance will tip, those who are now pros-

[6] Chu Hsi, 1129-1200 A.D.

perous will be impoverished, good fortune will fail and misery ensue. And, equally, an extreme of bad luck and misery will in time be rectified by prosperity and happiness. 'When Good or Evil reach excess, there will be a compensation.'

The basic idea of Chinese religion is thus a balance between forces, neither good nor evil in themselves, but neutral, tipping this way or that as the scales are loaded, but returning always to an even mean. It is a system in which sin, in the Christian sense, redemption and salvation, have no meaning. Buddhism, it might be said, tried to bring into Chinese thought these missing concepts. On the whole it failed to do so. The Buddhist should believe in punishment in the after life, either in a hell from which he may in ages rise again, or by being reborn poor and miserable, or as a lower animal. He should practise virtue in order to shorten the cycle of reincarnation and achieve the 'absence of striving', Nirvana. Consequently a true Buddhist should have little interest in his physical descendants or forbears, since these will be or were but wandering souls temporarily inhabiting their bodies, and no spiritual link between souls corresponds to the biological link between bodies.

The Chinese, however, have simply ignored all this; they continue to honour their ancestors, and cherish their posterity; they regard the severance of direct male descent as a calamity, and they have, or had, some rather imprecise ideas upon survival after death, a corollary to ancestor worship that is clearly imperative. As a consequence the two streams of Chinese religious thought have mingled, but never mixed. The scholar is a Confucian, but allows his family to practise Buddhist rites, and himself retires to the delightful peace of the mountain monastery in old age. He remains both a Confucian agnostic and a Buddhist monk. The man of the people and, to an even greater extent, his wife simply and happily worship every god, Heaven and Earth, the Buddhist Boddhisatvas, the Taoist nature gods, with much the same rites, and at temples very similar if not identical in design and furniture. The average man is quite unable to say whether this or that god is a Taoist deity or a Buddhist Boddhisatva.

No synthesis arose, no reformer, no prophet who found this cheerful confusion intolerable and damnable. Thus one of the

tasks of the Far Eastern historian is to discover and explain why the course of Chinese thought, starting from basic ideas not very dissimilar from those of the western peoples, has elaborated concepts or tolerated compromises, that are either markedly opposed to our own or strike at the roots of what we tend to regard as rational.

There was, then, in China, a political development that restored and continued an almost unchanging form, the centralized bureaucratic empire, for over two thousand years, without ever developing in itself those economic and other forces that have elsewhere led to the rise of the urban classes, nation states, the city state, or democratic institutions. The religious system has remained an accretion of elements foreign and native, without unity or clarity, and also without social message or political power. There was never anything that a Moslem or a Christian could call a real persecution in China. No one was ever put to death for refusing to recant his faith; the worst that happened was that Buddhist monks were compelled to renounce their vows of chastity and return to the world, sometimes by the doubly repugnant expedient of marrying Buddhist nuns. Finally, there was an ethical system and a morality that long ago rejected all supernatural sanction, all punishment and all reward. These are the characteristics of the Chinese culture that Far Eastern history must expound and, if it can, explain.

But the Chinese civilization was also exported to Japan, and by the Japanese very largely modified, transformed and developed in a distinctive way. The Chinese civilization was already old, and had reached what some would regard as its highest point of political development when, in the seventh century the Japanese, who had long been fitfully in touch with China, began to borrow the T'ang civilization with the same enthusiasm and thoroughness as they were to borrow from our own, more than a thousand years later.

The Japanese were confronted with a large and centralized empire ruled by a dynasty of recent origin, without an hereditary aristocracy of ancient descent, and governed by a bureaucracy which was now being recruited from the educated class by public examinations. All this was wholly unlike their own political and social system. They had a monarch, already of

ancient lineage, who claimed divine descent; but he did not rule over a unified empire, only over a small kingdom beyond which were a large number of nominal vassals, themselves aristocrats of almost equally ancient origin. There was no bureaucracy and hardly any urban development outside the new capital at Hei An, or Kyoto, copied from Chinese Ch'ang An.

Consequently, although the Japanese made a very thorough study of the Chinese system, and the emperors to whom it would have been most welcome did their best to introduce it to Japan, it could not take root in the Chinese manner, and was inevitably greatly transformed. Japanese feudalism, briefly overlaid by a coating of Hei An bureaucratic control, soon revived more powerful than before. The divine dynasty could clearly not admit the Chinese doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven, which expressly denied such divinity, and the same claim made a wholehearted acceptance of Chinese Confucian philosophy difficult if not impossible. Buddhism did better, since there was less competition in Japan from local forms of religion. But although Buddhism became the real religion of the Japanese people, the aristocratic and imperial association with the native polytheism, Shinto, kept this faith alive, and was in due course to make it the state religion of the unified central empire of Japan, when that form of government finally emerged.

The Japanese took, and cherish, the Chinese ideographic script, which though useful and perhaps essential for the Chinese language, is only fitted with difficulty to the inflected, polysyllabic Japanese tongue. Since they had the script, they had the literature too, and the closely associated art of painting. Thus it came about that it is in the arts that China and Japan have remained closest, and in government and religion that they have drifted farthest apart. The Chinese system could not be fitted onto the Japanese people, but the prestige of China and her ways remained to colour the Japanese attitude to politics and government. Broadly, the Chinese changed their dynasties, but kept the same political system intact. The Japanese kept the same dynasty, but frequently changed the political system over which it was supposed to preside. How far, despite recent changes, this will still hold true, will be for future Far Eastern historians to determine.

Nor did the Japanese follow the Chinese model closely in other matters. Patriotism, which was an alien concept to China, was perfectly intelligible and native to the Japanese. Perhaps because an island people is more conscious of its identity, which geography has helped to define, perhaps because one strain in the Japanese people is not of continental, but of oceanic origin, and thus inherits traditions and customs truly unlike those of the mainland, the Japanese, who were, for the most part of their history, neither menaced by foreign invasion nor themselves engaged in overseas adventures, developed a self-conscious patriotism to a degree much more marked than among the warring states of Europe.

Partly as a consequence of this widespread feeling, and of the long-continued feudal system, the warrior in Japan occupies a place very different from his traditional role in China. Although the Japanese use a Chinese character to write the word Samurai, warrior, which is the same as the one the Chinese anciently used to mean a feudal soldier, the connotations of the character in Japan and China are today very different. The swaggering Samurai with his two swords was for centuries the visible symbol of a warrior ruling class that gloried in its military traditions, and in due course passed them on to the officers of the later imperial army and navy. In China the same character came to mean a scholar, a civil official, and at last simply a gentleman, in the modern English sense of one who has received a polite education. The one thing that such a man in China would never seek to be, and would have been ashamed to be, was a soldier.

Yet many of the contradictions that can be observed in Chinese civilization were also present in Japan. The Japanese, too, find nothing inconsistent in belief in two religions with divergent theology. The Japanese Buddhist, if he were consistent with the teaching of his religion, could not believe that his emperor was descended from the sun goddess. But it would have been imprudent, in quite recent times, to give expression to this opinion. The Japanese felt no more troubled by these difficulties than the Chinese, and Japan was equally free from reformers and prophets who wished to substitute one clear, logical theology for the conflicting tenets of Buddhism and Shinto. The Japanese, in the course of a long history in which

they have tried a number of political expedients, have never questioned the institution of monarchy, which indeed has survived catastrophe and continues as well established as ever. In spite of a divergent political history in a very different geographic setting, and when all distinctive Japanese characteristics and developments are taken into account, Japan is still one of the principal heirs of the Chinese civilization, and remains very close to China in thought and, above all, in art.

The task of the Far Eastern historian is therefore to explain and interpret the workings of these societies which, by reason of their position in the 'extreme and inaccessible parts of Asia' so long continued in isolation and developed peculiar characteristics. His opportunity, as Gibbon said, lies in the fact that he 'is able to verify a series of near two thousand years by the perpetual testimony of accurate and contemporary historians.'

But how have these admirable historians presented their testimony? It is not in the manner of Herodotus nor of Livy. It is best appreciated by an analogy. Some future biographer wished to record the life and times of a certain Sir John Smith, a worthy of the twentieth century, but the only material the biographer could find was the single copy of *The Times* placed in Smith's tomb, and containing the notice of his death. As he was a person of some distinction there was, in another part of the paper, a short obituary giving the main facts of his parentage and career. Elsewhere his biographer finds in the paper the news of the world on the day of Smith's death, reviews of the current literature, articles on art, an account of some contemporary aspect of religion, economic information in the city pages; the court circular gives the movements of royalty and high society, the gazette gives the appointments to official positions. From all this some idea of Smith's world can be reconstructed. Chinese dynastic histories, immense compilations twenty-five in number, are arranged on a plan similar to *The Times* newspaper; the information they contain, however, covers not one single day but a span of some two or three centuries, according to the duration of the dynasty which they record. Neither in *The Times* nor in a dynastic history will the reader

find a straight, connected story of the history of that day or age. He will have to amass his facts from many columns or volumes, and he will find no index.

The Original Annals, the first part of such a work as the New T'ang History,[1] which may be taken as typical of the whole body of Chinese historical material, is a dry, bare chronicle of the acts of the emperor and changes at court. It is dated meticulously, by the month, often by the day. The emperor went from the capital to such a place. He returned. So-and-so was promoted to a high office, so-and-so was degraded, or decapitated. No comment, no explanation, no elaboration, one might almost say no meaning. But this arid account provides the chronological framework; elsewhere will be found the colour and the passion. These are to be found in the biographies, of which there are a large number – one hundred and fifty – beginning with the princes and princesses (but never the emperor himself) and continuing through high officials, generals, ministers, courtiers, rebels, traitors, bandits, courtesans, poets, artists, and every other name of merit or infamy acquired in three centuries of contemporary recording. These biographies usually ignore chronology, and concentrate strictly on the events that impinge on the life of the subject of the biography. If several high officials were all engaged in some political event, a conspiracy, a palace *coup* or a war, each biography will record that part of the events in which its hero took part, and make no mention of anyone else or any other aspect of the matter. To find the dates one must turn back to the Original Annals; to find the total sequence of events and all the participants, it is necessary to examine and collate the biographies of all who may have been concerned, even to a very minor degree. Nor is there any guide to indicate which biographies are involved.

If the historian wishes to go beyond the record of political action and examine the organization of the civil service or the collection of revenue, this information is found, often in great detail, in other parts of the compilation, the monographs, which deal at length with a wide range of subjects, but always with one at a time. There is no total view, no appreciation of a whole reign, or of a single major episode. To the western way of

[1] *Hsin T'ang Shu*. Edited by Ou Yang-hsiu and others. Eleventh century.

so arrange the facts that they conveyed an oblique criticism not truly justified by the recorded events, but this is to say no more than that they were human.

Faced with material of this nature the Far Eastern historian has a wide range of choice for his subject. He may decide to take a special feature of some period, such as the organization of the civil service, and prepare a detailed study of that institution. Or he may decide to translate some of the monographs of the dynastic history dealing with land tenure or the organization of the army. Such work needs much time and must be buttressed with a formidable understructure of footnotes if the complexities of the text are to be understood. The one thing no western historian can do, or would really wish to do, is what appears to be the most obvious and urgent task of all – to translate the Chinese histories as a whole into a western language.

If the nature of the dynastic histories as outlined just now is remembered, it will be obvious that as they stand they are, as a whole, quite untranslatable. Apart from the mere mass of the documents and the arrangement of the material there is the acute problem of the immense number of proper names, titles of office and other special features which would need to be explained in footnotes, making the volume of print quite out of proportion to the quantity of text translated. It is very doubtful whether any institution, however rich and benevolent, would sponsor the publication of this type of work, which it is to be feared would find only a very limited public of specialists.

Yet if the historian of the Far East is to serve something wider than his own curiosity, some fuller use should be made of the great compilations of Chinese history. In his general reading one who is interested in the history of old China or Japan will often find comments which imply that the story of the human race, or the significant part of it, was enacted in the area between the Baltic Sea and the Euphrates. The 'extreme and inaccessible parts of Asia' seem often to be as 'clouded with ignorance' as they were in the days of the Greeks and Romans. Impatient with what is to him an anachronistic attitude, he may ask himself, what else can he expect? How much has been done by himself or his like to make the history of the Far East known, not merely to specialists, but known so that it can enter

into the main stream of western education? For till that has been done, the rounded knowledge of the history of the world, which the growing contact of every part of it makes so desirable, cannot be achieved.

There is thus, in my opinion, room for the general historian of the Far East who will use the Chinese materials as his sources, translate such passages as are needed to give flavour and the authentic tang to his work, but will try, either by concentration on some period of real development, or by surveying a longer age, to give the non-Chinese reader reliable and readable history which can add to the store of his general knowledge, and contribute to his sounder judgment.