



# China in World History

## 300–1500 CE

By Valerie Hansen

Connections among the different regions of the world lie at the heart of world history, but many historians of China—whether writing in English or Chinese—minimize them, particularly when they indicate outside influence on China. Overland and sea routes connected China to the rest of the world; Buddhist missionaries and teachings entered China by these routes, which also carried Chinese inventions to Eurasia and beyond. Along with Europe, West Asia, and India, China was one of the world’s most heavily populated regions, home to roughly one-quarter of the world’s population between 300 and 1500. Comparative history, as the French historian Marc Bloch pointed out long ago, can suggest new questions about well-worked topics, and this brief overview of Chinese history in this period hopes to do exactly that.

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The tendency to underestimate foreign influence shapes many discussions of how Buddhist teachings entered China. The first Buddhists in China were foreign merchants who brought their faith with them overland from Central Asia and India just before the beginning of the Common Era. Several early Buddhist sites, notably Kongwang Mountain, were located on China’s coast, suggesting that early Buddhists made use of sea routes. These missionaries offered an appealing alternative to the grim system of underworld jails that most Chinese believed were the destination of the dead. Only a tiny few, Daoists taught, could escape into immortality.

When the students in my survey of premodern China write about the entry of Buddhism into China, they invariably say that Buddhism originated as a foreign religion but became Chinese after entering China. Their near unanimity suggests that this view of Chinese history is widely taught in American high schools. The students are correct, of course, to observe that Chinese Buddhist teachings diverged from Indian Buddhist teachings, themselves very much in flux between the first century BCE and the sixth century CE. Even so, Chinese Buddhist teachings, particularly monastic regulations requiring monks and nuns to be celibate, directly violated the Confucian imperative to produce sons to carry on the family line.

Recent studies have shown that some early monks continued to live outside monasteries, sometimes with their own wives and children, in different places in modern-day Gansu and Xinjiang<sup>1</sup>—and probably many other localities besides—but Chinese Buddhists never countenanced these departures from monastic rules. Buddhist teachings offered escape from the endless cycle of life, death, and rebirth, but only after one had severed ties with one’s family.

Buddhism gained a popular following in the third and fourth centuries and became the dominant religion in China only when the Sui (581–617) and early Tang (618–907) emperors made the decision to rule as *chakravartin* kings. A traditional Indian ideal, the *chakravartin* king embodied all the virtues of Buddhism and made donations to the Buddhist order, which he never entered so that he could continue to rule.

Himself a patron of Buddhism, the second Tang emperor, Taizong (reigned 626–649), sponsored *The Tang Code*, a set of laws to be used throughout his empire. Its drafters probably did not realize that the flexibility of their code meant that it could be used by rulers of neighboring countries. The code set forth the provisions of the equal field system, stipulating that new household registers be drawn up so that every able-bodied householder could receive a new allocation of land every three years.

A reading of *The Tang Code* gives the impression of a homogenous empire in which identical laws apply to each district in exactly the same way.<sup>2</sup> In fact, local officials implemented the code with great flexibility: in the land-poor oasis of Turfan, household registers allotted each family far less than the requisite amount of land, with a note on each register that the remainder “awaited” allocation. The equal-field system collapsed after the An Lushan rebellion of 755, which forced the central government to cede the right to collect revenue to regional rulers. Even so, lawmakers retained the provisions about it in the law code drafted early in the Song dynasty (960–1275). They were able to do so because statutes, regulations, and ordinances constituted the operative law of the empire, not the code, which played largely a symbolic role.

In later centuries, rulers inside—China as well as in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam—all adopted modified versions of the code, used civil service examinations to recruit officials, embraced Buddhism as the state religion, and espoused Confucian moral teachings, all in the hopes of creating a state as powerful as Tang dynasty China. As their subjects came to use Chinese characters and to eat with chopsticks, these shared practices culminated in the formation of an East Asian region.<sup>3</sup>

Tang civilization is well known for its openness to the music, art, and fashions of China’s neighbors, particularly to the west in Central Asia and India. Less often do people realize how readily Tang China absorbed the many refugees who fled the Islamic conquest, particularly Iranians who had lived in the Sasanian empire (224–651 CE) or farther east in the region of Samarkand. Household registers from Turfan list many Iranians, including full-time farmers as well as merchants and craftsmen, who left their mark on the Tang arts, especially gold and silver vessels. Iranian immigrants were buried in hybrid tombs, some recently discovered in Xi’an, that combined traditional Chinese tomb architecture with Zoroastrian burial practices.<sup>4</sup>

Tang emperors were the first to use civil service examinations to recruit their top officials. The exams originated in the Han dynasty (207 BCE–220 CE) as a means of placing officials who had already been appointed to the government, but during the Tang dynasty the top tier of officials had passed the exams prior to receiving their initial official appointment. The contrast with the educational level of contemporary societies in Western Europe is sharp: the pope crowned Charlemagne (reigned 768–814) the ruler of the Holy Roman empire, but the illiterate Charlemagne could sign his name only with the use of a wax-form to guide his pen. Educational levels in Europe soared after the year 1000. By 1300, European monarchs knew how to read and had bureaucracies staffed by university graduates to collect taxes.

Both Chinese and European states grew in sophistication. The Chinese state increased the recruitment of officials via civil service examinations so that a majority of Song-dynasty officials had passed some kind of exam before taking office, while European rulers appointed university graduates, usually on the recommendation of current officials.

Historians of China and Europe use the term “commercial revolution” to characterize the host of changes occurring in both societies between 1000 and 1400. A stream of technological innovations, ably described by Carlo Cipolla<sup>5</sup> and Mark Elvin,<sup>6</sup> boosted agricultural productivity. Market networks sprang up, and many cultivators began to specialize and produce for the market rather than simply grow their own food. As a result, both Europe and China enjoyed long periods of sustained prosperity, population growth, urbanization, and international trade.

Throughout the commercial revolution, the Chinese state granted degrees to those who had successfully completed the civil service examinations; at the same time, European universities gained the exclusive right to grant degrees.

During this period, Chinese inventions spread first to the Islamic world and then from Islamic Spain and Italy to the rest of Europe. Invented in the second century BCE, paper enjoyed wide use throughout China by 300 CE. The technology for paper-making spread to the Islamic world in the eighth century, to Spain in the tenth century, to Italy in the eleventh, and throughout Europe after that.<sup>7</sup>

During the thirteenth century, Mongol rule facilitated travel by individuals and many technological transfers across Eurasia. As a result, cartographic knowledge diffused over a wide area. In 1402 mapmakers in Korea combined maps of Europe and West Asia with a his-

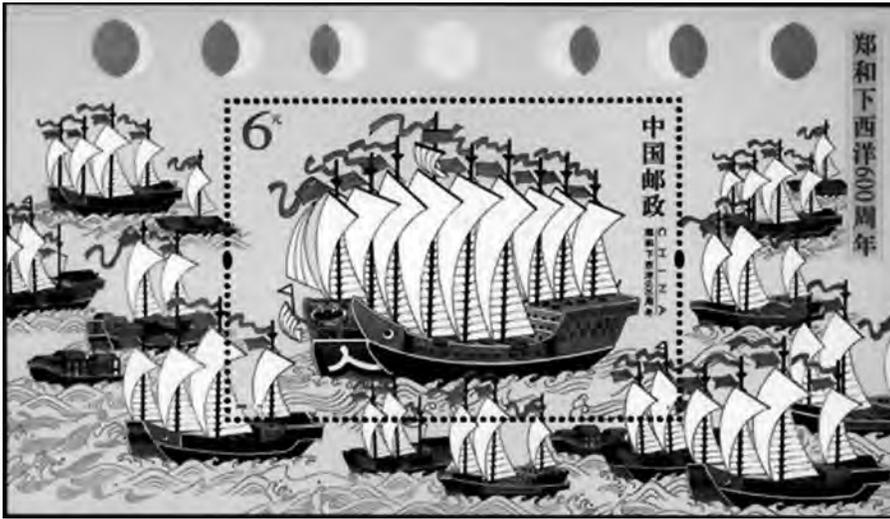
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The woodblock prints show some of the six major stages in papermaking, recorded in a seventeenth-century book *The Exploitation of the Works of Nature*.

Source: [www.computersmiths.com](http://www.computersmiths.com), History of Chinese Invention and Discovery.

Image: <http://www.computersmiths.com/chineseinvention/paper.htm>



Set of commemorative stamps issued for the 600th anniversary of Zheng He's voyages to western seas.  
Source: <http://www.unicover.com/h0004318.htm>

torical map of China's administrative divisions to make the most advanced map of its time, the Kangnido World Map. During these centuries, European shipmakers adopted several important Chinese technological innovations, including the adjustable rudder, watertight compartments, and the compass.

The ability to construct large seaworthy vessels made it possible for China to launch a series of remarkable ocean expeditions between 1405 and 1433. The voyages of the eunuch admiral Zheng He have received much attention since the heavily publicized appearance of Gavin Menzies' counterfactual *1421: The Year China Discovered America*.<sup>8</sup> Although no professional historian has

endorsed his findings,<sup>9</sup> *1421* raises an important point: why did the Chinese cease voyaging after 1433 while the Europeans never stopped? At first glance, the magnitude of the Chinese treasure ships—not quite three times as long as the *Santa Maria*<sup>10</sup>—might suggest that the Chinese should have reached the Americas before the Spanish did.

Yet, there is absolutely no evidence that they did. In actuality, large ships were not necessary to cross the Atlantic; Columbus complained that his ships, some eighty feet in length, were too big to explore the narrow inlets of the Caribbean. The giant Zheng He vessels would have been even less suitable.

The Zheng He ships sailed to demonstrate the power of the Ming dynasty and to reinforce the shaky claim of the Yongle emperor to rule after the mysterious disappearance of his nephew in a palace fire. Geoff Wade has recently argued that the Zheng He expeditions used genuine military threats to secure the cooperation of the rulers they visited.<sup>11</sup> On occasion, the Chinese did intervene in local politics; they even replaced one Sri Lankan ruler with a king more to their liking. As long as the visited ruler accepted gifts from the Chinese and agreed to present tribute to the emperor in return, the expeditions had fulfilled their mission.

Interestingly, the Chinese ships were not exploring. They were traveling a well-established sea route between south China and the Islamic world that, in George Hourani's words, "was the longest in regular use by mankind before the European expansion in the sixteenth century."<sup>12</sup> Given that Zheng He was Muslim, it is not surprising that he hired Muslim navigators to sail his ships along the hajj routes from East Asia to Mecca and then beyond to East Africa. Fei Xin, a sailor who traveled part of the way with Zheng He, provided a description of each port the treasure ships visited.<sup>13</sup> His account of the voyages ends with a description of Mecca, the destination of all Islamic travel accounts.

If one wishes to engage in provocative, yet unfounded, speculation about places the Zheng He voyages might have gone, Spain is a far more compelling candidate than the Americas or Australia. On the edge of the Islamic world, Spain was well known to Islamic mapmakers, but there is no evidence (yet!) that the Zheng He vessels ever entered the Mediterranean.

Columbus, in contrast, was seeking his fortune in the Americas, as is obvious from his first description of the first people he encountered, the Arawak people of Hispaniola, the island where Haiti and the Dominican Republic are located today: "Hispaniola is a wonder. The mountains and hills, the plains and the meadow lands are both fertile and beautiful. . . . The harbors are incredibly fine and there are many great rivers with broad channels and the majority contain gold. . . . I gave them a thousand pretty things that I had brought, in order to gain their love and incline them to become Christians."<sup>14</sup>

It may in retrospect seem natural that Columbus intended to establish a colony in the Americas, but the Chinese example shows that there was nothing foreordained about Columbus's plan. His ambition was the product of a lifetime of seeing the Portuguese colonies of the fifteenth century, including the slave-trading fort at Sao Jorge da Mina on the coast of Africa and the flourishing sugar plantations of the Madeira Islands just off the African coast in the Atlantic (the father of his first wife lived on the main island of Madeira).<sup>15</sup> When Columbus landed on Hispaniola, he simply used the existing procedure for founding a colony.

The fifteenth century Chinese had no comparable model for establishing colonies. Geoff Wade has suggested that the Zheng He voyages were part of the Yongle emperor's effort to colonize Southeast Asia—evident in his conquest of Yunnan, in today's southwest China, and the Red River valley of Vietnam—but Yunnan and Vietnam were contiguous with the Chinese empire, whereas the ports the treasure ships visited were not. The Ming empire stationed troops and officials in Yunnan and Vietnam, but not in the ports they visited, indicating that they viewed them differently.

The differences in motivation, funding, and technology explain the diverse outcomes of Chinese and European voyages. Columbus hoped to exploit the wealth of the Americas, to convert the indigenous population to Christianity, and to establish colonies. It helped that the Europeans had an extremely potent weapon of which they were totally unaware: the germs they carried brought devastating illnesses, including smallpox, that decimated the population of the Americas and facilitated settlement by Europeans and their African slaves. The colonies provided an outlet for European populations; many historians believe that the colonies provided the impetus for the subsequent economic growth and industrialization of Europe.<sup>16</sup>

In closing, let me state the obvious: the role of China in world history between 300 and 1500 fully justifies its inclusion in the world history curriculum. On today's American campuses, some 420,000 students typically enroll in some form of world history survey, compared to 550,000 who take Western Civilization. Some world history textbooks are merely retrofitted Western Civ classes with added coverage of China. This shortcut, however, cannot make these textbooks truly global in scope. A genuine world history has to go beyond just Europe and China to include Africa and the Americas as well as India and the Islamic world. ■

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## NOTES

1. Valerie Hansen, "Religious Life in a Silk Road Community: Niya During the Third and Fourth Centuries," in John Lagerwey, ed., *Chinese Religion and Society: The Transformation of a Field* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2004), 279–315.
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Chinese History. Ancient China was built along the two main rivers—first the Yellow River (Huang He) in the north, and later the Yangtze in the south. China is one of the oldest civilizations. Records of the Grand Historian (ca. 100 BC) It was during the rule of Song dynasty, that China became a world leader in science and technology. Also inventions such as typography and compass were made during this period. Yuan Dynasty (1271 AD–1368 AD): After the Mongols defeated the people of Song dynasty in a long war, Kublai Khan, a Mongol leader, established the Yuan dynasty. 5. Prehistoric China. The origin of Chinese Civilization is dated back to the Paleolithic Age when Homo Erectus lived in the area more than a million years ago. One archaeological site at Shanxi Province is dated back to some 1.27 million years. Then came the Neolithic Age which came around 10,000 BC and carries an evidence of the proto-Chinese millet agriculture, and even settlement along the famous Yangtze River is said to be around 8,000 years old. In the latter half of the Neolithic Age, the establishment of the Yellow River civilization led to the establishment of the Yangshao culture, wh History of China is a long and complex history includes all dynasties with their own memorable cultures. China is an important country because it has 1.4 billion people and it is one of the world’s oldest and most influential civilizations. There are four inventions commonly referred to as “the Four Great Inventions” in China including paper, gunpowder, compass and printing that have had a huge impact on the entire world. Chinese civilization has been the most technological, economically and culturally advanced throughout much of recorded history. The word - China in Chinese language means “Mi