

On China

Henry
Kissinger

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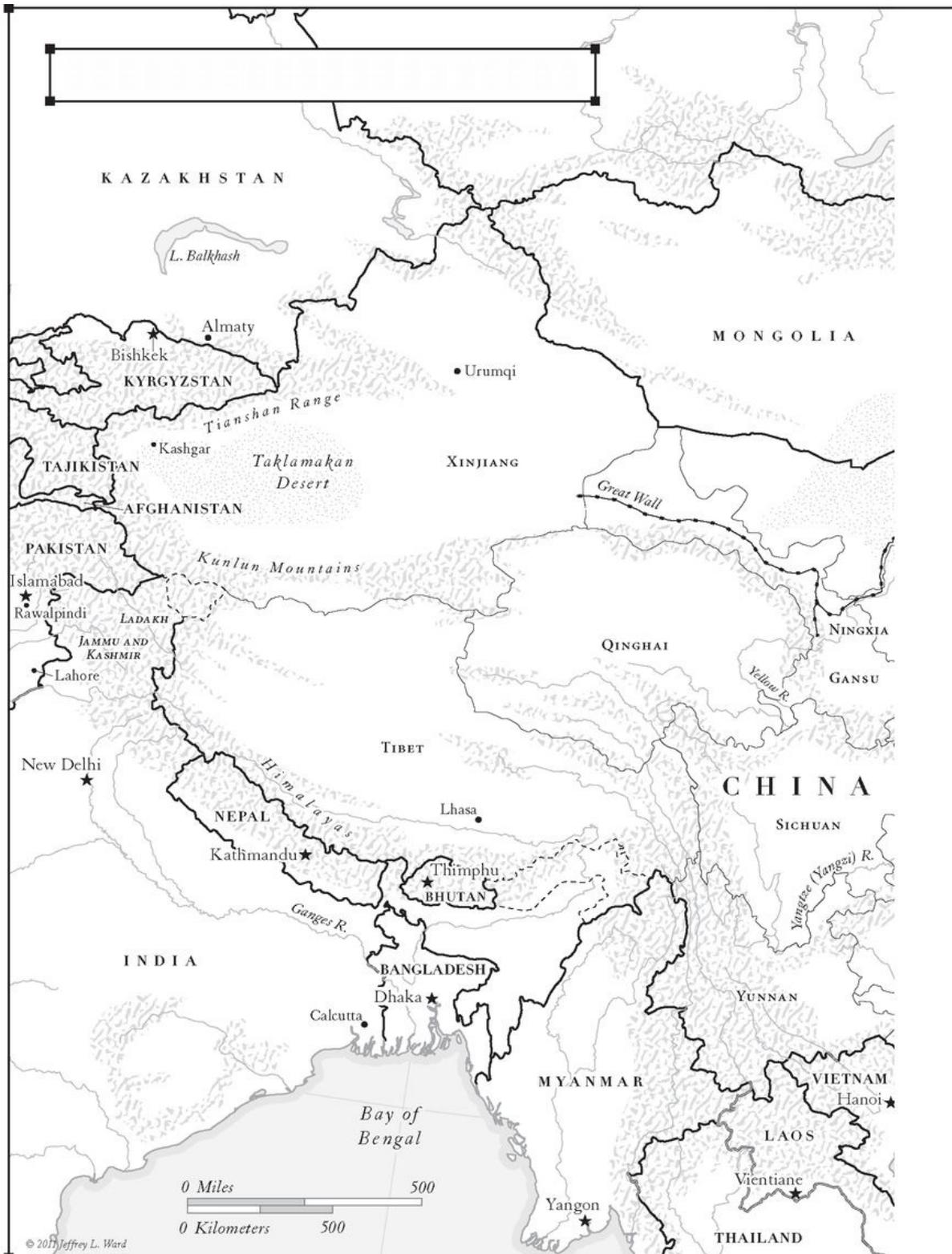
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TO ANNETTE AND OSCAR DE LA RENTA

CHINA AND ITS NEIGHBORS





Preface

FORTY YEARS AGO almost to the day, President Richard Nixon did me the honor of sending me to Beijing to reestablish contact with a country central to the history of Asia with which America had had no high-level contact for over twenty years. The American motive for the opening was to put before our people a vision of peace transcending the travail of the Vietnam War and the ominous vistas of the Cold War. China, though technically an ally of the Soviet Union, was in quest of maneuvering room to resist a threatened attack from Moscow.

In the interval I have been to China more than fifty times. Like many visitors over the centuries, I have come to admire the Chinese people, their endurance, their subtlety, their family sense, and the culture they represent. At the same time, all my life I have reflected on the building of peace, largely from an American perspective. I have had the good luck of being able to pursue these two strands of thinking simultaneously as a senior official, as a carrier of messages, and as a scholar.

This book is an effort, based in part on conversations with Chinese leaders, to explain the conceptual way the Chinese think about problems of peace and war and international order, and its relationship to the more pragmatic, case-by-case American approach. Different histories and cultures produce occasionally divergent conclusions. I do not always agree with the Chinese perspective, nor will every reader. But it is necessary to understand it, since China will play such a big role in the world that is emerging in the twenty-first century.

Since my first visit, China has become an economic superpower and a major factor in shaping the global political order. The United States has prevailed in the Cold War. The relationship between China and the United States has become a central element in the quest for world peace and global well-being.

Eight American presidents and four generations of Chinese leaders have managed this delicate relationship in an astonishingly consistent manner, considering the difference in starting points. Both sides have refused to permit historic legacies or different conceptions of domestic order to interrupt their essentially cooperative relationship.

It has been a complex journey, for both societies believe they represent unique values. American exceptionalism is missionary. It holds that the United States has an obligation to spread its values to every part of the world. China's exceptionalism is cultural. China does not proselytize; it does not claim that its contemporary institutions are relevant outside China. But it is the heir of the Middle Kingdom tradition, which formally graded all other states as various levels of tributaries based on their approximation to Chinese cultural and political forms; in other words, a kind of cultural universality.

A primary focus of this book is the interaction between Chinese and American leaders since the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949. Both in and out of government, I have kept records of my conversations with four generations of Chinese leaders and have drawn on them as a primary source in writing this book.

This book could not have been written without the dedicated and able assistance of associates and of friends who permitted me to impose on them for help.

Schuyler Schouten was indispensable. He came to my attention eight years ago when Professor John Gaddis of Yale recommended him as one of his ablest students. When I started this project I asked him to take a two-month leave from his law firm. He did so, and in the process became so involved that he saw the effort through to its end a year later. Schuyler undertook much of the basic research. He helped with the translation of Chinese texts and even more with penetrating the implications of some of the subtler ones. He was indefatigable during the editing and proofreading phase. I have never had a better research associate and very rarely one as good.

It has been my good fortune to have Stephanie Junger-Moat work with me for a decade across the gamut of my activities. She was what in baseball they would call the essential utility player. She did research and some editing, and was the principal liaison with the publisher. She checked all the endnotes. She helped coordinate the typing and never hesitated to pitch in when deadlines approached. Her crucial contribution was reinforced by her charm and diplomatic skill.

Harry Evans edited *White House Years* thirty years ago. He permitted me to impose on our friendship to go over the entire manuscript. His editorial and structural suggestions were numerous and wise.

Theresa Amantea and Jody Williams typed the manuscript many times over and spent many evenings and weekends helping meet deadlines. Their good cheer, efficiency, and sharp eye for detail were vital.

Stapleton Roy, former ambassador to China and distinguished China scholar; Winston Lord, my associate during the opening to China and later ambassador to China; and Dick Viets, my literary executor, read several chapters and made insightful comments. Jon Vanden Heuvel provided helpful research on several chapters.

Publishing with The Penguin Press was a happy experience. Ann Godoff was always available, ever insightful, never harassing, and fun to be with. Bruce Giffords, Noirin Lucas, and Tory Klose expertly shepherded the book through the editorial production process. Fred Chase copyedited the manuscript with care and efficiency. Laura Stickney was the book's principal editor. Young enough to be my granddaughter, she was in no way intimidated by the author. She overcame her reservations about my political views sufficiently that I came to look forward to her occasionally acerbic and always incisive comments in the margins of the manuscript. She was indefatigable, perceptive, and vastly helpful.

To all these people I am immensely grateful.

The governmental papers on which I drew have all been declassified for some time. I would like to thank in particular the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Cold War International History Project for permission to use extended excerpts from their archive of declassified Russian and Chinese documents. The Carter Library helpfully made available many of the transcripts of meetings with Chinese leaders during the Carter presidency, and the Reagan Library provided numerous useful documents from their files.

Needless to say, the shortcomings of the book are my own.

As always over half a century, my wife, Nancy, provided her staunch moral and intellectual support amidst the solitude authors (or at least this author) generate around

themselves when writing. She read most of the chapters and made innumerable important suggestions.

I have dedicated *On China* to Annette and Oscar de la Renta. I started the book in their home in Punta Cana and finished it there. Their hospitality has been only one facet of a friendship that has added joy and depth to my life.

Henry A. Kissinger
New York, January 2011

Note on Chinese Spellings

THIS BOOK MAKES frequent reference to Chinese names and terms. Well-known alternative spellings exist for many Chinese words, based on two particularly widespread methods of transliterating Chinese characters into the Roman alphabet: the Wade-Giles method, prevalent through much of the world until the 1980s, and the pinyin method, adopted officially in the People's Republic of China in 1979 and increasingly common in Western and other Asian publications thereafter.

For the most part, this book employs pinyin spellings. For example, the pinyin spelling "Deng Xiaoping" is used rather than the Wade-Giles spelling "Teng H'siao-ping." Where other, non-pinyin spellings remain significantly more familiar, they are retained for the reader's convenience. For example, for the name of the ancient military theorist "Sun Tzu," the traditional spelling is used, rather than the newer pinyin spelling "Sunzi."

Occasionally, in the interest of achieving consistency throughout the book's text, quoted references to names originally listed in the Wade-Giles format have been rendered in their pinyin spellings. Such changes are further noted in the endnotes. In each case, the underlying Chinese word remains the same; the difference is in the method of rendering the word in the Roman alphabet.

Prologue

IN OCTOBER 1962, China's revolutionary leader Mao Zedong summoned his top military and political commanders to meet with him in Beijing. Two thousand miles to the west, in the forbidding and sparsely populated terrain of the Himalayas, Chinese and Indian troops were locked in a standoff over the two countries' disputed border. The dispute arose over different versions of history: India claimed the frontier demarcated during British rule, China the limits of imperial China. India had deployed its outposts to the edge of its conception of the border; China had surrounded the Indian positions. Attempts to negotiate a territorial settlement had foundered.

Mao had decided to break the stalemate. He reached far back into the classical Chinese tradition that he was otherwise in the process of dismantling. China and India, Mao told his commanders, had previously fought "one and a half" wars. Beijing could draw operational lessons from each. The first war had occurred over 1,300 years earlier, during the Tang Dynasty (618–907), when China dispatched troops to support an Indian kingdom against an illegitimate and aggressive rival. After China's intervention, the two countries had enjoyed centuries of flourishing religious and economic exchange. The lesson learned from the ancient campaign, as Mao described it, was that China and India were not doomed to perpetual enmity. They could enjoy a long period of peace again, but to do so, China had to use force to "knock" India back "to the negotiating table." The "half war," in Mao's mind, had taken place seven hundred years later, when the Mongol ruler Timurlane sacked Delhi. (Mao reasoned that since Mongolia and China were then part of the same political entity, this was a "half" Sino-Indian war.) Timurlane had won a significant victory, but once in India his army had killed over 100,000 prisoners. This time, Mao enjoined his Chinese forces to be "restrained and principled."¹

No one in Mao's audience—the Communist Party leadership of a revolutionary "New China" proclaiming its intent to remake the international order and abolish China's own feudal past—seems to have questioned the relevance of these ancient precedents to China's current strategic imperatives. Planning for an attack continued on the basis of the principles Mao had outlined. Weeks later the offensive proceeded much as he described: China executed a sudden, devastating blow on the Indian positions and then retreated to the previous line of control, even going so far as to return the captured Indian heavy weaponry.

In no other country is it conceivable that a modern leader would initiate a major national undertaking by invoking strategic principles from a millennium-old event—nor that he could confidently expect his colleagues to understand the significance of his allusions. Yet China is singular. No other country can claim so long a continuous civilization, or such an intimate link to its ancient past and classical principles of strategy and statesmanship.

Other societies, the United States included, have claimed universal applicability for their values and institutions. Still, none equals China in persisting—and persuading its neighbors to acquiesce—in such an elevated conception of its world role for so long,

and in the face of so many historical vicissitudes. From the emergence of China as a unified state in the third century B.C. until the collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1912, China stood at the center of an East Asian international system of remarkable durability. The Chinese Emperor was conceived of (and recognized by most neighboring states) as the pinnacle of a universal political hierarchy, with all other states' rulers theoretically serving as vassals. Chinese language, culture, and political institutions were the hallmarks of civilization, such that even regional rivals and foreign conquerors adopted them to varying degrees as a sign of their own legitimacy (often as a first step to being subsumed within China).

The traditional cosmology endured despite catastrophes and centuries-long periods of political decay. Even when China was weak or divided, its centrality remained the touchstone of regional legitimacy; aspirants, both Chinese and foreign, vied to unify or conquer it, then ruled from the Chinese capital without challenging the basic premise that it was the center of the universe. While other countries were named after ethnic groups or geographical landmarks, China called itself *zhongguo*—the “Middle Kingdom” or the “Central Country.”² Any attempt to understand China's twentieth-century diplomacy or its twenty-first-century world role must begin—even at the cost of some potential oversimplification—with a basic appreciation of the traditional context.

CHAPTER 1

The Singularity of China

SOCIETIES AND NATIONS tend to think of themselves as eternal. They also cherish a tale of their origin. A special feature of Chinese civilization is that it seems to have no beginning. It appears in history less as a conventional nation-state than a permanent natural phenomenon. In the tale of the Yellow Emperor, revered by many Chinese as the legendary founding ruler, China seems already to exist. When the Yellow Emperor appears in myth, Chinese civilization has fallen into chaos. Competing princes harass each other and the people, yet an enfeebled ruler fails to maintain order. Levying an army, the new hero pacifies the realm and is acclaimed as emperor.¹

The Yellow Emperor has gone down in history as a founding hero; yet in the founding myth, he is reestablishing, not creating, an empire. China predated him; it strides into the historical consciousness as an established state requiring only restoration, not creation. This paradox of Chinese history recurs with the ancient sage Confucius: again, he is seen as the “founder” of a culture although he stressed that he had invented nothing, that he was merely trying to reinvigorate the principles of harmony which had once existed in the golden age but had been lost in Confucius’s own era of political chaos.

Reflecting on the paradox of China’s origins, the nineteenth-century missionary and traveler, the Abbé Régis-Evariste Huc, observed:

Chinese civilization originates in an antiquity so remote that we vainly endeavor to discover its commencement. There are no traces of the state of infancy among this people. This is a very peculiar fact respecting China. We are accustomed in the history of nations to find some well-defined point of departure, and the historic documents, traditions, and monuments that remain to us generally permit us to follow, almost step by step, the progress of civilization, to be present at its birth, to watch its development, its onward march, and in many cases, its subsequent decay and fall. But it is not thus with the Chinese. They seem to have been always living in the same stage of advancement as in the present day; and the data of antiquity are such as to confirm that opinion.²

When Chinese written characters first evolved, during the Shang Dynasty in the second millennium B.C., ancient Egypt was at the height of its glory. The great city-states of classical Greece had not yet emerged, and Rome was millennia away. Yet the direct descendant of the Shang writing system is still used by well over a billion people today. Chinese today can understand inscriptions written in the age of Confucius; contemporary Chinese books and conversations are enriched by centuries-old aphorisms citing ancient battles and court intrigues.

At the same time, Chinese history featured many periods of civil war, interregnum,

and chaos. After each collapse, the Chinese state reconstituted itself as if by some immutable law of nature. At each stage, a new uniting figure emerged, following essentially the precedent of the Yellow Emperor, to subdue his rivals and reunify China (and sometimes enlarge its bounds). The famous opening of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, a fourteenth-century epic novel treasured by centuries of Chinese (including Mao, who is said to have pored over it almost obsessively in his youth), evokes this continuous rhythm: “The empire, long divided, must unite; long united, must divide. Thus it has ever been.”³ Each period of disunity was viewed as an aberration. Each new dynasty reached back to the previous dynasty’s principles of governance in order to reestablish continuity. The fundamental precepts of Chinese culture endured, tested by the strain of periodic calamity.

Before the seminal event of Chinese unification in 221 B.C., there had been a millennium of dynastic rule that gradually disintegrated as the feudal subdivisions evolved from autonomy to independence. The culmination was two and a half centuries of turmoil recorded in history as the Warring States period (475–221 B.C.). Its European equivalent would be the interregnum between the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 and the end of the Second World War, when a multiplicity of European states was struggling for preeminence within the framework of the balance of power. After 221 B.C., China maintained the ideal of empire and unity but followed the practice of fracturing, then reuniting, in cycles sometimes lasting several hundred years.

When the state fractured, wars between the various components were fought savagely. Mao once claimed that the population of China declined from fifty million to ten million during the so-called Three Kingdoms period (A.D. 220–80),⁴ and the conflict among the contending groups between the two world wars of the twentieth century was extremely bloody as well.

At its ultimate extent, the Chinese cultural sphere stretched over a continental area much larger than any European state, indeed about the size of continental Europe. Chinese language and culture, and the Emperor’s political writ, expanded to every known terrain: from the steppelands and pine forests in the north shading into Siberia, to the tropical jungles and terraced rice farms in the south; from the east coast with its canals, ports, and fishing villages, to the stark deserts of Central Asia and the ice-capped peaks of the Himalayan frontier. The extent and variety of this territory bolstered the sense that China was a world unto itself. It supported a conception of the Emperor as a figure of universal consequence, presiding over *tian xia*, or “All Under Heaven.”

The Era of Chinese Preeminence

Through many millennia of Chinese civilization, China was never obliged to deal with other countries or civilizations that were comparable to it in scale and sophistication. India was known to the Chinese, as Mao later noted, but for much of history it was divided into separate kingdoms. The two civilizations exchanged goods and Buddhist influences along the Silk Road but were elsewhere walled off from

casual contact by the almost impenetrable Himalayas and the Tibetan Plateau. The massive and forbidding deserts of Central Asia separated China from the Near Eastern cultures of Persia and Babylonia and even more from the Roman Empire. Trade caravans undertook intermittent journeys, but China as a society did not engage societies of comparable scale and achievement. Though China and Japan shared a number of core cultural and political institutions, neither was prepared to recognize the other's superiority; their solution was to curtail contact for centuries at a time. Europe was even further away in what the Chinese considered the Western Oceans, by definition inaccessible to Chinese culture and pitifully incapable of acquiring it—as the Emperor told a British envoy in 1793.

The territorial claims of the Chinese Empire stopped at the water's edge. As early as the Song Dynasty (960–1279), China led the world in nautical technology; its fleets could have carried the empire into an era of conquest and exploration.⁵ Yet China acquired no overseas colonies and showed relatively little interest in the countries beyond its coast. It developed no rationale for venturing abroad to convert the barbarians to Confucian principles or Buddhist virtues. When the conquering Mongols commandeered the Song fleet and its experienced captains, they mounted two attempted invasions of Japan. Both were turned back by inclement weather—the *kamikaze* (or “Divine Wind”) of Japanese lore.⁶ Yet when the Mongol Dynasty collapsed, the expeditions, though technically feasible, were never again attempted. No Chinese leader ever articulated a rationale for why China would want to control the Japanese archipelago.

But in the early years of the Ming Dynasty, between 1405 and 1433, China launched one of history's most remarkable and mysterious naval enterprises: Admiral Zheng He set out in fleets of technologically unparalleled “treasure ships” to destinations as far as Java, India, the Horn of Africa, and the Strait of Hormuz. At the time of Zheng's voyages, the European age of exploration had not yet begun. China's fleet possessed what would have seemed an unbridgeable technological advantage: in the size, sophistication, and number of its vessels, it dwarfed the Spanish Armada (which was still 150 years away).

Historians still debate the actual purpose of these missions. Zheng He was a singular figure in the age of exploration: a Chinese Muslim eunuch conscripted into imperial service as a child, he fits no obvious historical precedent. At each stop on his journeys, he formally proclaimed the magnificence of China's new Emperor, bestowed lavish gifts on the rulers he encountered, and invited them to travel in person or send envoys to China. There, they were to acknowledge their place in the Sinocentric world order by performing the ritual “kowitz” to acknowledge the Emperor's superiority. Yet beyond declaring China's greatness and issuing invitations to portentous ritual, Zheng He displayed no territorial ambition. He brought back only gifts, or “tribute”; he claimed no colonies or resources for China beyond the metaphysical bounty of extending the limits of All Under Heaven. At most he can be said to have created favorable conditions for Chinese merchants, through a kind of early exercise of Chinese “soft power.”⁷

Zheng He's expeditions stopped abruptly in 1433, coincident with the recurrence of threats along China's northern land frontier. The next Emperor ordered the fleet

dismantled and the records of Zheng He's voyages destroyed. The expeditions were never repeated. Though Chinese traders continued to ply the routes Zheng He sailed, China's naval abilities faded—so much so that the Ming rulers' response to the subsequent menace of piracy off China's southeast coast was to attempt a forced migration of the coastal population ten miles inland. China's naval history was thus a hinge that failed to swing: technically capable of dominance, China retired voluntarily from the field of naval exploration just as Western interest was beginning to take hold.

China's splendid isolation nurtured a particular Chinese self-perception. Chinese elites grew accustomed to the notion that China was unique—not just “a great civilization” among others, but civilization itself. A British translator wrote in 1850:

An intelligent European, accustomed to reflect on the state of a number of countries enjoying a variety of different advantages, and laboring each under peculiar disadvantages, could, by a few well directed questions, and from very little data, form a tolerably correct notion of the state of a people hitherto unknown to him; but it would be a great error to suppose that this is the case with the Chinese. Their exclusion of foreigners and confinement to their own country has, by depriving them of all opportunities of making comparisons, sadly circumscribed their ideas; they are thus totally unable to free themselves from the dominion of association, and judge everything by rules of purely Chinese convention.⁸

China knew, of course, of different societies around its periphery in Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, Burma; but in the Chinese perception, China was considered the center of the world, the “Middle Kingdom,” and other societies were assessed as gradations from it. As the Chinese saw it, a host of lesser states that imbibed Chinese culture and paid tribute to China's greatness constituted the natural order of the universe. The borders between China and the surrounding peoples were not so much political and territorial demarcations as cultural differentiations. The outward radiance of Chinese culture throughout East Asia led the American political scientist Lucian Pye to comment famously that, in the modern age, China remains a “civilization pretending to be a nation-state.”⁹

The pretensions underlying this traditional Chinese world order endured well into the modern era. As late as 1863, China's Emperor (himself a member of a “foreign” Manchu Dynasty that had conquered China two centuries earlier) dispatched a letter informing Abraham Lincoln of China's commitment to good relations with the United States. The Emperor based his communication on the grandiloquent assurance that, “[h]aving, with reverence, received the commission from Heaven to rule the universe, we regard both the middle empire [China] and the outside countries as constituting one family, without any distinction.”¹⁰ When the letter was dispatched, China had already lost two wars with the Western powers, which were busy staking out spheres of interest in Chinese territory. The Emperor seems to have treated these catastrophes as similar to other barbarian invasions that were overcome, in the end, by China's endurance and superior culture.

For most of history, there was, in fact, nothing particularly fanciful about Chinese claims. With each generation, the Han Chinese had expanded from their original base in the Yellow River valley, gradually drawing neighboring societies into various stages of approximation of Chinese patterns. Chinese scientific and technological