

## History of China – 中國史

*The authors of this special issue on China are Chinese scholars working today in the three major Chinese societies, China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. The five articles in this issue are a random sample of a few of the main trends of history research that interest Chinese historians today. Neither Antiquity and early Medieval period are represented here, nor is the Modern period after the fall of the Manchu dynasty in 1911. The articles are concentrated on the imperial period from roughly the 10th to the early 20th centuries. All the authors (with the exception of the American scholar Mark Elliott) received their full education up to the university level in a Chinese society, with Chinese as their mother tongue. Most of them (except Chang Jianhua) later went for postgraduate studies in Western countries or in Japan, and their contact with the West remains frequent and constant. In other words, they are more exposed to Western scholarship in methodology and approach than most of their predecessors.*

*If we look more closely at the content of the articles of the present issue, one could easily make the observation that history writing in China nowadays is considerably different from that of half a century ago: the Marxist approach is no longer preeminent. No serious historian would bluntly label China's past as simply "feudal" and criticize it as "backward": the lineage system studied by Chang Jianhua, the historian from Tianjin, clearly shows the new freedom enjoyed by mainland Chinese historians in research in this respect. Less obvious to the uninformed reader is the change in history writing in other Chinese societies such as Taiwan and Hong Kong. As a reaction against Marxist historiography that denigrated China's "feudal" past, a whole generation of historians in Taiwan and Hong Kong in the post war period tended to search for moral lessons, more often positive than negative, in history. Chinese traditional institutions and culture were idealized and the Chinese Empire was often depicted as a monolithic cultural and political entity. On the other hand, works on the superiority of Confucianism as a State ideology or basis of social organization were also numerous in Taiwan and Hong Kong for a long time.*

*The authors of this present issue no longer consider such moral tasks as the main mission in their profession. Their exposure to Western scholarship transformed their mindset. The certainty and clarity with which their predecessors explained China's past are no longer satisfactory. The articles presented in this issue reveal some of the major trends in Chinese history research and writing of today: organization of local societies, with particular interests in lineage formation; the economic and political transformation of the Song period (10th to 13th centuries) as a turning point in Chinese history; new approaches to institutional history linking, for instance, the fiscal and the legal systems with State ideology; the problem of cultural identity for ethnic groups as well as for local communities. Moreover, a thread going through all the articles is the question of State and society, and the evolution of the relations between the two from the Song to the Manchu dynasties. These themes challenge the "nationalist" view of a top-down monolithic, dominating Chinese culture. The growing interest in lineage formation and organization in local societies has been provoked by the emergence of new*

*collections of genealogies, the opening of new local archives, as well as the joint interest of historians and anthropologists in doing field research in specific spots where other primary sources such as oral interviews, steles, old buildings, and obscure manuscripts could be discovered and used. As revealed here by Chang Jianhua and David Faure, the question of lineages in local societies is not only a matter of organization of the social and economic life of ordinary clans and families that adopted the aristocratic model, but involves changes in religious systems and ritual development that facilitated above all, the penetration of Neo-Confucianism as the State ideology into local communities. The evolution of the process and the form and content of lineages varied from region to region, but it is believed in general that in parts of Southern China, it began in the Southern Song period in the 13th century and reached a first peak in the 16th century. The cult of ancestor worship was a complex historical process involving Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism of the 13th century, the determination of the first Ming emperor to tighten control of local society in the 14th century, fiscal and tax reforms of the early Ming, and to a certain extent, the consolidation of the civil examination system.*

*The Song period was critical not only in the history of lineage development. Billy So's paper shows the dynamism of maritime trade in the same period along China's Southeastern coast. This brought not only unprecedented economic prosperity and the growth of market towns in the region, but also new commercial legislation that shaped economic behaviors together with rising Neo-Confucianism. The kind of "rationality" observed and described by So in institutions governing trade and commerce was equally persuasive in the Song family law finely analyzed by Lau Nap-yin. Here one clearly sees how the Song law, interpreted and applied by the judges, bolstered the patriarchy within the family while at the same time protected the basic rights of the subordinates. The law's strict observation of hierarchy within the family was intimately linked to the State's interest in upholding its taxation and household registration systems. The infiltration of the Neo-Confucian state in local society right down to every single household was launched in the Song despite marked variations in the North and South of the Empire. But it does not imply the development of a monolithic cultural entity. The question of identity, ethnic as well as local, is one burning issue for the historians of the Manchu dynasty, the last in the Imperial period, dominated by a non-Chinese ethnic group. It continues to be a controversial issue in present day's politics, as in the case of Taiwan where "Chineseness" is an emotional issue in political debates. The roots of all these ambiguities can be traced all the way back to the Antiquity and to the early periods of Chinese history, considered the formation period of the Chinese civilization, which unfortunately are not treated in this issue. The papers here on the Later Imperial period, however, do show intriguing local cultural diversities. They here mentioned the great cultural divide between the North and the South, with more specific cultural features in Southern societies such as Huizhou (Anhui province), Fujian, the Lower Yangzi, the Pearl River Delta. Particular local religions, rituals and cults in various local societies, special ecological features, economic developments (such as changes in trade routes) and specific histories (wars, upheavals, political struggles) experienced by local communities all explained the different receptions and representations of the penetrating State ideology.*

*The question of local or ethnic identity is discussed in Elliott's paper on the role of Manchu culture in the construction of the notion of "China" as a nation, a trend of reflection which is limited in present day PRC, whose political interest is to, again, impose the traditional ideology of a dominating, culturally monolithic Chinese culture. It has a profound historical and political significance for China today.*