INTRODUCTION: TIME, SPACE AND IDENTITY

This is the first of the modules we're presenting in this course. And today, we're doing it a little bit differently. It's not just a straightforward lecture. But Bill Kirby and I are going to be talking about some of the big issues that are enduring issues for thinking about China's history.

And when we began studying China, which was in the '60s and '70s, and think about where we are today, we go back decade by decade, and China keeps changing. But there are things that, despite all that change, it seems to be that we're thinking now in terms of thousands of years. There are some big issues that people have to bear in mind. And I thought we could talk about them in terms of time, in terms of space, the physical space-- land, territory-- and in terms of identity-- ways in which people in China have conceived of themselves as a people.

Right.

And what is sort of the big temporal units with which we need to think about China's history.

Well, just looking at the modern period you can see what a short half-life some conceptions of time have. When the Republic was founded, it was a new China, the first new China of the 20th century in 1912. And the Qing was this decadent old empire, now discarded on the ash heap of history. When the People's Republic was founded, it was [Xin Zhongguo], the New China. Everything before that was Old China, decadent, feudal China.

Right.

The Cultural Revolution comes in 1966. It's another New China. And everything before the Cultural Revolution is deemed bad and after good, then, of course, the Cultural Revolution itself in 1976 becomes bad, and in 1978 a new era of opening up and reform. All these new eras actually get old pretty fast, when you think about them, and they do help us understand political changes and shifts of political winds. They don't help us often understand long-term trends and enduring patterns of Chinese history that really matter.
Section 1: Time

1. WHAT IS A DYNASTY?

[MUSIC PLAYING]

So let's begin with how we're going to be dividing China's history up in this course. And the question that often comes up from students is what do you mean when you say dynasty?

Right.

What do you mean when you say dynasty?

Well, you often mean a ruling house. You mean, physically, an empire. But you also mean the rule of an imperial family. You mean a great hierarchy of inner and outer court, a whole realm of practices that date back more than 2000 years. And you assume both also a temporal limit. That is, a dynasty's may be long or may be short. But as it turns out, none has lasted forever.

They have their beginning points, always as military conquests. They have their high points, which are sometimes called a shengshi, a prosperous age, from which, sadly, once you're at the high point, everything else is downhill.

So a dynasty, then-- it's the name, so to speak.

Right. It's the name of a country.

Name of a country. It lasts for a certain period of time.

Right. So name of country matters. Ming is not the same as Qing.

Right. So this is the great state of Ming, or the great country of Ming, or the great country of Qing that they're called. It's a royal family, or an imperial family, that passes the rulership on within itself. It's the territory it controls. And it's the whole government that runs that territory. We have a song which we teach in class to help people remember the names of the major dynasties.

Right. It really does help to know which dynasty comes before which.

So we're less concerned with the dates than we are with the chronological order, the sequence of dynasties. Can you sing that song?

I cannot sing it as well as you can. [SPEAKING CHINESE: ni chang ba (please sing for us!)]

Well, shall we sing it together?

[SPEAKING CHINESE: ni chang ba (please sing for us!)]

Only if we sing it together.

OK. [SINGING: Shang Zhou Qin Han, Shang Zhou Qin Han, Sui Tang Song, Sui Tang Song, Yuan Ming Qing Republic, Yuan Ming Qing Republic, Mao Zedong, Mao Zedong...]}
So if you sing this song once a day, you will always remember the sequence of Chinese dynasties. It works. It's guaranteed.

You will also drive your friends and family crazy.

It's true.

2. DYNASTIES

Until the Mongols, the names of the Chinese dynasties were actually place names, different from the name of the ruling house. In fact, it's never been-- even when you have a new kind of name which are more ideological, a quality name, like the Yuan or the Ming or the Qing-- it's never the name of the ruling house. So the Ming Dynasty is the Zhu family. The Han Dynasty is the Liu family.

It's strange, because you would think that somehow the family-- and it's so much part of the government-- would have its name there, but it doesn't.

Like the Tudors or the Stuarts.

Yes, indeed.

But these names start to mean something in the Yuan, right?

Yes, that's right. These are names that we're not really sure exactly what they meant, but we know that they meant something, that they were meant to refer to some quality.

A dynasty is a period of time, and it's a ruling house. What happens when the emperor is a baby, and he comes to the throne? He's the successor, and he's a child. He can't rule.

No, but he has a regent. There may be an empress dowager for example, as in the late 19th century, but more commonly a regent. But the question of succession is always at the heart of the longevity or short-livedness of a dynasty.

When we talk about successors, they're all male.

Yes.

But there was one female empress in Chinese history who created her own dynasty. That was Wu Zetian, who was in the middle of the Tang Dynasty. She ends the Tang and create her own dynasty. She calls it the Zhou. Then with her death, she's out. It did happen once.

She has a complex history, but the rule of female leaders is one in which-- since most Chinese history has been written by men, at least until very recently. Take, for example, the woman who actually ruled China from about 1860 to her death in 1908, the Empress Dowager. In part because she was a woman, she has a terrible historical reputation.

I remember-- you may remember-- I used to have a picture of her, a wonderful portrait of the Empress Dowager outside of my office in University Hall when I was dean of the faculty at Harvard. And the Chinese ambassador once came and looked at this picture and said, why do you have this picture of this
terrible woman outside of your office? And I said to him, with all due respect, Mr. Ambassador, if it weren't for her, you might not have a country. She kept the county together so that others--

That actually brings us to really important point, that we use the name of the dynasty also to refer to the territory, not just the time period, but also the territorial extent. The time period has a beginning and end, but the territory waxes and wanes. That we can, as you'll see here on these maps, during the course of the Tang Dynasty, there's tremendous differences in the extent of control.

A dynasty is also a government. So China is a big place. How do they impose government over that territory of that size?

Well, there isn't a single dynasty that came to power by elections, at least so far. Dynasties conquer or fight their way to power, and they maintain their role, in part, by military force. That is inevitable, virtually for any state. They maintain their power also through bureaucracy and a regularized system of governance.

They maintain it through this vast and differentiated empire also by common patterns of thought, at least among the elite; by ideology, for lack of a better word.

By Confucian and other schools of thought that are part of the official--

Well, it's part of the official education.

--part of the official education through the examination system, which chooses the best and the brightest men of the realm to serve the court on the basis of shared learning and the Chinese classics, on the assumption that, if you memorize study and can make eloquent sense of the classics of civilization, you will therefore be a better person and better able to govern. It's a great way of ruling a vast empire on the cheap.

One aspect of this is that there's a field administration, the provinces, prefectures, and counties, but that the government, then, is appointing those leading officials to those levels. It's much More like the old French system, where it's centralized appointment rather than local selection, local appointment.

That's correct. Of course.

Chinese history has been divided up until the 20th century when the Western calendar is sometimes adopted. But it's been divided up into dynasties. But there are other ways of dividing up historical past, other kinds of periodization. We could talk about archaeology, for example, which looks at the materials used to make tools, Stone Age, Bronze Age, Iron Age.

And you could look at different Western ways of organizing time for China and for the rest of the world. Marx's idea of moving from a feudal to a capitalist to a socialist society.

We've talked about times in terms of dynasties. Dynasties tend to be thought of as cyclical--they have beginnings, middles, and ends, and then they repeat--versus a notion of progressive change, that every period is going to be an advance on the earlier period. Where I think we end up in this course is thinking about time not so much as cyclical or progressive as cumulative and advancing gradually, building things up and changing over time.

We could also speak in Chinese history about social time. That is, the time that people actually live their lives in a day-to-day basis. And that does seem to be very cyclical. The agricultural year is very much a solar year, and it's divided into 24 periods, and each has 15 days.

Their calendar is a lunar calendar, where you have 12 moons or 12 months, and they each have x number of days or 29 and a half days each. And so you have some 29 days, some 30 days. To make it work, you have
to add in an extra month every seven years to bring the lunar calendar back into sync with the solar calendar. Solar calendar is essential for agriculture.

The other thing that-- and this goes back to at least as far back as writing goes, that is at least 1200 BCE-- is something called the Sexagenary Cycle. You can see them on the screen now. One set of 12, one set of 10, so if you match them, you get a cycle of 60 before it repeats. And that cycle of 60, sometimes called the Jiazi, the name for the first of the 60 sets, is a very important cycle. It has been for as long as we know in Chinese history.

Confucius said, when I was 50, I could understand the will of heaven. [SPEAKING CHINESE: Wushi er zhi tianming]. And at 60, [SPEAKING CHINESE: Liushi er ershun]. My ear would be, as it has been translated, an obedient vehicle for the reception of truth.

And when you are 60, there's a good reason, because the cycle only comes around every 60 years. And when you are 60, when you have your 60th birthday, it is a time of the greatest celebration. You're supposed to have accomplished much of what you can accomplish, and it isn't that the rest is just gravy, but you are at ease.
Section 2: Space

1. SPACE AND PLACE

We've been talking about time and some general conceptions of time. Let's talk about space--

Mm-hm.

--and the space in place, so to speak. One of the things we've developed for this course is something called ChinaX Map, which those participating in the course will be able to use, will be able to see it online as you can see it here. And we're going to offer you a very brief tutorial to it.

Ah, right.

The maps that we use in the course can be found there, can be used, and you can overlay them, one with the others. It's through using what's called geographic information system technology in a very new way. This is actually the first time that this has been done in any course, as far as I know. It's going to be very exciting.

We're actually going to leave you from our conversation at this moment so we can give you sort of a series of maps and discussions about the landscape of China, and the rivers, the plains and plateaus, the physiographic differences between North and South, the cropping patterns, the dry north versus the wet south, but also with the man-made landscape. And I know one of the things that you said to me was, you wanted to be sure that people learned the provinces of modern China.

Well, this is something that we do in every class that we've taught. We say that there are no prerequisites in this class. There actually is one. You have to know where China is. And, indeed, you need to know the different parts of China--

Right.

--to memorize-- because you have to do it at some point-- the names of the provinces and the major cities. We force our students in the classroom to know all of the provinces, all the major cities, and to be able to draw in the river systems, because it matters.

It does matter.

These are different places. Just as if you're going to study American history, and you have no idea where the Mississippi River is, or where--

No, we need to pay attention, too, to the routes that, sort of, connect China overland through central Asia, the Silk Roads--

Right.

--but also the great sea routes that connect China and Japan, Korea, Southeast Asia to India, as well. In any case, we have a nifty way of learning the names of provinces that combines--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

Do you have another song?
I don't have a song, but I have-- well, you'll see. It involves knowing the fact that the Chinese name for mountain, river, and lake--

Yeah, that's right.

--and, of course, the four directions, north, east, south, and west in Chinese.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

Once you know them, you'll get most of the provinces. And then you'll get some other ones. Knowing a few Chinese words, to know that Yunnan--

Right.

--means South of the Clouds. It's so far south, it's south of the clouds.

Right.

Xizang as Western Storehouse.

Western storehouse.

Western storehouse

Sure.

These names make a lot more sense in Chinese than Connecticut, as in English, although it means long river, if I recall, in Pequot.

Well, in Beijing, for example, as we use all the time now, actually it simply means Northern Capital.

Yes.

You'll see this in a moment. And after that, we'll come back and we'll resume our discussion with the last big topic we want to talk about, which is identity.

2. USING CHINAX MAP

We've developed, for ChinaX, the ChinaX map on WorldMap platform at Harvard. You notice down in the lower left, you have base maps. Now there are different kinds of base maps. And depending where you are in the world, you'll be able to see some of them, but perhaps not all of them.

Now let's begin with what we're looking at now as being aerial, which is a satellite. But let's go down to Google Terrain. And you'll see a very different kind of map. The great thing about this is that you can zoom in. So if you hold down the Shift key, even smaller square than that, you'll see you can get a really, really refined view.
There are other base maps as well. For example, we could go to a hybrid. So here you have a satellite picture, about the same area, but with the roads showing as well. Play around and decide which base maps are best for you, depending on what you're interested in.

Now you've already seen that we can zoom in and zoom out. But we can also turn layers on and off. Let's look now at the layers we have. Let's change first back to our Bing Aerial base map, which won't have any place names or roads or borders on it. And let's put in now a boundary. Let's look at the Song Dynasty in 1050 with the Song, Liao and Xixia, two foreign states. And if we click that on, we've gotten that.

Now that's far too dark for us. We want to make it transparent. So now what I'm going to do is I'm going to go to that layer, the 1050 Song, Liao, Xixia, and I'm going to right click. And I'm going to Layer Properties. And when I go to Layer Properties, then I'm going to go to Display. And when I have Display on, you'll see something called Opacity. Opacity means transparency. And I can bring that down, let's say 3/4 of the way, and now leave it like that. And then you see I've made it somewhat transparent.

We could add other layers as well, turning them on and off as we wish. Let's turn this off for the moment and go to, for example, Provinces in 1997. There you see them coming right on.

There are other things we can do as well. You'll notice that on the bar above the map, we have things called Add Layers-- a choice of some 1,200 layers at the moment that pertains to this area of the world. So for example, we could say we want Chinese roads and highways in 2009. And we could add that by clicking on them. And now go to the bottom of this window and hit Add Selected Layers. You'll see the selected layers appear right on your screen. And now we're seeing the highways in 2009 laid over the provincial boundaries.

3. PHYSICAL GEOGRAPHY

Let's talk now about the physical geography of China, the lay of the land, how the land mass came to be formed in the first place. And that was with the uplift of the Tibetan Plateau.

The short story, which you see unfolding here, is what's now the Indian subcontinent, which was shaped something like a diamond, crashed into the Eurasian land mass, making the Tibetan Plateau rise up. And that still is going on today. The mountains are still rising. The result is that in, terms of Chinese territory today, Tibet and the Tarim Basin are these fairly arid regions, although Tibet has the advantage of being very, very high but getting these snow melts off the Himalayas, a very different sort of the landscape from China proper.

By China proper, we're looking to the East. We're looking to the major provinces but also where the majority of the population lives, and how should we understand that landscape. Thanks to the fact that the Tibetan Plateau rose, all the rivers in China flow east. And there are three very important rivers in Chinese history.

Beginning in the North, the Yellow River. And as you see on the next map, the courses of the Yellow River change with time. It's been called at points China's sorrow, that the flooding of the Yellow River has been devastating for the thickly populated North China Plain.

The second river goes through the middle of the country, West to East, is the Yangzi River. Draining from Sichuan, the Sichuan Basin in the West, through the Middle Yangzi, down to the rich and riverine Lower Yangzi Region.
And South, emptying into Guangzhou, Canton, and Hong Kong is the Pearl River, the third river. There are other rivers to keep in mind. There are many, many other rivers that will come up eventually. There's the Fen River in the northwest and then Huai River in the east, between the Yellow River and the Yangzi.

Next, note that China is composed of a collection of mountain ranges or mountainous zones and plains and plateaus. The most important of these plains is the North China Plain, the broad, flat expense of North China. It came into being over time, largely drainage from the West, from the loess, or the dust-blown soil through which the Yellow River flows and which gives the Yellow River its distinctive color.

And gradually, the area of the North China Plain, which was once shallow sea bed, silted up and filled up, and population moved in. The Sichuan Basin, the upper reaches of the Yangzi River, the Southeast or the Lower Yangzi River, the richest area in all of China, the Middle Yangzi, one of the great farming areas, and then the far South and the plateau in the Southwest of China.

now the Yangzi River, if you look carefully again, you'll see that in the middle of the Yangzi River are series of great lakes. And these great lakes act as catchment basins for seasonal floods. We can see this here with these pictures of the difference in the size of these lakes, even today, as taken by satellite in different seasons.

Now these plains and plateaus are also, not surprisingly, where the population is centered. And that's why when I draw this line from the Northeast to the Southwest on the map, 90% of the Chinese population lives to the east of that line. Now we can look at this population spread, and you can see that it's clustered, that it's denser in some areas than others.

The great G. William Skinner, a great scholar of regional analysis in Chinese history, proposed that China proper is made up of nine macroregions. That is, regions with cores, centered around where rivers come together, and peripheries, which usually are up in the more mountainous zones. It's sort of a tic-tac-toe board, if you will. But nine macroregions compose China.

There is, if you look, if you compare his map, for example, with the language map, you'll see that there's a certain amount of correspondence between the two. So macroregions is one of the ways of differentiating Chinese space.

There's another very important distinction which you should be aware of, and this is the distinction between North and South. This is not just a conceptual distinction. This has a real physical basis. If you draw a line between Qinling Mountains in the West down to the mouth of the Huai River in the East, we can start to differentiate all sorts of things between North and South.

The climate is different. Colder, drier in the North, wetter, warmer in the South. And here, for this, we should take note of the role of the monsoon. These yearly cycle-- for six months, the wind blowing one way to the North, six months, wind blowing to the South, bringing rain and wetness with it. Temperatures differ between North and South.

Cropping patterns differ as well. The North is dry land farming. The South is wetland farming. Today that means the North is wheat, and the South is rice. And if we take China today, in doing a map showing what kinds of crops people are farming, you'll see it corresponds very, very closely to our North South dividing line.

4. CLIMATE
We've just been talking about precipitation, which is one of the most important aspects of the climate. The dry north grows wheat, the warm and wet south grows rice. But let's go on now and consider historical climate change.

The Chinese historical record contains an enormous amount of information from which we can infer periods of relative warmth and relative cold. And here are the results of the most extensive research yet done on climate change through China's history. And you'll see that there are periods lasting sometimes several hundred years of relative warmth, and periods when things get colder, perhaps by one or two degrees Celsius, but that's enough to have some real consequences.

What are those consequences? Here, as we look at fields in the northern Loess region with that fine yellow dirt that's blown in from the Gobi Desert, you can imagine that a colder winter, or a longer winter, means the growing season is shorter. And if the growing season is shorter, farmers may not bring in their crops.

We go to the south, the wet rice growing region, we might see a very different thing. Here, shorter growing season. Let's say cold might have consequences, but not necessarily bad consequences. One hypothesis is that colder temperatures in the south made it possible for farmers to grow, not only rice, but also a crop of winter wheat, which greatly increased their productivity and, we assume, their wealth.

Now, there's one last final consideration. Here you see the capital, the modern capital of Beijing. And as we look here, you'll see that main road leading to the northwest goes through the passes, and goes out into the steppe into the Gobi Desert into Mongolia. The pastoral people's herds depended upon grasslands. Changes in climate meant changes in the availability of food for their flocks and their horses. And it's been posited that changes-- a cooling climate, for example-- would be precisely what would push the nomads down towards the south, and, thus, trying to come in and raid the North China Plain.

We still lack the kinds of particular exact evidence that would allow us to make these claims, but the general idea is worth considering. And the fact that climate changes historically is something we should keep in mind.

5. PEOPLE AND GEOGRAPHY

Agriculture reminds us that the landscape is in no small part man made. Mountains are difficult to move, but rivers can be diked. Dams can be built. Reservoirs can be built. And things like rice farming require adequate irrigation water systems from very early on in Chinese history. We have a focus on building canals, but for irrigation and for the transport of goods. The landscape also has natural transportation corridors, connecting the major population centers together, going between the mountains.

We can get more or less where a population will be centered, given the landscape. And we can see if we look at these highway routes from the Ming and Qing dynasties that the modern railway system and the old highways are very closely related.

But the population that the government registered and taxed did change over time. We should not think that China with its population going from the first registration with around 60 million people to contemporary China with 1.3 billion that the registered population stayed constant in its geographic distribution.

Here I'm going to show you formats from the Han, the Tang, and the Song, and the Ming, which illustrate the movement of population. There are exceptions. There are a couple major routes that are not really about
linking population centers in the sense that they are in China proper. But they're linking very distant population centers, or centers of wealth.

And one is the Silk Road, which goes from the Wei River Valley, where Chang'an, the capital of the Han and the Tang dynasties was located, out through the west, through the Tarim Basin, across the mountains, into central Asia. The second set of routes is the sea routes, sea routes connecting China directly Japan and sea routes connecting China to Southeast Asia and South Asia. This the routes that Chinese sailed abroad in and Arab traders very often came to China along.

Notice also that the sea routes fit very well with the Southeastern coast. The reason for that is all the harbors along the southeast. China also has two great man-made features. One, perhaps the best known, is the Great Wall. Although, it's not clear that it ever really was an effective border. It was certainly meant to be a border between the central states and the tribal peoples.

We see walls being built very early in Chinese history, in the third, fourth century BC, being revived at various points, but always being part of consciousness about the north and where the northern border was, even when it wasn't in fact the real border. The other great feat of engineering in China is the Grand Canal from 589 AD, which connected the capital in the north with the rice growing areas of the southeast.

Now Bill asked me to talk with you about and show you how you could figure out the names of provinces. And so that's what we're going to do now. So we have the four cardinal directions, north, east, south, and west-- bei, dong, nan, and xi.

So if you remember those, and now let's turn to the physical features-- the hu, the lakes; the he, the river, the Yellow River; the jiang, which is the Yangzi River; the shan, which means mountain. If you combine the four directions with the terms for physical features, then you'll see that Shandong, the province, means east of the mountain.

So take a look at this and see if you can figure out the rest for yourself. Just in case you couldn't, we'll go over the rest of them. But also point out that there are parts of China which this doesn't fit at all. And you still are going to have to at some point learn those province names. Those are particularly important for looking at China today.

Provinces don't appear really in the form that we now think of them as also having administrations until rather later in Chinese history around, I'd say, the beginning native proto-provinces is the 10th, 11th century. But they're fully part of the organization of Chinese space today. We'll later on in the course we'll have a chance to talk about urbanization cities and other issues. But let's turn now to the last of our larger themes for this sort of getting a big picture of Chinese history, the issue of identity.
Section 3: Identity

1. ETHNICITY

We're back to talk about identity, because it seems to me that this is also part of Chinese history. This term, ethnicity, is this an appropriate—should we speak of the Chinese as an ethnic group? Ethnicity is a modern term, many people would argue. It's associated with ideas of nation states and citizens, and that people are ethnically all of the same kind, and thus they can have a nation state. Does this fit China?

Well, it depends on what you mean by China. But if you mean the People's Republic of China today, by official categories, you can be a Tibetan, a Uyghur. You can be a Han Chinese. You could be a Miao. You could be from Taiwan, Taiwanese. And you are, according to the People's Republic, you are all zhongguoren, all citizens of the People's Republic of China. That's an official definition. You're all Chinese in the sense of being citizens of the PRC.

More complicated is that, of course, more than 90% are what have officially been called Han Chinese. That is to say, almost defined as being not national minority, as not minority. Because the differences between so-called Han Chinese—these are all, in political terms, 20th century categories.

In terms of numbers, the population of the People's Republic is now 1.3 billion.

Right. 1.34.

1.34 billion. 1.2 billion are Han Chinese?

About right. But are defined as Han Chinese, but as you know, [xiabing] a native of Shandong, is not exactly the same as a native of parts of Guangdong. There's a lot of mobility around the country, but there's enormous differentiation in diversity, also in local dialect, between those whom we lump together as Han Chinese.

One of the remarkable feats of the early People's Republic was to follow the Soviet model in identifying the so-called national minorities. Stalin had done so in the Soviet Union. Mao Zedong believed the need to do so in China. And within a matter of months, I believe it was in 1952—our colleague at Stanford, Tom Mullaney, has researched this very, very well—56 national minorities were identified, and they remain 56 to this day. Some people, as these ethnographers and sociologists were trying to do this in Yunnan Province, trying to figure out what these were. The national minorities or the local peoples didn't know. Is it a positive or a negative thing to be a national minority? And that's still a question that one might ask.

So it was a very one-time—and now one time fits all—approach to defining ethnicity. It's much more complicated than that. If you look back and think of the Taiping Rebellion, think of the Hakka, the Kejia ren in the 19th century, as opposed to what we would today call Han Chinese who call themselves the "Bendiren," the locals.

The locals.

The locals versus the guests. That was one way of differentiating ethnicity.

So I want to push that back 2,500 years ago to the time of Confucius, let's say. Would the appearance this notion of the zhongguo, not in its modern meaning of China, but in this idea of the central states, basically the states located in the North China Plain who define themselves as having a common civilization. And what was interesting about that was that they were states, and they saw themselves as surrounded on the periphery by tribes, tribal peoples. And started to refer to them as the yidi.
So you get this notion of a bifurcation between the zhongguo, the central states, the central country-- and eventually when it becomes one state-- and tribal peoples, yidi, who are not civilized, who didn't live sedentary lives.

And in some ways it strikes me that the modern version of the Han Chinese versus the minority peoples is a little bit like that. The Han Chinese, predominant group, but these minorities on the periphery, where they tend to be, are seen as different but also threatening.

That's a very interesting point of view. It's not one that I think the Chinese government today would agree with, but if you look at how difficult the question of identity can become-- if we are all zhongguo ren, according to Beijing, within the realm of China including, now, Hong Kong, and from Beijing's point of view, Taiwan-- that's a complicated approach to identity which assumes that ethnicity and nationality, really, at the end of the day, go closely together. And that's why, for example, some in Taiwan have pushed back on this conception of Chinese identity, this ethnic conception.

So over time, this distinction between the tribal peoples, the yidi, and the zhongguo, the central states and the people of the central states, gets brought back again and again and again. I have a wonderful passage here from a great statesman of the late 12th, early 13th century, a man named Ye Shi where he talks about exactly this distinction. What is it that makes the zhongguo, the zhongguo, and the yidi, the yidi? And I thought we'd invite the participants to read it for themselves and make some comments on what they think it's about.

That's an excellent idea.

2. LANGUAGE

So one of the more interesting things of this passage is the assumption that with culture and civilization of China, as it were, of the Central States comes morality. We would put this in 20th or 21st century terms as not just having hard power as an empire, but having the soft power of civilization. You have values that others want to share or should want--

Should want to share.

--to share, even if they're too ignorant to understand that this is the opportunity of a lifetime to learn from your values.

But I mean what this does, to be frank, it seems to me, put these people who claim to represent the Zhongguo of the Central Country in a position of denying any kind of equality to the people they see around them.

It's true, and yet society is not organized on the basis of equality throughout all of Chinese history. It is organized on the basis of hierarchy, of proper behavior according to your status, and the status of those outside the realm was by definition lower.

So Ye Shi says what we can share, as a people, as our identity, is some devotion and commitment to moral behavior and to maintaining certain values. I'm not so sure that he's right. But I do think there is something that, despite it being a hierarchical view of the world, can be shared by everybody, although better at the top than at the bottom, perhaps. And that's language.

If we look at this language map. And here you can see the map right here. There is no one Chinese language so to speak, or at least the languages spoken in this place are so diverse that they're not mutually intelligible. In what sense is language the basis for unity?
Well, in very modern times, that is 20th, 21st century time, part of that unity is in fact in the spoken language, for the first time outside of officialdom a national language or guoyu. We think of this today as Mandarin, as automatic, as if this is the only possible choice. And it is in fact an extension of official language as it were, Mandarin language, guanyu of the late Qing.

But of course until that time, until modern times, there hasn't been a shared national spoken language. But there has been a shared national written language. And nothing is more essential for the continuity of Chinese civilization than by the fact that if you are illiterate today, you can at least read the characters, even if you don't understand all the text of a volume written 2,000 years ago.

And even if you, let's say, come from Canton (Guangzhou) and you only speak Cantonese-- you come from Beijing and only speaking beijinghua-- Northern Mandarin, you can still read the same thing text.

You can read exactly the same. Language and culture, language and politics, have been intimately connected throughout all of Chinese history. This remains true into the 20th century, where there are efforts in order to remake or to make a new China to have at least in part a new language, to have the written language as written people speak it, not in classical Chinese, but in vernacular Chinese, in what's called plain speech, baihua.

This is the same thing that people were arguing at the 8th century and the 15th century, again and again, the belief that if how people write is a sign of what kind of person they are, but also if you could change the way people write and what they write about, you're changing them.

Right, but if you were to look at the same classical Chinese and saying in baihua, in vernacular Chinese, they mean exactly the same thing. They're different characters. Which one to you, in the audience, which one to you is easier to read?

Well the fact is, if you're illiterate, if you don't know characters, they're both mutually incomprehensible. So this is in fact a debate among the elite, among the literate, as to how to communicate to the masses and with each other. All right, so Peter, how did this start? How did Chinese become Chinese as a language, Chinese script.

Chinese script. The problem in answering that question is that the Chinese script appears all at once in what might be called a fully developed language systems in 1200 BC. And we find it in one place, on the oracle bones, which the Shang kings used for divination. Well, shall I tell you the whole story?

Sure.

Yeah, I will.

3. WRITTEN LANGUAGE

PETER K. BOL: How did language begin? Well, a common definition of language goes something like this, common definition of written language. The norm of writing is phonemic, to symbolize all the sounds of the language and none other. And that's sort of a typical definition.

But is it really the norm? We look around the world and say, where was writing invented? Well, we have Mesopotamia cuneiform, Egypt which was hieroglyphic, Mayan civilization much later which was hieroglyphic, and China which was also hieroglyphic.

So, originally, writing did not represent sounds, the case of hieroglyphics. Writing represented things. It was a way of representing the world. Chinese today is the only survivor of all those early hieroglyphic languages.
Writing came to symbolize sounds in only one place— in Mediterranean civilization. The way it happened apparently was this— that Egyptian hieroglyphs became alphabetic when they began to, so to speak, take a picture of a bear and use it to represent the sound of B. From Egyptian and we get Hebrew, Arabic, Davangari, and Phoenician. And from Phoenician we get Greek and Roman.

China does not alphabetize. Why does this matter? Now, I think it matters because as you'll be seeing later, very early on, there's the idea that there should be one king over all the peoples of the world.

And in some ways, this notion of a hieroglyphic writing made that true. One writing system could be shared by everybody, precisely because it wasn't entirely based on spoken language. Now, it's going to be more complicated than that, as I'll show you in a moment.

It was also the case historically that this writing system could be shared by people who spoke different languages— Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese, and Korean and Japanese were grammatically different— if the Chinese writing system could be adopted. Bill Kirby's already mentioned that, under the influence of Western nationalism, there's a desire to make writing the equal of language and have everyone share the same writing, teach everyone writing. But that to do that, they realized they'd also have to teach everybody the same language, the same spoken language. And that has never proved entirely possible for the majority of the population. And, in fact, in Taiwan there have been voices, pro-independence voices that have argued that it would be a very good idea to get rid of Chinese altogether and use the Roman alphabet to symbolize spoken Taiwanese, precisely in order to cut the bonds to China, to cut the bonds that the written language gives.

Now, let me say something with illustrations now about the logic of the Chinese writing system. And you'll see, at this point, that it actually is more complicated than being a hieroglyphic. Take, for example, the notion of a tree here on your left in the earliest form and, on the right, in the modern form, or the sun. Both of these are arguably representations of things.

But how would you say east? How could you represent a concept like the east? Well, in fact, you don't. You take two different characters, and you put them together— in this case, the sun rising through trees. And now you've created the word for the east.

How about to see, the act of seeing with your eyes? Well, the solution to that was to have a picture of the eye, a hieroglyphic, on top of legs. So an eye on legs was to represent to see.

Now, Chinese is marked by a very, very large number of homophones— that is, things that sound the same, are pronounced the same. There are only about 400 distinct sounds in modern Chinese, in modern Mandarin. And it seems that this must've been true or something similar to this must've been true when Chinese writing first appeared because we see that people have already in the very first writings we have, in the very first texts that they use characters for their sound value to represent a word that has the same sound value.

Let me give you an example. On the left, you see the early hieroglyph for an elephant. You can see the elephant's ear there well enough.

And on the right, you see, at the top, that same word in modern writing, pronounced "xiang," which is used to mean elephant and to mean ivory. Below that, you see that same word, that same character with the addition of a element on the left called the man radical, which means portrait, which is also pronounced xiang. In other words, xiang elephant, xiang portrait are homophones. And so they use the character that was originally used to represent elephant also to represent this particular homophone.
Let me give you a more complicated example. On the left, you see the ancient graph for a fur pelt. Contemporary version of this would be on the right, top right-- pronounced "qiu." In modern Chinese, it means to seek, no particular relationship to a fur pelt.

But the sound value qiu, if you combine that with another symbol on the left, another graph-- jade, in this case, qiu-- you'd have a jade ball. If you put the character for clothing underneath it, you have a fur robe. That does have a connection to a fur pelt. And if you put the character for insect to the left of it to make a new character, also pronounced "qiu," you get the name of an insect.

Now, all these developments have already taken place when writing appears in 1200 BC. We simply do not know how Chinese writing evolved. It is possible that it was invented on the spot and put together, right?

There are other cases where written language get invented over in a very short period of time. In any case, we have no history of its evolution at all. And this is the writing that spread eventually to China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, but interestingly not to the tribal peoples of the West and the North who made a point of making sure that their written languages-- which they had to invent much later and sort of invent it on demand-- that their written languages would be distinct from Chinese in order to maintain their own separate identity. And you see this here in images of the Khitan and the Jurchen script, which comes from the 11th and 12th century AD.

So a common writing goes with a common culture, becomes something that provides continuity over time, sharable by many peoples speaking many languages. And that's why I think that, in fact, writing is of fundamental importance to Chinese identity and has been ever since it was first invented.
Section 4: China’s History Mapped

We've talked about important ways of dividing up time and thinking about history, space, the physical territory that China has occupied and has created, and about this issue of identity. What do we want the participants to do next?

We'd want them to start, really, with two discussions. We begin with this map of China over the last 3,000 years. Watch it and stop it. And what we want you to do is, simply based on what you see, tell us three big conclusions that you come to about Chinese history.