

## DAILY LIFE IN ANCIENT CHINA

In this volume, Mu-Chou Poo offers a new overview of daily life in ancient China. Synthesizing a range of textual and archaeological materials, he brings a thematic approach to the topic that enables a multifaceted understanding of the ideological, economical, legal, social, and emotional aspects of life in ancient China. The volume focuses on the Han period and examines key topics such as government organization and elite ideology, urban and country life, practical technology, leisure and festivity, and death and burial customs. Written in clear and engaging prose, this volume serves as a useful introduction to the culture and society of ancient China. It also enables students to better understand the construction of history and to reflect critically on the nature of historical writing.

Mu-Chou Poo is Chair Professor of History at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. His research interests include society and religion in ancient Egypt and China and comparative ancient history. He is the author or editor of five books in English, most recently *Old Society, New Belief: Religious Transformation of China and Rome, ca. 1st–6th Centuries*.



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## PREFACE

This book was written at the invitation of Cambridge University Press, for which I am very grateful. It gave me an opportunity to venture into areas of Chinese history that I had been interested in but had never really had the chance to explore deeply enough to form any perspective. I have of course read a number of books on daily life in various cultures and histories since my school years, and have always been interested in looking at history from a bottom-up angle. But when the time came to write this book, the question that immediately came to mind was not how to write it, but why to write it. I have attempted to answer this in the Introduction. As to how to write it, indeed I had so many samples to consult and emulate that it should not have been a problem. For the period that I was going to write about, there are abundant literature as well as archaeological sources to support an account of the daily activities of the people of early imperial China: food, drink, dress, house, entertainment, family life, education, social engagement, festivities, transportation, agriculture, medicine, technology, etc. Many of these were written by earlier scholars, including Michael Loewe, whose *Everyday Life in Early Imperial China during the Han Period, 202 BC–AD 220* remains the most important work on this subject in the English language. As I try to suggest in the Introduction, the present volume is not meant to repeat or replace Loewe's book. What I wish to do is to provide readers with a historical framework that could allow them to appreciate the general conditions that people had experienced in their daily lives. In other words, I tried to make sense of the daily experience of the people of that bygone time by providing a historical framework: why their life evolved the way it did, and what structural sources influenced it.

Some reflections on the historian's craft arose after I had finished the manuscript. Historians who are eager to understand and reconstruct the past – and, therefore, produce “historical knowledge” as opposed to mere “historical fact” – can usually do two things: (1) select sufficient facts to describe an event according to one avenue of thought – of human nature, of political or economic necessity, or of “the law of history,” and thus create meaningful “historical knowledge” through which facts can be understood in a logical fashion; and (2) include as many facts as possible in the description of an event, hoping that the more we know about them, the clearer the picture of the

event will be. The two are not mutually exclusive, but there might be certain differences as to whether the historian constructed the event with explicit lines of interpretation.

There are, moreover, two aspects to the studying and writing of history: the private and public. A person may read history in private moments and find personal satisfaction or revelation. When the reader later wishes to make use of historical knowledge, however, it may or may not be a private act, since historical knowledge is often the motivating factor behind human actions, private or collective. Similarly, the writing of history, though it may be defined as a private act, is actually also a public act, as historical works are expected to be published and read by the public. As a creator of historical knowledge, the historian should ideally abide by the rule that he or she is creating historical knowledge based on facts, not fabrication, even though it is entirely possible that a historian can get every fact right but write a history that is fictitious. In reality, of course, there is probably no absolute, objective, historical knowledge, since all historical knowledge derived from facts and interpretations is created by the historian, who is bound to have certain personal biases. Even simple lists of events, such as the chronicles of the emperors in traditional Chinese historiography, were deliberate selections of facts, and certainly not all the facts were known to the historian. As is often the case, a historian with ideological missions may use his or her craft to manipulate the facts to create a historical memory that fits a specific purpose. The historian, however, might not be responsible for how the reader uses the historical knowledge provided.

What is more dangerous is the claim that the historian had told the whole or the true story. We are constantly reminded of that ironic comment, not without a certain grain of truth: in history everything except dates, places, and names is false; in novels everything except dates, places, and names is true. Most historians would like to steer away from being novelists, the reason being that historians consider their work to be of a special nature; that is, historical works are supposed to record past events as closely as possible to what really had happened in history. The function of historical works is not, primarily, for entertainment (though that may be one of the reasons), or for philosophizing (though many historians may secretly hope that their magnum opus would have that quality), but to provide responsible accounts (which are not necessarily equal to “true accounts”) of our past and to construct a reliable foundation for our whole existence. Historical works, in our view, provide human society with a “relatively reliable memory” that may allow society to navigate through a myriad of “facts,” true and fabricated, that float in the collective memory of society, and find a better way to the future. Most importantly, such relatively reliable memories could and should be responsibly examined and corrected by the community of historians so that individual prejudice may be reduced to a minimum. But if historians do

not try to find out what really happened in history to the best of their ability, and allow fellow historians to cross-check the result, then they may as well claim to be novelists.

Rereading the pages of this volume, certain shortcomings in the interpretation and organization of the source materials become obvious to me. While dissatisfied with the limited amount of historical evidence at one's disposal, simultaneously, one also regrets one's inability to do justice to the evidence that is available. The reader is, therefore, the sole judge of the work if he or she is generous enough to spend time reading through the pages.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the support of many colleagues, among whom Professors Robin Yates, Ping-chen Hsiung, and Lothar von Falkenhausen had contributed the most by making critical comments and suggestions on the manuscript. The anonymous reviewers also provided some very useful comments and suggestions, which are highly appreciated. Any mistakes and misinterpretations are of course my responsibility.

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## WEIGHTS AND MEASURES

## Equivalents

Length	1 cun		23.1 mm
	1 chi	10 cun	23.1 cm
	1 bu	6 chi	1.38 m
	1 zhang	10 chi	2.31 m
	1 li		0.415 km
Capacity	1 ge		19.968 cc
	1 sheng	10 ge	199.687 cc
	1 dou	10 sheng	1.996 L
	1 shi (also 1 hu)	10 dou	19.968 L
Weight	1 shu		0.64 g
	1 liang	24 shu	15.36 g
	1 jin	16 liang	245 g
	1 jün	30 jin	7.37 kg
	1 shi	4 jün	29.5 kg
Area	1 qing	100 mou	11.39 English acres

The chart follows Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe, eds., *Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. xxxviii.

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## JOURNALS AND ABBREVIATIONS

<i>AEPHE</i>	<i>Annuaire de l'Ecole pratique des Hautes Etudes</i>
<i>AM</i>	<i>Asia Major</i>
<i>BIHP</i>	<i>Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishiyuyan yanjiusuo jikan</i> 中央研究院歷史語言研究所集刊
<i>BMFEA</i>	<i>Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities</i>
<i>CEA</i>	<i>Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie</i>
<i>Dalu zazhi</i>	大陸雜誌
<i>EC</i>	<i>Early China</i>
<i>Hanxue yanjiu</i>	漢學研究
<i>Huanan shifan</i>	<i>Huanan shifan daxue xuebao (Ziran kexueban)</i> 華南 師範大學學報 (自然科學版)
<i>JAH</i>	<i>Journal of Asian History</i>
<i>JESHO</i>	<i>Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient</i>
<i>Jianbo yanjiu yicong</i>	簡帛研究譯叢
<i>Jianghan kaogu</i>	江漢考古
<i>Jiuzhou xuelin</i>	九州學林
<i>Kaogu tongxun</i>	考古通訊
<i>Kaogu xuebao</i>	考古學報
<i>Kaogu yu wenwu</i>	考古與文物
<i>KG</i>	<i>Kaogu</i> 考古
<i>Late Imperial China</i>	
<i>Lishi yanjiu</i>	歷史研究
<i>Nature</i>	
<i>Nongye kaogu</i>	農業考古
<i>Numen</i>	
<i>Qilu xuekan</i>	齊魯學刊
<i>Qinghua daxue</i>	<i>Qinghua daxue xuebao (Zhexue shehuikexue ban)</i> 清 華大學學報(哲學社會科學版)
<i>Shixue yuekan</i>	史學月刊
<i>Shoudu shifan</i>	<i>Shoudu shifandaxue xuebao (Shehui kexueban)</i> 首都 師範大學學報(社會科學版)
<i>Sichuan daxue</i>	<i>Sichuan daxue xuebao</i> 四川大學學報

xviii JOURNALS AND ABBREVIATIONS

<i>TP</i>	<i>T'oung Pao</i>
<i>TR</i>	<i>Taoist Resources</i>
<i>Wenshizhe</i>	文史哲
<i>WW</i>	<i>Wen Wu</i> 文物
<i>Yanyeshi yanjiu</i>	鹽業史研究
<i>Zhengzhou daxue</i>	<i>Zhengzhou daxue xuebao (Zhexue shehuikexue ban)</i> 鄭州大學學報 (哲學社會科學版)
<i>Zhongguo dianji yu wenhua</i>	中國典籍與文化
<i>Zhongguo jingjishi yanjiu</i>	中國經濟史研究
<i>Zhongguo nongshi</i>	中國農史
<i>Zhongguo shehui jingjishi yanjiu</i>	中國社會經濟史研究
<i>Zhongguoshi yanjiu</i>	中國史研究
<i>Zhonghua wenshi luncong</i>	中華文史論叢
<i>Zhongyuan wenwu</i>	中原文物
<i>Zhongzhou xuekan</i>	中州學刊