

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-64029-9 - China and Historical Capitalism: Genealogies of Sinological Knowledge

Edited by Timothy Brook and Gregory Blue

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## China and Historical Capitalism

Only recently has it been recognized in the West that the historical experience of the world has been as much the history of China as of the West. The primary subject of this book is the historical relationship that has arisen between the concept of capitalism and the idea of China. The concept of capitalism was formulated by European intellectuals to identify the social formation in which they found themselves. Portraying it either as an ideal system or as its necessary prelude, they regarded capitalism as unique to Europe and as an organic outgrowth of Western civilization. In the process, they rejected China as a model of civilization, considering it merely despotic, feudal, or stagnant. This Eurocentric judgement has hung over all subsequent thinking about China, even influencing Chinese perceptions of their own history. The aim of this collaborative project is to examine how the experience of capitalism as a European social formation and as a world-system has shaped knowledge of China. In addition the volume aims to establish new foundations on which a theory of Chinese society might be built, in order to perceive and understand Chinese development in less Eurocentric terms.

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In honor and memory of  
**Joseph Needham**  
1900–1995

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## Preface

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This book has had its own long and complex history. The original idea of addressing the formation of European and Chinese interpretations of China in the light of the development of European capitalism we owe to Joseph Needham, who died in 1995 at the age of ninety-four. Needham stood out among Western scholars who have taken China seriously in the sense of using Chinese history to question assumptions about European and world history. He committed his work on the history of Chinese science and technology to the task of recognizing China's contributions to world scientific knowledge and scientific culture. Wanting to understand why Chinese science and technology had been comparatively advanced, only to be eclipsed by "modern" science in Europe after the sixteenth century, he set himself the task of historically reconstructing the Chinese scientific and technical traditions. During the Second World War he formulated his problematic in terms of the negative question of "why modern science had not developed in China but only in Europe," but he soon expanded his inquiries with the more positive formulation of "why was Chinese civilization much *more* efficient than occidental in gaining natural knowledge and in applying it to practical human needs" prior to the sixteenth century. The difference between Chinese superiority until that time and European superiority thereafter Needham credited not to a difference in civilizational genius, as many of his generation and their predecessors had done, but to differences in the historical circumstances shaping the two societies. In Needham's view, Europe underwent the social, economic, and intellectual transformations associated with the full development of capitalism whereas China did not, in large part for reasons of material organization that scholars only now are beginning to identify.<sup>1</sup>

Needham believed that a more profound understanding of the nature of Chinese society would be required to develop a satisfactory explanation for the historical evolution of science in China, and he designated

<sup>1</sup> Needham 1969; Needham and Huang 1974.

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volume VII of his *Science and Civilisation in China (SCC)* as the place in that series where this issue would be pursued. In his seventies he came to feel that other *SCC* commitments would make it impossible for him to devote his own time to this task, and so engaged collaborators for volume VII to investigate various aspects of the problem of comparing China's development with the emergence of capitalism in Europe, a subject also treated by Francesca Bray in her *SCC* volume on agriculture.<sup>2</sup> In 1977–78 he arranged for Gregory Blue and Timothy Brook to collaborate on volume VII by examining respectively European and Asian interpretations of Chinese society,<sup>3</sup> both of which he acknowledged had exercised great influence on his own thinking. In 1983 he invited Immanuel Wallerstein to examine the conditions of the emergence of capitalism in Europe in order to establish how one might now best understand the specific character of European historical development. Unanticipated difficulties that arose in the course of editing our part of volume VII in the early 1990s led to its cancellation. We decided then, with some regret, to publish our work outside the framework of *Science and Civilisation in China*. To enlarge the scope of the volume, we invited Bin Wong and Francesca Bray to contribute chapters that would help to complete the intellectual trajectory that this book seeks to describe: beginning with the peculiarity of Europe and ending with the specificity of China.

For their comments on sections of this book as it was in progress, we wish to thank Martin Bernal, Joshua Fogel, Dieter Kuhn, Kenneth Pomeranz, and Elinor Shaffer. For their support given during the long gestation of this volume, we are grateful to the successive librarians of the East Asian History of Science Library, Cambridge. The editorial assistance of Ludgard De Decker in the final phase of producing the manuscript and proof reading it is gratefully acknowledged. To Richard

<sup>2</sup> She argues there that the technical conditions of production in northern Europe favored the development of large-scale farms capable of economies of scale. They therefore tended to encourage capitalist relations of production in agriculture, while the technical conditions of riziculture, which was labor intensive and skill oriented, did not. See Bray 1984: 6, 134–39, 198–202.

<sup>3</sup> Having previously been struck by the palpable differences between Western sinological scholarship and orthodox Chinese Marxist historiography regarding ancient and imperial Chinese history, the two of us independently came to focus on issues of comparative “pre-capitalist” development prior to our collaboration with Joseph Needham. This we did through separate engagements with Perry Anderson's (1974a) *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, then recently published, particularly the substantial appendix on the Asiatic mode of production, which included a thoughtful appraisal of Needham's notion of “bureaucratic feudalism.” (Ray Huang, another collaborator on volume VII, brought this text to Needham's attention.) As it was Bin Wong who first introduced Anderson's work to Brook, we are pleased that he has been able to join us in completing this intellectual odyssey.

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Fisher we owe the privilege and pleasure of publishing with Cambridge University Press. In closing, we would like to reserve our final thanks, if we may, for each other. When we set out on our wandering journey to create what this book has become, we had no inkling of the extraordinary length of time it would take to complete the journey, nor of the bonds of friendship that journey would create. We only wish that Joseph were still with us to share, as he would have, in that pleasure.

*9 December 1998*

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GREGORY BLUE

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## Major dynastic periods in China's history

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Shang	1766–1122 BC
Zhou	1122–249
Qin	221–207
Former Han	202–8 AD
Latter Han	25–220
Tang	618–907
Northern Song	960–1127
Southern Song	1127–1279
Yuan (Mongols)	1271–1368
Ming	1368–1644
Qing (Manchus)	1644–1911
Republic	1912–1949
People's Republic	1949–