INTRODUCTION

WHY DAILY LIFE?

Why do we need to know about the kind of daily life people in the ancient world, including ancient China, had? Several reasons spring to mind. To begin with, it is inherently interesting for those of us with an inquisitive nature to want to know what was happening in the world, including how people lived their lives. This may be a way of reflecting on the quality and meaning of our own existence. The study of history may be said to consist, although not exclusively, of the study of the lives of others, as individuals, groups, ancient or modern, young or old, male or female. Yet, professional historical studies with which we are familiar usually deal with the so-called "big events," that is, events that happened to large numbers of people, such as a change of dynasty, war, famine, or the rise and fall of empires. These continue to interest most historians and readers, with good reason. When we focus on the daily lives of people, however, we are looking at history from a different perspective. Ever since the early twentieth century, the Annales School of historical research had already demonstrated with their works the long-neglected aspects of the past, the process of social and cultural change on the basis of *longue durée*, and the structure of daily life that was not in the picture of traditional history, which focused mainly on political change. Here there are no big events, no prominent figures, but simply descriptions of how people lived in a certain period. Yet,

of course, the big events could, and indeed did, exert a certain influence on people's lives; thus they serve as the backdrop to daily experience.

Our intention in this volume, simply put, is to try to re-create for the reader glimpses of life experiences of people in a past era. Yet, we need to be realistic about what we can expect from such an undertaking. It is nearly impossible, given the material at our disposal, to reconstruct the details of the daily life of any individual in the past, even though we may occasionally have access to records of someone's thoughts and emotions that survived through chance preservation. Thus, the kind of daily life we can study is not the life of any individual person, but the general conditions of life that may have been experienced by many.

Furthermore, to see how people fared in their lives is one thing; to understand why their lives proceeded or developed the way they did is another. To achieve this, we decided to investigate the various social, economic, ideological, political, and physical factors that constituted the framework within which people of different social strata conducted their lives. The archaeological discoveries of the last half century in China had provided us with quite a large amount of texts and artifacts that could allow us to discuss these factors with new materials unavailable to our predecessors. Our aim is not to provide any theory to explain the course of history, but only to suggest reasonable ways to understand, with hindsight, the possible circumstances that generally shaped the lives of individuals.

Despite our interest in the details of daily life and its underlying structure, we still have to ask ourselves what the value is of such an undertaking besides personal enjoyment. The purpose is not to find a moral justification – though it may be a legitimate one – for doing, perhaps, what one enjoys doing, that is, to satisfy one's curiosity. We are essentially asking about the nature and value of historical knowledge.

This is hardly the place to discuss subjects such as "what is history?," whether to choose sides with positivism or relativism, or whether to concede that all histories are "constructions" and no "reconstruction" is possible.[1] Our position here is relatively simple. The content of historical knowledge can be described as consisting of two parts: facts and interpretations. Events happened only once. Therefore, there is only one objective historical fact about everything in the past. How to obtain and ascertain the facts is part of the work of professional historians. The truth about a past fact, moreover, may be accessed and verified at different levels, depending on what kind of questions the historian wishes to ask. "The Past" as an abstract idea referring to an all-encompassing

[1] The famous book by E. H. Carr 1986 (*What Is History?*) touches on some of the fundamental questions about historical studies in the modern era. For a useful overview of the subsequent development of the debates over constructionism, deconstructionism, postmodernism, etc., see Alun Munslow (1997).

entity may, indeed, be unknowable, yet the "past" (with a small "p") may still be possible to investigate as long as we clearly define the level of truth that we are interested in. Needless to say, the process of finding and ascertaining facts already involved the historian's interpretation. Interpretation based on the knowable facts, moreover, is really what gives meaning to the facts. In search of meaning is what history is about; even meaninglessness is a form of answer that may be acceptable.

The human mind, though incredibly complex in terms of its biological structure, is still far from being able to comprehend the significance of the sum of all knowable facts and, thus, has to select from the myriad facts those that fit within its comprehension, to create a narrative of an event that may have consisted of many known and unknown facts. Most of the facts in history, needless to say, are lost to us. These are not merely the deeds of deceased people and their material remains, but the thoughts and emotions, likes and dislikes, happiness and sorrow, joy and remorse, desire and despair that each human being would have experienced. It was these daily experiences that drove human beings to act, or refrain from action, and, finally, to create history.

The value of the knowledge of daily life in history, therefore, lies in the fact that such knowledge may attract our attention and help us to understand what people experienced on a daily basis. Such historical knowledge may be placed side by side with the "grand narratives" that are often seen in standard historical works, and allows the readers to imagine the process of history of a certain period with a more down-to-earth view, to flesh out the skeleton of historical events. Since interest in daily life is a modern phenomenon that reflects democratic values, the lack of ancient discourse on daily life may actually point to a different collective mentality. That is to say, even though we can find evidence that may allow us to have access to certain aspects of daily life in the past, that evidence was most likely not originally meant to serve such a function. This, of course, is not to say that people in the past did not pay attention to their daily lives. In fact, we have quite a lot of evidence that points to the institutional and individual concerns of people's daily lives in various manifestations. We can predict that, for most people, a "comfortable" daily life was probably what they hoped for. That we are now consciously interested in examining the daily lives of people in the past, therefore, is not only to satisfy our curiosity, but also, as historians, to demonstrate how the grand narratives of history may have overlooked most of the ordinary people for whom the rigors of daily life were their sole focus. The preconceptions or biases of our historical knowledge, therefore, are exposed and, at the same time, partially redeemed when the agenda of daily life in the past is revealed. It is an opportunity to regain some portion of the holistic image of the past, a methodological countermeasure for a balanced view of history.

In the field of Chinese history, previous works have of course studied daily life during a certain period.[2] For the ancient period that concerns us in this volume, it has been fifty years since Michael Loewe published his *Everyday Life in Early Imperial China*.[3] While the main contour of his description of life in early imperial China may still be valid, the enormous progress both in terms of research and archaeological discoveries that had ensued since his work dictates that a new overview of the subject, incorporating the latest scholarly achievements and utilizing the exciting new archaeological as well as textual materials would be useful in obtaining an understanding of not only the life experience of the people in ancient China, but also the state of the field of the study of early China. To be sure, individual works on various aspects of material and spiritual life have continuously been published: Michael Loewe's own works pioneered the study of the intellectual and religious traditions as well as the operation of the government of the Han period, which provided a sound foundation for the construction of an overall understanding of life during that time.[4] A recent monographic study by Anthony Barbieri-Low explored the trades and lives of the artisans of the Han period, which amply demonstrates that with the help of newly available material there can be substantial progress in the understanding of history from a bottom-up and daily operational perspective.[5] One very useful book, with abundant illustrations of archaeological discoveries and artifacts that far surpass what the present volume could have included, and therefore a must read for anyone with an interest in the material life of the Han, is Wang Zhongshu's *Han Civilization*.[6] In this book the reader may find all sorts of illustrations that could supplement what we have discussed in the present volume.

What we hope to achieve in this volume is to provide a historical framework that may assist the reader to access the material as well as spiritual life of the ordinary (and some not so ordinary) people, and to be able to understand and appreciate their lives and experiences, their hopes and fears, likes and dislikes, and purpose in life. By learning how people lived thousands of years ago, and thereby gaining an understanding the human condition, however incomplete, the reader is given a chance to reflect on his or her own condition of life. The guiding principle in the writing of this volume, therefore, has been a close reading and analysis of the materials that are relevant to the formation of a view of the life experience of the people of early China. Such a view, which no doubt reflects our modern concerns, will give the reader a fresh perspective for examining the history and culture of early China, one that goes beyond the

[2] Gernet (1962); Benn (2002); Dikötter (2007).
[3] Loewe (1968).
[4] Loewe (1982, 1994, 2006).
[5] Barbieri-Low (2007).
[6] Wang Zhongshu (1982).

usual façade of various "great achievements" that are often self-aggrandizing for historians and their modern readers, yet removed from our sentiments and passions for getting to know a people.

A few words about the sources used in this volume may also help the reader to understand the conditions under which scholars now conduct research of this period. The study of early China, especially the late Warring States period and the Qin-Han Empires, had been given new opportunities in the last half century with the discovery of new archaeological materials, including artifacts and texts found in tombs and ancient sites. These new materials provide evidence for us to study the material life of the people, and to obtain new information on many aspects of the intellectual development of the period. Notable types of texts include legal texts, bureaucratic records, hemerological texts, funerary texts, and literary and philosophical texts, some of which were variants of traditional texts such as the *Book of Poetry*, the *Confucian Analects*, *Laozi*, and some of which were "new" – that is, unknown to the world until their discovery, such as the medical texts found in the Mawangdui tomb no. 3.[7] These new materials, together with traditional texts transmitted throughout the centuries, shall be utilized to illuminate our subject whenever appropriate. This, of course, is not to say we have most of what we need, but only that we are better informed than our predecessors half a century ago. However, because this volume is written for English-speaking readers who are not necessarily familiar with Chinese, we kept the Chinese sources to a minimum.

THE SYNOPSIS

The main period of focus in the present volume is the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), with background coverage of the previous Shang and Zhou periods (including the brief period of the Qin Empire), with extension into the early medieval period after the fall of the Han. The reason for making such a choice is as follows. As the Han was the first enduring and "successful" regime that had inherited and consolidated a form of political structure developed by the previous Qin dynasty and lasted for 2,000 years, there is good reason to see the Han as the beginning of a new phase in the history of China, not only in terms of political development, but also in various other aspects such as social structure, economic institutions, religious and intellectual growth, and technological advancement. Much of what we know of the "traditional Chinese state" had its roots in the Han dynasty. An understanding of the life of people at this important juncture of the development of Chinese civilization, therefore, is a crucial part of any attempt to understand China and Chinese history in general. Needless to say, since history exists in a continuous

[7] Shaughnessy (1997).

flow of time, a description of the Han period could neither be the beginning nor the end of a larger picture of Chinese civilization. We need to trace some of the characteristics observed in the Han period back to the earlier periods, the Shang, Zhou, and Qin, in order to present a contour of various elements that became prominent in the Han period. Similarly, we should also note some of the salient aspects of daily life that were passed on to successive generations, so that a continuum of cultural development and change may be appreciated.

With the foregoing background in mind, Chapter 1 sets out to describe briefly the historical development of various cultural centers or regimes, from the late Neolithic period to the end of the Zhou dynasty, in the land that was later called China.[8] One of the main points that needs to be emphasized is the multiple origins of the various prehistorical cultures that later interacted and merged with each other to form what was later known as the "Chinese" culture. The reader is introduced to the reality of early societies: physical conditions and relative locations of various communities constituted major factors for cultural development on this vast land. The chapter aims to help the reader gain a sense of the physical environment in which literacy, practical knowledge, lifestyles, modes of production, political and social organizations, religious traditions, and value systems combined to form certain cultural characteristics. In summary, this chapter provides an overview of the historical and cultural development of China before the Han, in order to give the reader a diachronic and synchronic orientation of what will be discussed in the following chapters.

Chapter 2 first sets out the political stage on which the players performed. As the Qin-Han Empire took control of the land, and instituted a vast bureaucracy to manage it, it makes sense to have an idea of this basic structure in which all the people, from the emperors to the peasants, organized their lives. Thus, we describe the government organization from the court in the capital, to the regional government, the county magistrates' offices, and down to the village household level organizations, in order to set the stage. It is important to understand, for example, how the state extended its power and control through various levels of local governing bodies, enabling a population census to be taken, corveés to be organized, and taxes imposed and collected. The government was not daily life itself, but the hard reality that conditioned the daily lives of the multitudes.

The art of governing, however, was not the invention of the Han. The political philosophy – or ideology – that the Han regime relied on had been gradually forged during preimperial times, and could be traced to the teachings of Confucius (c. 551–476 BCE) and beyond. A brief account of this most important system of thought will help to explain many features of the daily

[8] Loewe and Shaughnessy (1999).

lives of the people, though certainly not their entirety. It is important to know, for example, how an "elite ideology," such as Confucianism, could have penetrated to the lower social stratum, and what the practical implications were for the lives of the people. In particular, social institutions, such as family ethics and kinship organization, or funeral customs, have been deeply imprinted with this ideology. It is also necessary to emphasize that Confucianism, or Ruism as some scholars now prefer to call it, at this time was not the only ideology that was accepted among the elite class. Philosophies such Daoism and Legalism were also strong competitors of – but were also sometimes complementary to – Confucianism.[9] On the other hand, as the majority of traditional, textual sources passed down to us are now heavily influenced by such ideologies, the reader needs to be informed of the possible biases that the information from these traditional sources may have created. It would also be useful to allow the reader to have a balanced perspective when introduced to the newly discovered texts, especially those that pertain to the more mundane aspects of life, which were considered to be relatively "uncontaminated" by the later processes of redaction and revision.

Having discussed the political as well as the ideological construction of society, Chapter 3 ventures to describe the social structure of the Han, and the common rules of behavior under which social interactions took place. The traditional Chinese partitioning of society into the four types of people, that is, gentlemen, farmers, craftsmen, and merchants, though useful to a certain extent, cannot represent the complicated reality of the day. Since the Han society had it's roots in the past, we need to trace the composition of the various social groupings back to the earlier, preimperial, period. Thus, we will provide a brief account of the social structure of the Shang and Zhou, including the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, and move on to the Han social structure and the law. Using recently discovered texts, the reader is given a chance to see how the rule of law affected social life in many ways: household registration, movement of people, taxation, marriage, family relations, commerce, and even farming activities.

Chapter 4 deals with the agricultural cycle of the farming community, and discusses various aspects of farming technology, and all sorts of natural and social problems that challenged the farmers. They are the disruptive forces of regular life: natural disasters such as flood, drought, locust plague, and earthquake, or manmade disasters such as war and corruption, which caused dislocation of communities and the abandonment of farm land. It is particularly important that we should not intentionally provide an "idyllic" view of country life, but try to gain a closer look at the reality of the farmer's lot.

[9] Schwartz (1985).

Yet, much as we like to portray the lives of the ordinary people, who were mostly farmers, the physical remains of village settlements of this time are extremely rare. Some glimpses may be gained in certain paintings, reliefs, and even funerary objects found in tombs, though hardly sufficient to paint a whole picture. On the other hand, archaeologists have been able to locate and reconstruct the most important cities, Chang'an, and Luoyang, the capitals of Western and Eastern Han, respectively. With a basic understanding of the different neighborhoods and areas of the capitals, we are able to describe the lives of the city dwellers in more realistic terms: the distances they had to travel to get from one part of the city to another; the different kinds of neighborhood the city had; and how the city functioned as a ritual center, a bureaucratic center, a military garrison, a commercial center, a place of recreation, a center for education and, ultimately, a symbol of luxury and prosperity and the power of the empire. With the basic physical structure laid down, Chapter 5 uses various kinds of textual evidence to trace the life of the people in the city by attaching stories and anecdotes to the various elements of this physical structure. There is abundant textual evidence that attests to various aspects of life in the cities, or events that happened in the cities.

Production, consumption, income, and expenditure are some of the hard facts of people's daily existence. With the help of texts that dealt with economic issues, it is possible to understand to some extent the factors that formed the basic structure of economic life of the people. Chapter 6 discusses examples of basic production industries such as weaving, lacquer ware, wine, salt, and iron. We also discuss the commodities' prices in relation to people's income and expenditure, and explore the underlying ideological constraints and shared values that might somehow have limited or assisted the development of one or other aspects of these factors.

Complementing or supplementing the economic structures are the technological factors that assisted the operation of the economic system, thus, the process of daily life. Without engaging in technological details and scientific theories, we intend to see how practical technology materialized in daily operations. Factors to be considered in Chapter 7 are the transportation and various measuring systems of length, weight, volume, time, and the calendar, all of which are fundamental guidelines for any kind of activities that involve the transportation and exchange of information and goods over a period of time. Finally, medical knowledge is one factor that directly influenced people's lives to a great extent, for which the Han period already held some very interesting records.

Chapter 8 discusses subjects that are more popular in traditional accounts of daily life, such as leisure and entertainment, games and festivals. Many of the festivals were ancient customs developed in rural society, passed down through history, further developed during this time, and passed on to later generations.

There is abundant textual, as well as archaeological, evidence that bears witness to all sorts of activities, entertainments, or banquets in connection with various seasonal festivals celebrated at all levels of society. Often, symbolic rituals would evolve into public celebrations or dramatic performances. Thus, by giving accounts of the festivals we can help convey a sense of the ebb and flow of popular sentiments throughout the year. As many of the annual festivals celebrated during the Han period are still celebrated in modern times, connections between the modern reader and the Han society may serve as important reminders of the continuation of Chinese cultural tradition. Entertainments, games, and pastimes, in addition to annual festivals, that people enjoyed in their lives as ways of alleviating the drudgery and pressure of daily work (for the commoners), or to show off wealth and power (for the rich), are also worthy of our attention. By studying records of such activities, it may allow us to have access to the private sentiments and, perhaps, the character of the people at certain moments. This, then, leads us to Chapter 9 on emotional life.

After the previous discussions of the various practical aspects of daily life, it is time to focus on the feelings of people in specific situations. Chapter 9 attempts to explore the feelings that manifested in various social and ethical relationships between people of all walks of life. Whether women were respected and had control of their own lives, whether filial piety was innate in a person or enforced externally, whether gender relationships between men and women could reveal the nature of social ethics, whether we can assess the value of friendship, and whether the lives of children and the elderly in society constituted any conscious reflections and concerns are all issues that we explore in this chapter. Yet we need to remind ourselves that as much as we like to know about the emotional lives of people long gone, we may capture only some very cursory glimpses of emotions that left their imprint on the sources we have. Instead of having access to detailed accounts of the life history of an individual, we should consider ourselves fortunate to be able to look at some special, or even mundane, moments in the life of the ancient, and reflect on what life would have felt like in a bygone age.

With life comes death. An account of daily life would, therefore, inevitably have to deal with how death featured in people's lives. How the dead were buried, what kind of rituals or funerary paraphernalia were provided for the deceased, as well as how people imagined a life hereafter, in fact, are all important pieces of information to help us reconstruct people's views of what constituted a worthwhile life on earth, what ethical standards or religious beliefs people held to sustain their lives. In summary, Chapter 10 discusses how people dealt with death physically and spiritually. Through this, we gain some understanding of their ultimate goal in life.

As this account of the daily life experience of the Han people comes to a close, it is important to emphasize the continuation as well as the transformation

of this experience in later eras. The conclusion of this volume provides an overview of the historical development of Chinese history after the establishment of the Han in order to bring the reader back to the grand historical process that began before the Han and continued after it ended. Yet, we do not plan to give a conventional general account of all the important events, of the various dynastic changes and wars that created the division of the north and the south, which can be found in many standard accounts. Instead, we first provide an interpretation of the fall of the Han, followed by an account of the cultural transformation in North China following the inroads made by the nomadic groups who established various regimes there. A brief note on the continuation and transformation of life experience after the fall of Han concludes this survey. Although it is outside of the coverage of this volume, it is important to recognize that the process of cultural integration, including that of lifestyle, religious belief, and dietary habits in North China, during the time between the fall of the Han and the reunification under the Sui and Tang was a major factor that contributed to the formation of a new cultural spirit and lifestyle in the years to come.