

The Formation and Development of Chinese Civilization and Culture

Authors Details

Vadim Rozin^{1*} 

Institute of Philosophy, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, Russia.

Corresponding Author: *Vadim Rozin*

ABSTRACT: This article analyzes China's historical development through the lens of its shifting social forms: dynasty, empire, and state. Drawing on the seminal work **China: A Short Cultural History** by Charles Patrick Fitzgerald, the author questions the universal applicability of the Western concepts of "empire" and "emperor" to Chinese civilization. In the Chinese tradition, the empire—or "All-under-Heaven" (**Tianxia**)—is conceptualized not merely as a military-administrative structure, but as an expanded global family headed by an "August Ruler" (**huangdi**) who holds the Mandate of Heaven. This fundamental distinction offers a fresh perspective on the relationship between empire, state, and nation: while these concepts historically diverged in the European tradition, in China—owing to a social model rooted in the family—they converge through shared characteristics of agency, purpose, and integrity. The article pays particular attention to the nature of China's development. Unlike the Western periodization model (archaic era, ancient kingdoms, classical antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the modern era), the primary unit of development in China was the dynasty, with a cycle comprising rise, flourishing, decline, and collapse. Crucially, dynastic transitions—despite accompanying political upheavals—did not alter the deep-seated foundations of the social order, such as the family model, imperial organization, and prevailing worldviews (Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism). The author highlights a paradox: development, understood as the succession of ruling elites and institutions, coexists with the persistence of fundamental cultural codes, lending Chinese

history an oscillatory, pendulum-like character. Key factors of development are identified: power struggles, external threats (nomads, Mongols, Manchus, European powers), natural disasters, corruption and the degeneration of elites, as well as the normative influence of the educated stratum of mandarin officials who secured their positions through Confucian examinations. Particular attention is paid to the role of the Legalist school, which laid the legal foundations of the empire, and to Confucianism as the ethical basis for the training of officials. The author also addresses the phenomenon of eunuchs as a social "pole of evil" that accelerated the degradation of dynasties. Methodologically, the article offers a comparative analysis of Chinese and Western conceptualizations and employs problem-setting as the initial step of the inquiry. A periodization of Chinese culture is constructed: the archaic period, the culture of the ancient kingdoms, imperial culture, and Chinese modernity (from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping). In the author's view, contemporary China retains the imperial logic of centralized governance while adapting to global technological and economic challenges. The article concludes by raising the ethical question of human nature—is man inherently good or evil?—a topic debated by Chinese philosophers that has regained relevance in an era of global risks. The author suggests that China's experience may prove significant for the emergence of a new Aeon characterized by a more responsible ethical climate that fosters the preservation of life on Earth.

Keywords: *empire, state, culture, dynasty, emperor, elite, nation, governance, history, life*

Introduction

Historians and scholars in the humanities are currently engaged in a lively debate regarding whether Russia is an empire and what the concept of empire actually entails. These issues arise regarding China as well; however, while official China attempts to downplay the imperial essence (or nature) of the Chinese state, for the renowned Anglo-Australian scholar Charles Patrick Fitzgerald—author of numerous works on Chinese history—China's imperial character is self-evident. That said, he emphasizes the difference between Chinese and European conceptions of both the empire and the emperor. Fitzgerald demonstrates that, from the Chinese perspective, the empire is a universal family comprising both the living and their ancestors, with the emperor serving as the head of this family—one who has received the "Mandate of Heaven."

"It is also crucial to remember," writes Fitzgerald, "that the terms 'empire' and 'emperor'—adopted in the West to describe China's institutions of power—are not entirely accurate, as their Chinese equivalents do not carry the militaristic connotations that 'empire' and 'emperor' acquired from their Roman roots. The emperor in China was not an emperor in the full sense of the word; that is, he was not a military commander or a chief... The word *huang-di*, translated as 'emperor,' actually signifies 'August Ruler'... The empire—'All Under Heaven'—represented a single family that had expanded to encompass all of humanity. At the head of this family stood the father, the 'August Ancestor' [6, p. 65]."

The material in Fitzgerald's book also allows us to raise the question of the essence of the imperial phenomenon. He demonstrates, for instance, that China's transition to an empire entailed a transformation of its economy and administration (a feudal model gave way to a partially capitalist one; aristocratic landholding was replaced by free land sales and a taxation system; and the vassal relationships characteristic of aristocracy and feudalism yielded to centralized administration via a bureaucracy). Reading Fitzgerald's book, one might infer that he equates the empire with the Chinese state and nation. But is this conceptually accurate?

In Europe, the state took shape independently of the Roman Empire and the nation. "The state," writes Martin van Creveld, "closely linked to the collapse of the medieval world and the ensuing civil and religious wars, was initially conceived primarily as an instrument for establishing legal order in the relations between individuals and groups. However, about a century and a half after its inception, it encountered fervent nationalism and began to appropriate it, thereby imbuing itself with ethical content" [4, p. 331]. The situation differs, however, if one views the social realm through the lens of the family; in that case, the concepts of empire, state, and nation do indeed converge (as all three entities are characterized by agency, goal-setting, and a sense of wholeness).

In this context, one might point to the "problem of agency" regarding the Chinese social collective. Fitzgerald suggests that it was precisely the creation of the empire that instilled in the population a sense of wholeness and a capacity for goal-setting. There is also another aspect—a distinctive dialectic: a reliance solely on one's own people (the Chinese), which is characteristic of a nation, alongside a drive for expansion (the conquest of other peoples and kingdoms). With the emergence of the empire, alongside the need to defend its

territory against nomads and border peoples (one solution being the construction of the Great Wall of China), the expansion of China at the expense of neighboring kingdoms became an equally pressing issue.

Beyond the points raised in Fitzgerald's remarkable book, **China: A Short Cultural History** (covering imperial dynasties, social structure, wars, and cultural traditions from ancient times to the 19th century), several other issues emerge. For instance, explaining China's development presents a complex challenge. Fitzgerald demonstrates that, in contrast to the Western model of development—viewed as a succession of "great cultures" (from "archaic" to the culture of "Ancient Kingdoms," then to "Classical" antiquity, followed by the "Medieval" era, and finally the Renaissance and Modern times)—the unit of development in China was the "dynasty." Yet, the structure of the developmental cycle is similar: the rise of a dynasty, its period of established rule, and its eventual decline and end (analogous to the stages of emergence, actual development, and conclusion that the author identifies in the European cultural cycle).

The issue lies in the fact that, according to Fitzgerald, the concept of the dynasty explains historical development because a change in dynasty alters the composition of the people making decisions and participating in governance. However, dynastic changes do not affect the essence of China's social structure, as the models of family and empire remain intact, along with the fundamental frameworks governing the population's behavior—such as the prevailing worldviews (Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism). "The Chinese family system exerted a tremendous influence on society. Together with the state—modeled on the family—it maintained relative tranquility in Chinese society for centuries; there were no social imbalances. Dynastic changes in no way affected the foundations of the family; they were purely political events and upheavals" [6, p. 118]. Either this is a dialectical interpretation, or there is a contradiction here—both development and its absence.

As presented by Fitzgerald, China's development appears somewhat contradictory and peculiar. An empire would be established and endure for decades—sometimes even two or three centuries. Yet, the end of a ruling dynasty invariably ushered in a period of power struggles, intrigue, betrayal, and assassination—events that often culminated not merely in a change of dynasty but in the empire's collapse. Nevertheless, after a relatively short time, the empire would be reconstituted. For instance, in the second century, military leaders—

having seized Emperor Xian, the last ruler of the Han dynasty, amidst the "Yellow Turban" uprising—"tore the empire apart into three warring kingdoms... After forty years of ceaseless warfare, the three kingdoms reunited into a new centralized empire under a new dynasty, which usurped the throne of the Prince of Wei and subsequently conquered the other two kingdoms" [6, p. 161]. China evolved in this manner for two thousand years, right up until the early twentieth century, when the empire fell. (Though perhaps today it has risen from the ashes of history like a phoenix, albeit as a different kind of empire.)

The issue of the factors and nature of this development is closely linked to the preceding one. [8; 9; 10] Fitzgerald outlines several key factors: dynastic succession; the drive for China's unity and integrity; and—depending on the era—the need for defense against nomadic raids, Mongol and Manchu invasions, or, in more recent times, European expansionism. According to Fitzgerald, other constant drivers of development included power struggles, wars, natural disasters (droughts, floods, etc.), and the degeneration of dynastic rule (manifested in corruption, disregard for the subjects' interests, and a desperate bid to retain power at any cost). Here is an example of one such factor. "For the Chinese," writes Fitzgerald, "disunity was synonymous with weakness and disorder, while unity signified strength and peace... It became an axiom that any form of disunity amounted to anarchy and that peace and prosperity could be achieved only under conditions of unity. Centuries later, following the 1912 revolution, Chinese republicans immediately rejected the idea of establishing a federal state modeled on the USA... (based on the conviction — V.R.) that all forms of local autonomy were signs of weakness capable of leading to instability and the country's disintegration. This viewpoint remains prevalent among both Communists and Nationalists to this day" [6, pp. 28, 199]. Another important factor is the normative or ideological influence of the educated stratum ("scholars," "officials," "philosophers," and even certain monarchs). According to Fitzgerald, these were not so much scholars and philosophers in the Western sense as individuals who had received a solid Chinese education, who critiqued the authorities, and who produced dynastic histories as well as works of art and technology. "The revolution that dismantled the feudal system and created a unified empire also destroyed the old aristocracy... a new class emerged as the foundation of the new empire, providing the state with officials and military officers, teachers and scholars... the adoption of Confucianism as the orthodox philosophy and source of knowledge fostered increasing education among the ruling

class... scholars were held in high esteem and deeply respected" [6, pp. 354–355]. But the question arises: how did all these factors shape China's development? The next issue concerns explaining the significant role played by a specific stratum: the eunuchs. The latter often played a decisive role during the periods when dynasties ended and new ones were established; moreover, they were viewed as a social evil opposed to the Confucian concept of good. "Eunuchs were generally of humble origin, and their fortunes depended entirely on the emperor's will... yet they could amass wealth and bequeath it to their relatives. As their influence grew, more and more people sought their favor—favor that the eunuchs 'sold' for money <...> In the early 16th century, the influence of eunuchs surged once again and never thereafter waned. Eunuchs took bribes and sold official posts... One chief eunuch in the early 16th century amassed a fortune equivalent to 251,583,600 ounces of silver, in addition to possessing vast quantities of gemstones, gold, and other assets" [6, pp. 330–331].

As a methodologist, cultural theorist, and psychologist, the author is interested in the Chinese debate regarding the origin of the Universe (a topic yours truly discussed in the 2024 book **Images and Paradoxes of the Universe**), as well as the dispute concerning the anthropological explanation of good and evil. "Based on rather obscure passages from ancient texts, philosophers of the Song Dynasty (roughly 960 to 1126 AD — V.R.) created a cosmological theory that defined the First Cause—the Supreme Essence—as **tai-ji**... this is the primordial cause of the Universe's emergence and its moral driving force...

Human nature was also a subject of debate... Mozi argued that man is good by nature, whereas Xunzi held the diametrically opposite view. During the Song era, a third option was also discussed... man is born neither good nor evil; rather, like water that always finds an outlet, good or evil will eventually emerge, but this depends entirely on circumstances. Hence the growing importance of education as a guiding force for a character not yet fully formed... (related to this were the views of the Su school, holding that a person must voluntarily choose virtue, while followers of the Hu school asserted that a moral person loved and chose virtue, whereas an immoral person fell under the sway of base passions and chose vice — V.R.). [6, pp. 391-392] Here, the author recalls a similar distinction proposed by Emanuel Swedenborg. 'God,' writes Borges, describing Swedenborg's concept, 'grants man free will—that terrible privilege allowing him to imprison himself in

hell or earn paradise... If a person has a demonic nature, he will prefer the company of demons; if an angelic one, the company of angels" [3, p. 522–529].

Regarding methodology, we have already taken the first step: problematization—that is, the formulation of questions and challenges requiring answers and resolution. Furthermore, it is evident that discussing the issues raised entails a comparative analysis (comparing Chinese views and conceptualizations with the tenets of Western culture). We will also draw upon the author's own research into European culture, as well as his reconstruction of China's first two dynasties [5].

The Formation and Characteristics of the Chinese Empire

The formation of an empire in China was preceded by a prolonged internecine struggle characteristic of the culture of the ancient kingdoms. In the West, conceptions of gods (interpreted in semiotics as "schemas") provided an explanation for the formation of kingdoms, the necessity of collective labor under strict vertical management, and the division of labor that had emerged at the time; furthermore, in terms of visual representation, these gods were most often depicted in anthropomorphic form. In China, new sacred entities (such as celestial ancestral deities, the ancestors of the ruling dynasty, and the gods of mountains and lakes) served, on the one hand, to explain those same three social innovations; on the other hand, however—acting as schemas that structured the life of large social collectives like kingdoms and dynasties—these entities were not given an anthropomorphic visual form. [5]

It can be hypothesized that the primary reasons for the formation of numerous Chinese kingdoms and the conflicts between them were as follows: a multitude of social collectives (communities) with distinct dialects and customs; a perception of one's own gods as protectors and those of others as mortal enemies; an absence (or insignificance) of economic ties and trade between kingdoms; and a desire to seize the lands and populations of other kingdoms (in this sense, war—alongside agriculture and hunting—was understood as a significant economic category). "In 403 BC," writes Fitzgerald, "the collapse of the major state of Jin... signaled an intensification of internecine strife and an escalation of hostilities... This era lasted two hundred and sixty years... constituting a convoluted history of intrigue, aggression, and betrayal... All the weaknesses and vices of a system of

sovereign states—as can be observed in our own time—are most vividly illustrated by the example of the 'Warring States' period." "Selfish policies, an inability to unite in the face of aggression, the unscrupulous exploitation of the fruits of a victory won through treachery, the pursuit of certain illusory advantages..." [6, pp. 61–62]

Nearly three hundred years of internecine conflict convinced the Chinese that the gods and ancestors of individual kingdoms were weak and unable to protect their people; that alliances and concessions were a sounder strategy for survival; and that submission to a single center—which later came to be known as the empire and the emperor—could not only safeguard lives but also foster prosperity. At the same time, the formation of the empire necessitated radical changes.

First, the empire proved incompatible with the established culture of the ancient kingdoms. In the Chinese context, this culture was characterized by an aristocracy and a military class that held land and supplied the manpower and other resources for warfare. Consequently, these aristocrats and military figures enjoyed a significant degree of independence from the ruler; they were often inclined to act on their own initiative and even lay claim to supreme power. Although a fierce struggle against them began with the first emperor, a pressing need arose for individuals to carry out the emperors' will—a role previously filled by the aristocracy and the military. A solution was gradually found: the administration of the entire empire was placed in the hands of educated officials.

"Men from aristocratic clans, who had played a pivotal role under unstable and weak dynasties, had previously stood at the center of political life... In the seventh century, emperors consistently pursued policies aimed at weakening and eliminating this class <...> A solution was found by Emperor Daizong and his successors ...it consisted of creating a class of officials recruited through examinations from among educated landowners (the content of the exams was based on Confucian concepts — V.R.) <...> The rise of the class of scholar-officials—later known in Europe as mandarins—was an exceptionally important outcome of the empire's reunification" [6, pp. 201, 356].

Secondly, the empire could only exist if the old feudal economic system was dismantled and a new one created—one that possessed certain capitalist features. This new economic system had to ensure, on the one hand, a lifestyle for the *Huang-di* (Emperor) and his

court befitting his imperial status, and on the other, a livelihood for the peasants and artisans, who were no longer vassals of the aristocracy but subjects of the emperor. Furthermore, this economic system had to be unified, enabling resources to be allocated for the benefit of the empire and the emperor while simultaneously supporting the population during times of war and natural disasters. This is precisely where the state and the class of officials were indispensable.

"Under feudalism, the aristocrat owned the land, and the peasants were subordinate to him, as they were tied to the land and obliged to fight on their lord's side in the event of war. New laws allowed any person—rich or poor—to own a plot of land, provided they could pay the land tax. Thus, feudal estates began to disintegrate. Consequently, during the final years of the Qin Empire and the early years of the Han Empire, a social structure emerged that was destined to endure for over two thousand years—until its destruction by the People's Republic—namely, the landlord-tenant relationship" [6, p. 69].

But one might ask: how were the behavior of the population—and indeed the officials—organized and managed within this newly created empire? In the West—specifically in Rome, where an empire was also established—reliance was placed on laws and legal principles, concepts Aristotle had been the first to articulate. Debating Plato, the Stagirite wrote: "But even if someone were to establish moderate property holdings for all, it would be of no benefit, for it is human desires, rather than property, that ought to be equalized. And this can be achieved only when citizens are properly educated through the law. The absolute concept of a citizen is best defined by participation in the courts and in the exercise of power" [1, pp. 420, 445].

In China, too, laws played a major role in the empire's formation—laws championed by the "Legalists" (a school of thought that had emerged during the Warring States period — V. R.). From their perspective—which they instilled in the first emperors—"if people fear the laws, peace and order will prevail." Furthermore, the Legalists "deemed any activity other than agriculture and warfare to be useless." Historians note the particularly strong influence of the Legalists during the initial Qin Empire. The country was "ruled with a truly iron hand. For the slightest infractions of the law, hundreds of thousands of people were sentenced to forced labor and dispatched to build the Great Wall along the state's northern border." Fitzgerald believes that "authoritarian rule, the monarch's absolute power,

the disintegration of the feudal system, and the flourishing of the bureaucracy are, to some extent, the result of Legalist ideology" [6, pp. 66–68, 91].

In cultural terms, Confucianism stood in opposition to the Legalist school. Although Confucius lived during the pre-imperial era of internecine strife and his teachings were intended for the virtuous servants of rulers, in the empires that followed the Qin, his ideas were utilized to train officials and gradually captured the public consciousness. "All the philosopher's efforts were directed toward curbing the rapid decline of morals—in both politics and public life... He left behind a new understanding of ethics, wherein the aristocratic ideal was a person of high moral character: just, honest, loyal, and benevolent—someone deserving of respect not because of their lineage, but by virtue of possessing these qualities. In this sense, Confucius created the archetype of the official (albeit unwittingly, given that the official class emerged later — V.R.) who holds office through knowledge, virtue, and diligence rather than birth and wealth. This was to become the behavioral model for China's future civil servants—an ideal to which they would always aspire..." [6, pp. 85–86].

It is interesting to note that many officials, despite holding firm Confucian views, would—upon concluding their careers and service to the emperor—retire to the mountains to contemplate nature and compose poetry, a practice characteristic of the Taoist school; alternatively, they might enter Buddhist monasteries, renouncing worldly desires in pursuit of nirvana—albeit a nirvana interpreted through a distinctly Chinese lens.

Taoism established an order and hierarchy within nature that was readily comprehensible to officials (for instance, river dragons presided over watercourses, while "mountain gods ruled over the peaks"; the natural world was organized and governed much like the empire itself). Furthermore, the esoteric (secret) branch of Taoism offered practices promising the means to "attain the elixir of immortality" or "produce gold" from base metals [6, p. 137].

While embracing Buddhist doctrine, the Chinese accepted the concepts of nirvana and karma but did not believe in the reincarnation of souls (rejecting the notion that ancestors could transmigrate into other beings, including non-rational creatures). "Since Buddhism made no attempt to influence the spheres of state administration, family life, or communal affairs, these areas remained under the sway of Confucianism... for the Chinese, people—

along with their destinies and history—always held far greater significance than gods and their power." "In no other country—even in modern times—were educated people such pronounced agnostics or even atheists... Zhu Xi, the great Chinese philosopher and interpreter of Confucian ethics, stated that 'there is no one in the heavens who could judge our sins'... This fact largely explains why educated people in China embraced Marxism more readily than, say, the inhabitants of Western countries, who were raised in religious traditions from childhood" [6, pp. 136, 151].

Thus, although Confucianism was the dominant worldview, a Chinese person could also find others (such as Taoism, Buddhism, and later, European rationalism) to turn to—whether at the end of life or in response to a specific, somewhat unconventional, yet fairly common personal inclination. All of this became both possible and necessary—if one may put it that way—within the "culture of the Chinese empire." Now, let us consider the issue of China's development.

Periodization of the History of Chinese Culture

In the article "A Comparative Reconstruction of the First Two Cultures of Ancient China..." (Shang and Zhou dynasties)," we outlined the first two stages of China's development: the "archaic" stage and the "culture of the Ancient Kingdoms." The third stage can be identified as the Chinese empire itself (let us call it "imperial culture"). A fourth stage can also be proposed: modern China—open to Western technologies and participating in global trade, the economy, and politics, yet simultaneously governed centrally by Xi Jinping and the Communist Party, with Party members functioning much like bureaucrats. Let us call this final stage "Chinese modernity."

Archaic Chinese culture	Culture of the ancient kingdoms	culture of the empire	Chinese Modernism
<i>The legendary period of mythical emperors (up to the mid-2nd millennium BC)</i>	<i>Shang and Zhou Dynasties (from 1523 BC to 222 AD)</i>	<i>Qin, Han, Xing, Three Kingdoms, Northern and Southern Empires, Sui, Tang, Five Dynasties, Song, Yuan, Ming, Qing Dynasties (before 1911)</i>	<i>From Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping (starting in 1949)</i>

The author cannot agree with the view of the renowned Hong Kong philosopher of technology Yuk Hui, who writes the following regarding modern China: “If China wants to avoid the total destruction of its civilization in the Anthropocene, its only hope is to invent a new form of thinking and invention... This requires cosmotechnical thinking and the development of a form of thought that ensures the further development of **Qi** without severing ties with the **Dao** and cosmological consciousness” [7, p. 178]. If China adheres to tradition—encompassing family, empire, and fundamental conceptual frameworks—then it continues to develop today without severing ties to the **Dao** and a cosmological consciousness. But let us return to the culture of modernity.

Chinese modern culture clearly underwent change (and development), yet this occurred, firstly, within the framework of the empire as a unified whole, and secondly, with dynasties serving as the primary engines of development. As one dynasty gave way to another, the entire ruling stratum and many social relationships shifted. These changes were driven, on the one hand, by actual transformations in Chinese life—such as population growth (sometimes doubling or tripling under a single dynasty), technological innovation, the construction of cities and irrigation systems, and the advancement of education and the arts—and, on the other, by a pattern that might be metaphorically described as the “swing of the historical pendulum” (the empire would periodically suffer degradation or even temporary collapse, only to be reconstituted and move forward once more).

Several factors contributed to this pendulum-like dynamic: internal ones (the degradation and degeneration of the ruling elite, the ambition of emerging groups to seize power, and “intractable” economic problems) and external ones (invasions by nomads—later the Mongols and Manchus—and, in the 19th century, Western powers, as well as natural catastrophes). The causes of these internal fluctuations are particularly interesting. The fact is that in cultures like China’s, there exist groups and individuals who prioritize their own interests over the collective good; they cultivate behaviors directed against those who think differently, viewing such people merely as means to an end (in the Kantian sense)—individuals who, in some instances, are even deemed fit for elimination.

Eunuchs in China serve as an example of such a group. Lacking families of their own yet integrated into the emperor’s household, they were able to exert significant influence over both the emperor and his wife. Moreover, their influence most often gravitated toward the

"pole of evil"—that is, it was directed at satisfying personal ambitions and desires that had nothing in common with the well-being of the Chinese population. Let us recall Aristotle, who wrote in the **Nicomachean Ethics** that while the good of a single individual is certainly noble, the good of a people and a state is nobler and more divine. [2]

Of course, it was not only eunuchs who gravitated toward this "pole of evil" in China; at various times, aristocrats, military figures, and sometimes even emperors and their families did so as well. As the saying goes, power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. The end of a dynasty was often hastened by such figures in high office who had become corrupted. Social changes, unfolding according to the logic of a swinging pendulum, likely explain the fluctuating and contradictory nature of the Chinese empire's development.

In attempting to explain these fluctuations—as well as the inhumane cruelty involved in the struggle for power (a struggle in which not only potential claimants, whether legitimate or illegitimate, were killed, but their loved ones as well)—Chinese philosophers identified the human being as the root cause and turned to discussing the ethical nature of human actions. Daoists naturally tended to view humans as inherently good or evil from birth, believing that this same opposition existed in nature (Friedrich Nietzsche, by contrast, held that nature is indifferent to concepts of good and evil—viewing them as purely human distinctions created for protection, to bring order to chaos, or to justify one's own weakness). Followers of Confucius, however, took a different view: while individuals partly shape themselves, they are largely molded by others and by culture; thus, whether a person becomes good or evil depends on education, the state, and their own character.

Conclusion

The analysis conducted leads to several conclusions. First, the Chinese empire represents a unique historical phenomenon that cannot be reduced to European analogues; its essence is rooted not in militarism and conquest, but in a family-clan model wherein the emperor acts as the father of the people and subjects as members of an all-encompassing kinship community. This characteristic explains the resilience of Chinese civilization over millennia: dynastic changes were perceived as political events rather than the collapse of the world order.

Second, China's development is cyclical and oscillatory in nature: periods of centralization and power alternated with fragmentation and internecine strife, yet the empire was reconstituted time and again. This process was driven by both internal factors—such as elite degradation, power struggles, and economic crises—and external challenges, including invasions and natural disasters. Throughout this, the institution of the educated bureaucracy, shaped by Confucian canons, served as a stabilizing mechanism, ensuring continuity in governance and ideology.

Third, Chinese culture has demonstrated a capacity to synthesize diverse systems of thought—Legalism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism—thereby maintaining social harmony while allowing for a flexible response to change. In the modern era, this tradition is adapting to the conditions of globalization, technological progress, and political transformation, while nonetheless preserving the imperial logic of centralized governance and ideological control.

Finally, the ethical discourse regarding human nature—which dates back to ancient Chinese philosophy—has taken on renewed urgency in the context of contemporary global threats. The Chinese experience demonstrates that social order and moral cultivation are interconnected, and that the state and the educated strata play a decisive role in shaping the individual's ethical choices. The article not only deepens the understanding of China's historical trajectory but also offers fruitful analogies for comprehending contemporary crises of governance, morality, and identity—both within China itself and in the world at large.

References

1. Aristotle. Politics. Collected Works in 4 vols. Vol. 4. Moscow, 1983. pp. 376–644.
2. Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics.
https://www.lib.ru/POEEAST/ARISTOTEL/nikomah.txt_with-big-pictures.html
3. Borges J.L. Thinking Aloud. // Borges. Collected Works in 4 vols. / Vol. 3. – St. Petersburg, Amphora, 2005. <https://www.litres.ru/book/horhe-borhes/dumaya-vsluh-sem-vechero-68532449/chitat-onlayn/?page=5> (accessed: July 15, 2026)

4. van Creveld M. The Rise and Decline of the State. – Moscow: IRISEN, 2006. – 544 p.
5. Rozin V.M. Comparative Reconstruction of the First Two Cultures of Ancient China (Shang and Zhou Dynasties) // Culture and Art. 2026. No.
6. Fitzgerald C.P. History of China: Imperial Dynasties, Social Structure, Wars, and Cultural Traditions from Ancient Times to the 19th Century. Moscow: ZAO Tsentrpoligraf, 2024. 460 p.
7. Hui Yuk. Art and Cosmotechnics. Moscow: AST Publishers, 2024. 384 p.
8. H. Harrison. The Qianlong emperor's letter to George III and the early-twentieth-century origins of ideas about traditional China's foreign relations. 2017. Oxford University Research Archive.
9. Krishan Kumar. The Chinese Empire in Comparative. RUSSIAN SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW. 2025. Vol.24. No.4.
10. William T. Rowe. 9 -Social Stability and Social Change. The Cambridge History of China. Published online by Cambridge University Press: 28 March 2008.