

## **2012/3 China And The Chinese People**

by BS Poh

As China opens up to the world, great interest in this ancient civilization is aroused everywhere. Businessmen are interested in penetrating this vast market of 1.3 billion people - about a quarter of the world's population! Political observers are anxiously watching to see if this nation, the potential superpower of the new millennium, will be friendly or hostile. This ancient kingdom fascinates historians, anthropologists, linguists and even tourists.

### **Brief history**

The Middle kingdom (for that is what the country is known as in Chinese) has a recorded history of nearly 4000 years. Its oral history goes back much further. The transition into the period of written history occurred during the primitive slave society of the Xia dynasty, which was founded in the 21st century BC. This was followed by the Shang (16th - 11th century BC), the Western Zhou (11th century - 770 BC), and the Eastern Zhou (770-221 BC) dynasties. Then came the founding of the Qin dynasty (221-207 BC), when Qin Shi Huangdi united the warring states, standardised the written script, the currencies and weights and measures and constructed the Great Wall of China.

From the fall of the Qin dynasty in 206 BC to AD 1912, when the People's Republic of China was founded, some fourteen dynasties rose and fell - not bad for a period spanning over 2000 years. The Mongols and Manchus both conquered and ruled it, but ended up adopting Chinese culture. Trade and diplomatic ties were established along the Silk Routes on land as well as by sea. Gunpowder, paper and printing were invented, the arts flourished and Chinese culture started to influence neighbouring countries.

The Middle Kingdom was justifiably proud of its self-sufficiency, until internal decay set in and corruption became pervasive. Britain introduced the opium trade into China, which led to the draining of the economy and disruption of society through the mass addiction of the people. The Opium War of 1840 culminated in the signing of the Treaty of Nanjing with Britain. Enclaves were created along the coast of China in which land was ceded to western nations. (The last of these treaties expired in recent years when Hong Kong was returned to China by Britain and Macau by Portugal.)

After the founding of the Republic internal struggles ensued and in 1937 the Japanese occupation began. After the withdrawal of the Japanese, the Communist Party led by Mao Zedong (or Tse-tung) fought with the Kuomintang Party led by Chiang Kaishek. Chiang and his army withdrew to Taiwan, forming a separate island state to which China still lays claim even to this day.

Civil strife and famine drove many Chinese to seek greener pastures. They were prepared to work hard to eke out a living anywhere - in the gold mines of Australia, the railways of America, the cattle ranches of Argentina or the tin mines of Malaya. Their frugal living, business acumen and

esteem of scholarship meant that subsequent generations became better educated, richer and more influential. The success of the Chinese is admired - and even envied - in many parts of the world.

Today the Han people make up 92% of the population of China. About 30% are found in the cities and the majority of these would profess to be atheist due to the influence of communism and the effects of the Cultural Revolution. (The demographics are changing fast, with increasing urbanization.) There are over 50 minority groups, including the Buddhists in Tibet, the Muslims in the western provinces, the Christians among the Yi, Miao and Yao tribes of Yunnan, and a number of others. The Chinese who emigrated from China carried with them the traditional Chinese religion which is a mixture of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. The people of Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan belong to this category.

### **Conversion of a Chinese pagan**

My grandfather was one of many emigrants to Malaya in the early part of the twentieth century. Malaya was to gain independence from the British in 1957, and became known as Malaysia. My father was born in Malaya, but was sent back to China when he was six. After six years of hard life in China working on a farm, he was sent back to Malaya. He worked as a shopkeeper and had six children, of whom I am the second. We were told to study and to work hard. We would celebrate the normal festivals, many of which were religious (e.g. the Hungry Ghosts Festival), while others were non-religious (e.g. the Chinese New Year).

I would go with my mother to a temple in which were various Chinese deities, the Goddess of Mercy, and Buddha. She would burn joss sticks and papers, make offerings and then consult a medium. The medium was a plump man who wore a pair of shorts and no shirt. He would often give out yellow strips of charm papers, which he would write whilst in a trance. To begin a session he would sit by a table and place his hands and head on it while invoking the spirit. When the spirit entered him he would hit the table and jump up to squat on his chair. He would then communicate in an unknown tongue with those who came to consult him. While he understood the various dialects of the people, he had to make himself understood through an interpreter. The charm papers were kept by the devotees in their wallets for protection from calamity, or pasted over the door at home to ward off evil. Sometimes they were burned and their ashes dropped into a bowl of water, which was then drunk.

In the mid-seventies I went to England to study, and was invited to a church by Christian friends. The weekly messages soon began to take effect and I was converted. My conversion was a traumatic one in which I shed many tears over my pride and sins. I trusted in Jesus Christ as my Saviour, whose death on the cross makes atonement for sin. I came into full assurance of salvation immediately and knew God's peace in my heart. Doubts and fears were experienced, but by God's grace I grew in the grace and knowledge of the Lord. I attempted to learn as much of the Bible as I could before returning to Malaysia.

I discovered very soon that I had to contend with living the Christian life in the Chinese culture. The slick solutions proffered by well meaning Christians were often inadequate. If everything is to be rejected simply because it is tinged with religion, or is invented by a pagan, or is given a religious sounding name, then the Christian would have to cease to be Chinese! The Bible is our all-sufficient guide. With diligent study, prayer and consultation with friends I learned to separate the cultural from the religious, and apply the Bible's teaching to the Chinese culture, without compromising Christian truths. There were many stumbles and much prayer before I came to a clear conviction. I came to realise that Christians from the same traditional religious background share the same struggles. However, we must not make the mistake of thinking that the Chinese need a different gospel, presented in a different way. "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God (Rom. 10:17)."

The Chinese are after all the descendants of Adam. May many become the children of God!

**Recommended study:**

1. <[www.chinaguide.org](http://www.chinaguide.org)>, this and similar websites, provide up-to-date, general, information on China.
2. "The Rise of Modern China", by Immanuel CY Hsu (Oxford University Press, 1995), 5th edition. A readable history book, covering the culture, politics, and economy of China from 1600 to the present.
3. "The Sons of the Yellow Emperor", by Lynn Pan (Mandarin Paperbacks, 1993). Contains informative, interesting and heart-rending accounts of the overseas Chinese.
4. "Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China", by Jung Chang (1992). A very readable account of the trauma of three generations in China, caught in the rapid transition from feudalism, through communism, to modernisation.
5. "The Private Life of Chairman Mao", by Dr. Li Zhisui (Random House, 1994). A fascinating and somewhat repulsive revelation of this powerful, vain, and lascivious architect of modern China.
6. "Biography of James Hudson Taylor", by Dr and Mrs Howard Taylor (Hodder and Staughton, 1965).
7. "Nests Above The Abyss", by Isabel Kuhn (OMF Books, 1983). On the evangelization of the Lisu tribes in Yunnan, south-west China.
8. "Pastor Hsi", by Mrs Howard Taylor (OMF, 1977). On the life and ministry of a converted Confucious scholar and opium addict.
9. "A Stone Made Smooth", by Wong Mingdao (Mayflower Christian Books, 1981). Autobiography of a prominent Chinese pastor.
10. "The Resurrection of the Chinese Church", by Tony Lambert (Hodder & Staughton, 1991). Gives an overview of the revivals and persecution of the church until recent years, in China.
11. "The Christian in the Chinese Culture", by BS Poh (Good News Enterprise, 1989.) Currently out of print.
12. "The Heavenly Man", by Brother Yun and Paul Hattaway (Monarch Books, 2002). The story of a house church leader.
13. "John Sung My Teacher", by Timothy Tow (Christian Life, 1985). A devotional and stirring account of the life and ministry of a Chinese evangelist.
14. "The Life and Ministry of John Sung", by Lim Ka-Tong (Genesis Books, 2012). A scholarly study and assessment of the life and ministry of the man.
15. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=imhUmLtlZpw>>, TED Talk on "Understanding China", by Martin Jacques.

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