

W12 - Enemies of Civilisations - China

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Introduction: The Study of Foreigners and Self-Perception

- **Core Question:** How did ancient Chinese civilisations perceive and interact with “outsiders,” and what does this reveal about their own cultural identity?
- **Scope:** This lecture focuses on ancient China, primarily from early periods up to the early Imperial era (around the 3rd century BCE and into the Han Dynasty).
- **Key Concept:** The study of attitudes toward foreigners is crucial for understanding the formation and maintenance of cultural and ethnic identities.

Defining “Foreigner” in the Chinese Context

- **Relativity of the Term:** The concept of “foreigner” is not static or universal. The Latin root “forās” means “outside”.
- **“We” vs. “They”:** The division between “us” (insiders) and “they” (outsiders) is a subjective construction.
- **Criteria for Division:** In ancient China, distinctions were often based on cultural practices, lifestyle, and language rather than purely racial or biological factors.
- **The “Central State(s)” Ideology:** From the Shang period onwards, China viewed itself as the “central state(s),” with barbarian states located at the periphery. This Sino-centric ideology shaped perceptions of who was “Chinese”.

The Chinese Concept of “Barbarians” (Man-yi)

- **Pejorative Connotation:** Terms like “man-yi” (barbarians) carried pejorative meanings, used to distinguish the “civilised us” from the “uncivilised them”.
- **Cultural Distinction:** Foreigners were often characterised as culturally different peoples.
- **“Animal-Folk” Equation:** In some instances, foreigners were equated with wild animals, suggesting a perception of them as less civilised or even dangerous.
- **Nuance in Sources:** It’s important to be cautious about interpreting these terms as simple “group hostility.” Attitudes could vary based on the source and the sociopolitical context.

Early Perceptions and Representations

- **Limited Graphic Representation:** Compared to Egypt, archaeological discoveries in China have produced relatively little material depicting human figures, let alone foreigners, especially in earlier periods like the Shang Dynasty.
- **Artistic Traditions:** The artistic traditions of the Shang and Zhou periods often avoided direct representations of human figures, contributing to the scarcity of visual evidence of foreigners.
- **Focus on Ritual Bronzes:** Much of the existing graphic design is found on ritual bronze vessels, which are specialised objects and may not represent all manufactured items.
- **Warring States Period:** It was only in the Warring States period that scenes of military action began to appear on bronze vessels, though often as small, schematic decorations.

The “Civilised Us” vs. “Uncivilised Them” Dynamic

- **Cultural Superiority:** The dominant position of Chinese civilisation fostered a mentality of cultural superiority over neighbouring peoples.
- **“Civilised Us”:** The concept of “us” was often tied to adherence to Chinese cultural norms, rituals, and ways of life.
- **“Uncivilised Them”:** Those who lived outside these norms, particularly the “Rong” and “Di” peoples, were often labelled as barbarians.
- **Official vs. Private Views:** Official representations of foreigners often reflected a strong and persistent political ideology, while more private or nuanced views might have existed.

Military Confrontations and Borderland Views

- **Poetic Depictions:** Poems in the *Book of Odes* describe conflicts between the Zhou and barbarian neighbours, reflecting both the excitement of battle for aristocrats and the disruption of peasant life.
- **Militant vs. Pacifist Views:** The *Zuozhuan* preserves different views on foreigners, ranging from militant demands for submission (e.g., Guan Zhong's view of Rong Di as “wolves”) to pacifist approaches of alliance and border peace.
- **Foreigners as Enemies:** The term for foreigner was often synonymous with “enemy”.
- **Borderland Perspectives:** People on the cultural periphery might have had different views of foreigners than those from the political centre, potentially seeing them as closer than the distant cultural heartland.

The Role of Physical Features and Monstrous Descriptions

- **Pre-Qin Writings:** Physical differences between the “Chinese” and foreigners were generally not emphasised in pre-Qin writings.
- **Later Emphasis:** From the medieval period onward, physical features became a more significant marker for derogatory attitudes toward foreigners.
- **Monstrous Peoples:** Texts like the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* described faraway lands and their inhabitants with monstrous features, often bearing animal resemblances or engaging in behaviours like raw meat consumption.
- **Basis for Demonisation:** This demonisation was based not only on cultural differences but also on perceived physical characteristics.

Friends, Allies, and Diplomatic Relations

- **Beyond Enmity:** Despite the portrayal of foreigners as enemies, peaceful relationships often outweighed confrontations in reality.
- **Realpolitik:** Political leaders often desired peaceful relationships with foreigners for practical reasons.
- **Rong and Di as Allies:** The Rong were not always in a confrontational position and could be friends and allies of the Chinese.
- **Fair Judgements:** Authors like the one in *Zuozhuan* could make fair judgments about the causes of conflicts, sometimes indicating that the Chinese were the guilty party.

Assimilation: A Core Chinese Strategy

- **Willing Assimilation:** A significant aspect of China's interaction with foreigners was an active attempt at cultural assimilation.
- **“Sinification”:** The process of integrating non-Chinese peoples into the Chinese cultural sphere, often referred to as “Sinification.”
- **Symbol of Rulership:** The willing assimilation of foreigners became a symbol of virtuous and righteous Chinese rulership.
- **Archaeological Evidence:** Archaeological discoveries, such as tombs of the Mountain Rong people containing both seminomadic artefacts and Chinese-style bronze vessels, support the evidence of integration.

The Two-Way Street of Cultural Exchange

- **Transformation of Barbarians:** How “barbarians” were transformed by Chinese culture.
- **“Barbarianisation” of the Chinese:** While less frequently portrayed positively, cultural assimilation could occur in both directions.
- **Example of King Wuling:** King Wuling of Zhao adopted “barbarian clothes” and mounted cavalry, demonstrating a practical, non-ideological course that reversed Zhou court values.
- **Mozi’s Perspective:** The philosopher Mozi showed an anthropological insight, viewing different customs (like cremation) as valid styles of living, implying that the Chinese way was not inherently superior.

Appreciation of Foreign Goods and Ideas

- **Coveted Foreign Goods:** Foreign goods and objects were often highly praised and coveted, associated with exotic places and perceived as prestigious symbols of high social status.
- **From Objects to Ideas:** The appreciation of material objects could potentially transform into an appreciation of foreign ideas, culture, and ways of life.
- **Limited Reflection on Foreign Culture:** Written reflections on the nature of foreign culture in a positive manner are rare in ancient China.
- **Neo-Assyrian Example:** In contrast, Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions show a more objective interest in the character and lifestyles of foreigners.

The Impact of Confucianism and Later Developments

- **Establishment of Confucianism:** Since the Han Dynasty, Confucianism as state ideology largely halted debate about the superiority of Chinese culture over foreign peoples.
- **Sino-Centric Mentality:** A persistent mentality viewed Chinese culture as the centre of the civilised world, with barbarians as admirers.
- **Disintegration of Hegemony:** The end of the Han Dynasty led to a temporary collapse of this Sino-centric worldview.
- **Learning Barbarian Languages:** During the Northern Dynasties, some Chinese learned “Hu-Barbarian” languages to please foreign rulers, showing a shift in cultural values due to sociopolitical reality.

The Dynamic Nature of Cultural Identity

- **Relative Concepts:** The division between “we/civilised/centre” and “they/barbarian/periphery” is a relative concept, employed by social groups to suit their needs.
- **Assimilation and Transformation:** When barbarians were assimilated, the “real” Chinese could, in a sense, become the barbarians, illustrating the fluidity of these categories.
- **Beyond Unified Attitudes:** Ancient attitudes toward foreigners were not monolithic; they varied and changed with historical forces.
- **Cultural Consciousness:** The absorption and conquest of barbarian tribes led to a new cultural consciousness where the distinction between Chinese and barbarian was increasingly based on cultural differences rather than solely on origin.

Conclusion: China's Evolving Relationship with Foreigners

- **Assimilation as a Defining Feature:** Ancient China's approach to foreigners was significantly characterised by a strong emphasis on cultural assimilation.
- **Self-Perception Reflected:** Attitudes toward foreigners reveal the self-perception and cultural identity of ancient Chinese civilisation.
- **Dynamic Interaction:** The relationship was not static; it involved periods of conflict, alliance, appreciation, and significant cultural exchange.
- **Enduring Legacy:** The Sino-centric ideology and the process of assimilation have had a lasting impact on China's cultural development.