

Foundations of Chinese Civilization

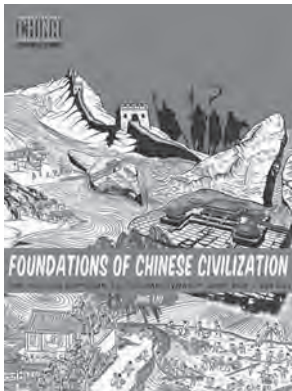
The Yellow Emperor to the Han Dynasty (2697 BCE–220 CE)

Understanding China through Comics, Volume 1

By JING LIU

BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA: STONE BRIDGE PRESS
168 PAGES, ISBN: 978-1611720273, PAPERBACK

Reviewed by Ward Fleissner



Here's the opening line: "After 17,434 disasters, 3,791 wars, 663 emperors, and ninety-five dynasties, the 5,000-year-old Chinese civilization marches on." What an entrance onto the world history stage! This nonfiction "graphic novel," an informational comic book of 168 pages, combines breezy style with historical rigor to strike just the right gong-tone for a middle school audience approaching the vast scope of Chinese history. It could also serve well as an introductory text for high-schoolers needing an

overview before they go more deeply into a narrower topic.

Consistently, the text focuses down from big picture to digestible detail: "Of the ninety-five dynasties in China's history, nine were major ones."

"A rain belt, where roughly sixteen inches of rain falls annually, divides China in half. Today, due to water shortages, only 5 percent of Chinese live west of the rain belt."

"The Duke of Zhou left many legacies, the most famous one being the Mandate of Heaven."

The style of cartooning varies in creative and effective ways, never losing the reader's interest and always serving the needs of the informative text. Many drawings employ small silhouette figures in the background in contrast to line-art figures in the foreground. Frequent maps vividly show both geographic and demographic information in well-thought-out formats. There are subtle, whimsical touches; Confucius is pictured in traditional robes, describing the proper attitudes toward man's life at different stages and ages of Chinese history, which are still seen as valid benchmarks by many Chinese today. Meanwhile, a modern figure in a Mao pajama suit is "measured" as Leonardo's Vitruvian Man, multilimbed and encased in a circle and square. And irresistibly, there is the occasional nod to modern politics: Wang Mang assumes power in the Xin Dynasty and proclaims, "Now I can make this country great again."

In an unusual and perhaps unique manner, one underlying theme sets this book apart from the general trend of history texts: the cost of war. A fascinating spread early in the book uses pie charts and bar graphs to show the loss of life—up to two-thirds of the existing population—during eight particular regime changes as dynasties gave way to one another. Each pie chart illustrates the number of lives lost both as a raw number (39 million in the Han Dynasty change, for example) and as a percentage of the total population (71 percent). A bar graph shows the number of years of warfare before the dynastic overthrow (twelve years) and during



Page 13 cartoon example.

the aftermath (eighty-five years).

Later in the text, a conventional table contrasts some features of warfare, such as the duration of fighting and the quantity of soldiers deployed, between the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period. In another two-page spread, "Li Ling and the Xiongnu," a mini-epic, plays out as the heroic leader sets out with 5,000 soldiers against insurmountable forces and returns with only 400 survivors. Presenting numerical information to a secondary school audience can be daunting, and this author-illustrator gets it right.

The book is at its best in these miniature stories, which become gradually longer as the chronology progresses into the Han Dynasty. For example, the "Life of a Farmer" two-page spread ambitiously delves into micro- and macroeconomics of the Western Han Period. In a table format with accompanying cartoons, the woebegone farmer lays out his family budget in grain productivity from his 100 *mu* of land, including revenue from surplus grain sold in the marketplace, land taxes to the emperor's government, expenses to sustain his family, and costs of rituals and community events. But there is nothing left over for contingencies or medical emergencies, so deficit spending ensues. The farmer must borrow at exorbitant rates from the rich nobility, resulting in the eventual loss of his land and his possible conversion to a life of crime. The farmer's story is told in *two pages*, quite an endurable economics one-act play for the middle and high school audience. In another fine example, the life, accomplishments, and suicide of Cai Lun, the inventor of paper, are presented in foreground spotlight to illuminate the weakening and downfall of the Eastern Han regime—all in six pages of cartoons that are gripping and intense, but mercifully not overstuffed.

A note on pronouncing and writing Chinese names accompanies a brief list of suggested readings, and a twenty-five-event timeline fits on one page and outlines the main events covered in the text in a conventional manner. The timeline itself is heavy on BCE dates, perhaps to balance the fact that the main narrative text slows down and goes into more detail in the later eras (Han Dynasty, in particular). Three more volumes are set for publication in the "Understanding China through Comics" series, concluding in November 2017. The complete set of four will summarize Chinese history up to the 1911 Revolution, and secondary students would surely benefit if a fifth book covering the quite-compelling twentieth century were under consideration. ■

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