# CHINA THROUGH THE AGES

LAWRENCE W. REED & KATRINA GULLIVER

China Through the Ages



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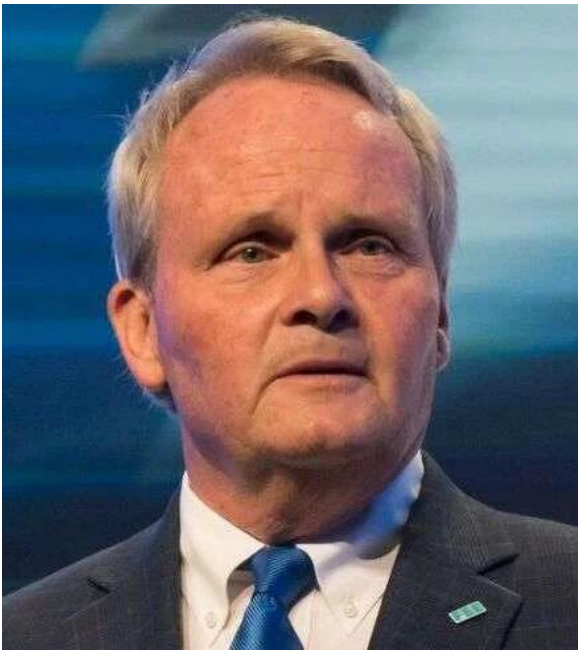
# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Lawrence W. ("Larry") Reed** is FEE's President Emeritus, Humphreys Family Senior Fellow, and Ron Manners Global Ambassador for Liberty. He previously served as president of FEE from 2008 to 2019. He chaired FEE's board of trustees in the 1990s and has been both writing and speaking for FEE since the late 1970s.



Prior to becoming FEE's president, he served for 21 years as founding president of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy in Midland, Michigan. He also taught economics full-time from 1977 to 1984 at Northwood University in Michigan and chaired its Department of Economics from 1982 to 1984.

He holds a B.A. in Economics from Grove City College (1975) and an M.A. in History from Slippery Rock State University (1978), both in Pennsylvania. He holds two honorary doctorates, one from Central Michigan University (Public Administration, 1993) and Northwood University (Laws, 2008).

A champion for liberty, Reed has authored nearly 2,000 newspaper columns and articles in magazines and journals in the United States and abroad. His writings have appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *USA Today*, *The Epoch Times*, *The Washington Examiner*, *Detroit News*, and *Detroit Free Press*, among many others. He has authored or coauthored eight books, the most recent being *Was Jesus a Socialist?* and *Real Heroes: Inspiring True Stories of Courage, Character, and Conviction*.

Reed has delivered dozens of speeches annually since 1985 in virtually every state and in dozens of countries from Bulgaria to China to Bolivia. His best-known lectures include "Seven Principles of Sound Policy" and "Great Myths of the Great Depression," both of which have been translated into at least a dozen languages and distributed worldwide. His interests in political and economic affairs have taken him to 94 countries on six continents.

Reed served for 15 years as a member of the board (and for one term as president) of the State Policy Network. His numerous recognitions include the Champion of Freedom Award from the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, the Distinguished Alumni Award from Grove City College, and the Citizen Warrior Award from Heirs of the Republic.

In 2022, he was named by President Andrzej Duda of Poland as a recipient of the highest honor that Poland bestows upon a foreigner, the *Grand Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland*. US President Ronald Reagan is among past recipients.

He is a native of Pennsylvania and a 30-year resident of Michigan, and has resided in Newnan, Georgia, since 2010. His website is LawrenceWReed.com.

**Katrina Gulliver** is Editorial Director at FEE. She holds a PhD in Modern Asian History from Cambridge University. She has held faculty positions at universities in Germany, Britain, and Australia, and worked for the national library in Singapore. A prize-winning scholar, she was elected a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society in 2021.

Her research interests include the development of port cities and the history of crime. She has taught courses on the histories of Asia since the spice race, urban history, and the development of policing and forensics.

Katrina's articles and reviews appear regularly in *The Spectator* and *Reason*, and the *Wall St. Journal*, and she has written on historical topics as varied as terrorism for *TIME*, aviation history for *The Atlantic*, and the tomb of Tutankhamun for the *Washington Post*.

# FOREWORD

## by Katrina Gulliver

In this volume, Lawrence Reed's essays bring to life the changes and enigma of Chinese history, from the Classical dynasties to the repression under communism of the 20th century.

The prescient wisdom of Chinese philosophers set them apart from the developments of the West, and cast a lingering influence on China, even as contemporary politics attempted to strip Chinese people of much of their cultural heritage.

Larry discusses the "four great inventions" of China: the compass, paper, printing, and gunpowder. They make a legacy in global technology that few countries could surpass. Yet China's complacency led to national stagnation—leaving it vulnerable to the tragic wars and revolutions of the 20th century.

He explores the life of Wang Anshi, an economic reformer of the 11th century sometimes dubbed the "Chinese FDR." I wrote about the idea of the individual in the texts of Yang Zhu, and the legacy of Sun Yat Sen in China's long history of leaders.

Larry also highlights the despotism of contemporary leadership, and the One-Child Policy. The waste of China's individual potential in the hands of the state. As China continues to expand its sphere of influence, understanding the strands of its history is essential.

Most movingly, Larry celebrates the work of Taiwanese singer Teresa Teng, whose voice represented liberty to the mainland Chinese, as they listened to pirated copies of her albums. A global star, she performed in Paris and Hong Kong in support of democracy in mainland China. For her fans trapped under communism, her music offered hope.

Today, democracy and freedom activists in China offer hope too.

This book was produced by FEE with the support of David Ahmanson.

Katrina Gulliver, PhD
Editorial Director
Foundation for Economic Education
Atlanta, GA

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# 1. A TYRANNY TO REMEMBER

## by Lawrence W. Reed

June 26, 2025

*Wang Mang's brief but bloody interregnum (9–23 AD).*

Armed with weapons and a monopoly on the use of legal force, one man (or woman) can do a world of harm. Add ego, arrogance, and dictatorship to the mix, and the harm can spread far and wide, even across generations. One tyrant's fancies become curses upon society, the effects of which may linger long after the tyrant is gone.

This is an iron law of the human experience. The ancient Chinese emperor Wang Mang provides a prime example.

If you're curious what an absolute dictatorship looks like—one of the very worst in all history—this is a story you'll want to read.

While the family dynasties that ruled China for four millennia often lasted dozens or even hundreds of years, the Xin Dynasty endured a mere 14—from 9 AD to 23 AD. Wang Mang was its only emperor. As Emperor Augustus governed in Rome and Jesus Christ was a boy in Nazareth, Wang rose to power in the Han Dynasty as a senior official.

After the death of a boy emperor for whom Wang acted as regent, Wang seized the throne and ordered the murder of many potential opponents. His time at the top proved to be a brief and bloody interregnum. Wang's overthrow and the restoration of the Han Dynasty followed his appalling reign.

Despite living nearly 2,000 years before Karl Marx, Wang was a Marxist. He nationalized the country's gold supply. He imposed draconian regulations on commerce and money lending. After declaring that all land belonged to the head of state, he confiscated and redistributed much of it to the poor (who often did not know how to manage it) and the politically well-connected (ditto). He imposed new taxes on virtually everything; indeed, he may have been the first ruler in history to impose an income tax. Citizens were required to testify annually regarding their income, and, if they provided false information, they were sentenced to a minimum of a year in prison. He introduced a new bureaucracy to enforce price controls. And finally, he waged constant warfare against rebels at home and enemies abroad.

Sometimes Wang Mang is credited with abolishing slavery. He did precisely that in the year of his coup d'etat (9 AD), not for humanitarian reasons but as a strategic

move to weaken the farmers whose land he was about to confiscate. Just three years later, in 12 AD, Wang reinstituted slavery. It would remain legal until it was abolished early in the 20th century, only to be reinstituted under other names by the Communist Party, beginning with Mao Zedong. (Don't forget the Uighurs, who endure a harsh life in what amounts to slave labor camps in China at this very moment.)

Pan Ku, a scholar of Chinese history, contends in his exhaustive book, *The History of the Former Han Dynasty* (translated into English in 1938 by Homer H. Dubs), that before rebels executed Wang Mang in 23 AD, "the population of the empire had been reduced by half." He likens the widespread resistance caused by Wang's measures to a chronic disease:

> When the wealthy were not able to protect themselves and the poor had no way of keeping themselves alive, they arose and became thieves and robbers. Since they relied upon the vastness of the mountains and marshes for refuge, the officials were not able to capture them…and the infection spread daily. Thereupon in the various regions, often by the tens of thousands they battled and died, or were taken captive at the borders by the various barbarians, fell into criminal punishment, or suffered from famine and epidemics, so that people ate each other.

All that would be bad enough on its own. But Wang destroyed the monetary system as well. For generations, the Chinese people had used *wu zhu* coins (some made of bronze, others of gold) produced by the Han Dynasty—round coins with a square hole in the middle. Wang suspended the minting of wu zhu coins, banned their use, and then flooded the market with a complex and bewildering array of cheap fiat coinage composed of baser metals and even tortoise and cowrie shells.

Historian Richard von Glahn reports in *The Economic History of China* that Wang's policies "drove sound coin and gold out of circulation, unleashing rampant inflation and severely disrupting commerce and industrial production." That's Gresham's Law in action, 15 centuries before Gresham. The economic confusion and chaos it produced led to mass protests and strikes by workers and shopkeepers. People who were caught using the traditional currency were executed or exiled.

Among today's numismatists (coin collectors), the coins of this brief period are highly prized. Heinz Gratzer and A. M. Fishman's *The Numismatic Legacy of Wang Mang* (1971) showcases Wang's unusual coins, which were shaped like knives and spades instead of the traditional round form. Gratzer and Fishman also note how power thoroughly deranged the man himself:

> His actions before his accession to the throne are those of a wise learned scholar, gentle and generous, concerned with honor and piety. His actions as an Emperor are those of a careless, greedy, and murderous despot who disregarded the well-being of his subjects…His Confucian convictions are also thrown into doubt, as his actions can be viewed as those of a ruthless courtier and scheming political manipulator and not of a true Confucian scholar.

Throughout history, governments that debase the currency routinely impose edicts and penalties to force people to accept it. Wang Mang took that to a new level. Historian Robert Tye reports, "In order to try to force the spade coins to circulate, regulations were passed to have checks made on people at customs posts, fords, rest houses, city gates and palace gates, to detain those who travelled *without* them [emphasis mine]." For the crime of using unsanctioned currency, one was lucky to be executed, because Wang's government also enslaved the culprit's family and the families of his five nearest neighbors.

When Wang confiscated and nationalized the gold holdings of Chinese citizens early in his reign, he claimed it was "in the public interest." In truth, it turns out that he hoarded a large portion of it for himself. Rebels who eventually killed him and sacked his palace found more than 150 tons of the yellow metal in one room after another. The people were left with the near-worthless coinage he had foisted on them. With the restoration of the Han Dynasty after his death, the old but reliable "wu zhu" money reappeared as the nation's preferred currency.

The hatred for Wang's crazed dictatorship was so great that none of his so-called "reforms" survived. Officials did their utmost to expunge memory of his horrific reign. His body was ripped to shreds, and his head was kept in a box by his imperial successors until it was destroyed in a fire some 300 years later.

Would anyone dare to argue that Wang Mang did not deserve his fate? Good luck.

# 2. THE INSPIRING TERESA TENG

## by Lawrence W. Reed

May 18, 2025

*The pop star who stood for freedom.*

After the Soviet Empire expired in the 1989–91 period, commentators worldwide revealed the autopsy results. The patient died of terminal socialism, a disease characterized by backward economies, massive shortages, and the absence of competition in both political and economic life. Powerful internal resistance movements (such as Solidarity in Poland), encouraged by the resolute leadership of Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and Pope John Paul II, helped pull the plug. The state had indeed "withered away," but not in the fashion the false prophet Karl Marx envisioned.

The role played by music in ending so many evil regimes, Rock & Roll in particular, is not so well understood. Historian Larry Schweikart convincingly maintains that among younger generations, Rock & Roll fostered a spirit fatal to the unquestioned loyalty demanded by those regimes. Schweikart says the poison wasn't in the lyrics. It was in "the freedom of Rock & Roll as a musical structure."

Though a tune involves an entire group performing collectively, what struck home to listeners was the distinctiveness of individuals *within* the group. Band members accompanied Bruce Springsteen, for example, but it was Springsteen who stood out and inspired the imagination of young fans. How refreshing in societies where propaganda had long taught that it was the collective that mattered, not the individual!

Individuality is the toxin that music injects into the totalitarian system. Try as it might, the system ultimately cannot resist it. Schweikart quotes the last leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev:

> We could keep out books. We could keep out television. But we could not keep out rock 'n' roll. Rock 'n' roll was fundamental to bringing down communism.

A similar story played out in Communist China, though it helped produce regime *change*, not regime *extinction* (unfortunately). It involves a pop music icon from Taiwan, Teresa Teng 鄧麗君(1953–1995).

Teresa Teng established herself as Asia's premier singer in a career that spanned nearly three decades. She mixed Eastern and Western genres into her own unique popular music. No Asian musician came close to her renown in the decades of the '80s and

’90s. She was a superstar by any estimation, recording more than 1,700 songs and selling about 48 million albums. Her songs of love and relationships, combined with a new “breath singing” method, broke the collectivist mold ordained by authorities in communist countries like China. Young people turned to Teresa Teng to escape the boredom of official tunes meant to glorify state and country.

Teng’s music began to be pirated into mainland China in the mid-’70s, and would influence listeners in the Communist state just as Rock & Roll helped shred the Iron Curtain in Europe.

Check out the music video for “The Moon Represents My Heart,” released in 1977. She sang in Mandarin, so she had a natural audience on the mainland, and her legion of fans marked the beginning of Chinese pop music fandom.

The PRC hard-liners perceived the threat almost immediately. Not only was Teng from Taiwan, which Beijing considered a breakaway province, but her music also celebrated the individual instead of the state. Her lyrics were not explicitly political, but she occasionally sang of freedom in vague terms. People found the music liberating, so Beijing’s paranoids banned her work for years.

Meanwhile, Mao Zedong died in 1976, opening the door for a new generation of reformers led by Deng Xiaoping. He became the mainland’s leader in 1978, and, like Gorbachev in the Soviet Union, he recognized that sclerotic socialism needed some measure of freedom to reform. Under the slogan “It doesn’t matter what color the cat is as long as it catches mice,” Deng opened the country to limited free enterprise, foreign trade and investment, and a diversity of cultural influences (the “Open Door Policy”).

By the time of Deng’s reforms, Teresa Teng’s songs had already flooded China’s black markets. Deng’s government surrendered to the inevitable and lifted the ban on Teng’s music in the mid-’80s. Her notoriety then broke all records. It was widely said that while Chinese people listened to “old Deng” by day, they preferred to hear “little Teng” by night.

Then came the nightmare of the Tiananmen Square massacre in early June 1989. Student protesters by the thousands occupied Beijing’s main square for a month, demanding greater freedom and an end to the communist one-party monopoly. Teresa Teng supported the students from afar, even performing before 300,000 in Hong Kong in their defense. But as the world sadly knows, Deng Xiaoping ordered the Army to crush the uprising, killing at least a thousand and jailing many more.

She never performed on the mainland. After Tiananmen Square, she publicly declared she would not do so until the two Chinas were united under freedom, not communism.

Teng earned millions as Asia's music superstar and became a pioneering philanthropist, raising huge sums for projects ranging from water systems in Thailand to disaster relief and other charitable endeavors in multiple countries. To the communists in Beijing, that was another mark against her because humanitarian assistance should come from the State, not private, "greedy" capitalists.

As the first Chinese-speaking vocalist to gain recognition and international influence, she opened doors for other artists throughout the region. Her notoriety ultimately reached every continent. Countries that issued postage stamps in her honor include: Russia; Sierra Leone, Mali, and Guinea-Bissau in Africa; Grenada in the Caribbean; as well as many in Asia. Her music still sells briskly the world over.

Teresa Teng died at the age of 42 from a severe asthma attack while in Thailand. Her premature demise sent shock waves throughout Asia, but the spirit of her unique music resonates to this day. When the captive peoples of Beijing's tyranny are someday liberated, we will look back and likely credit Teng's music for contributing to the revolutionary spirit that finally got the job done.

# 3. YANG ZHU AND THE FREEDOM OF THE SELF

## by Katrina Gulliver

October 22, 2025

*Lessons from an early Chinese philosopher.*

Yang Zhu (440–360 BC) was a Chinese philosopher whose ideas were considered daring and transgressive for his time, but can strike us as modern in their focus on individual freedom. His lessons were shared through early texts and referred to by scholars in the following centuries.

He lived during the "Warring States" period, the phase of clashes between regional powers in what would later be unified as China. This was a time of not only military conflicts but also intellectual battles. Daoism was emerging as the dominant religious force in China (Buddhism would not arrive for another two centuries), and Yang Zhu's philosophy reflects a Daoist worldview. The *Zhuangzi*, a Daoist text written between the 4th and 3rd centuries BC, describes the proliferation of ideas at that time:

> The empire is in utter confusion, sagehood and excellence are not clarified, we do not have the one Way and Power… There is an analogy in the ears, eyes, nose and mouth; all have something they illuminate but they cannot exchange their functions, just as the various specialities of the Hundred Schools all have their strong points and at times turn out useful. However, they are not inclusive, not comprehensive; these are men each of whom has his own little corner.

It was amid this swirl of ideas that Yang Zhu's philosophy took shape. To put his life in context of Chinese philosophy: he was born around 40 years after Confucius, the most famous Chinese philosopher, had died. Mencius was born during Yang Zhu's last decade. It would be Mencius who would later comment on his work and declare its significance, calling the influence of Yang, and the rival school of Mo Zi (Mohism), like "floods of wild animals that ravaged the land."

According to Sinologist Liu Wu-Chi, "He represented a new philosophical trend towards naturalism as the best means of preserving life in a decadent and turbulent world."

Yang Zhu was an early advocate of "ethical egoism," or the value of acting according to one's own self-interest. He held that it was wrong to harm others, but sacrificing

oneself for its own sake was not a virtue. This ran against the other major philosophies of the time—Mohism, which advocated general altruism, and Confucianism, which emphasized a hierarchical social order, ordained by heaven. His work was significant for the understanding of *xing*: one's inborn nature or essential character.

According to historian Erica Brindley:

> Yang Zhu, like Mencius, appears to have viewed the self and human body as an important resource for universal, objective forms of authority through *xing*. We see this through the following quote from Mencius, which states: "Even if he were to benefit the world by pulling out a single hair, he would not do it."

These were revolutionary thoughts at the time. Yang Zhu was challenging the ideas of duty and also of prescribed order, in his argument for making one's own choices.

Yang saw humans as self-interested individuals, and believed that this was the proper way to live. This, paired with the developing idea in Daoism of Yang Zhu's egoism, was seen as anticipating the Daoist search for individual immortality—although Zhu argued that we should accept our allotted time on the earth and seek neither to shorten nor to prolong it.

We should not deny ourselves pleasure or overindulge. Do not harm anyone else. Mind your own business, and be at peace with the world.

# 4. THE CHINESE FDR

## by Lawrence W. Reed

June 6, 2025

*Reshaping the economy in Imperial China.*

For 4,000 years, from 2070 BC to 1911 AD, one imperial family after another ruled China. The longest period in which a single family exercised power was 790 years, while the average tenure was 228 years. Most Westerners are familiar with the Tudors, Stuarts, and Windsors of England, or the Romanovs of Russia, but few are aware of the names of Chinese dynasties such as the Zhou, Han, or Ming, let alone the notable figures associated with them.

In this essay, I acquaint the reader with a man named Wang Anshi 王安石. He lived from 1021 to 1086 AD during the Song Dynasty (960–1279). He passed the highly competitive imperial exam that qualified him for the civil service, and began his career in local administration. After gaining a reputation as knowledgeable in what we now call economics, he was appointed chancellor (akin to prime minister) by Emperor Shenzong in 1070. Almost twelve centuries later, Wang Anshi's fame rivals that of any of the 18 nondescript emperors of the Song Dynasty.

In less than seven years as chancellor, Wang so disrupted the status quo with his "reform" agenda that "turmoil" describes his tenure as much as anything. What kind of change agent was he? Historians sometimes call him "the Chinese New Dealer," a description I consider apt.

When Franklin Roosevelt inaugurated his "New Deal" program in 1933, he fancied himself an original policy maker, bold enough to try things not previously undertaken. As it turns out, whether FDR ever knew it or not, his interventionist plans for the economy mirrored policies that had been attempted many times in many places.

The 1939 book from Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist H.J. Haskell, *The New Deal in Old Rome*, recounted stunning parallels between FDR's tax, spend, centralize, and regulate policies and those of the ancient Romans 2,000 years ago. See *Are We Rome?* for more on that. And almost a millennium before FDR's theme song, "Happy Days Are Here Again," Wang Anshi gave it a go in China. Instances in which politicians meddle are, sadly, far more common than those rare occasions when they leave us alone. This fact recalls two of my favorite quotes about the past. One is from Mark Twain: "History doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme." Konrad Adenauer authored the other: "History is the sum total of things that could have been avoided."

The Song Dynasty governed China for a little over three centuries (960–1279), although northern invaders forced its territory and capital city to the south in 1127. In keeping with the "light touch" that Confucian ideals taught, the regime allowed considerable economic freedom, producing remarkable advances in the arts, sciences, and engineering. Inventions of the period include banknotes and paper money, gunpowder, and astronomical clocks. Rice production soared, and so did China's population. The country began building a navy for the first time in its history.

One-family rule, however, carries with it the same dangers and temptations that accompany one-*party* rule. Over time, corruption and bureaucracy grow. Privileges extended to the politically well-connected perpetuate inequalities that foster resentment and restrict upward mobility. Calls for "reform" increase. This describes China in the late 11th century.

Emperor Shenzong appointed Wang Anshi chancellor in 1070 because he sensed changes were needed. Wang, widely regarded as a "reformer," promised to shake things up. He raised the standards of civil service examinations to improve the quality of officialdom. He sacked or demoted state employees who were incompetent or dishonest. So far, so good. But a man whom historians regard as an early economist should have known better than to implement some rather dubious economic changes he dubbed "New Policies."

FDR's New Deal of the 1930s was not a carbon copy of Wang Anshi's New Policies of the 1070s, of course, but they share an activist, centralizing tendency. Both men enjoyed experimenting with the economy. The description of Wang's governing philosophy in historian Mary Nourse's 1942 book, *A Short History of the Chinese*, fits that of FDR like a glove: "The state should take the entire management of commerce, industry, and agriculture into its own hands, with a view to succoring the working classes and preventing them from being ground into the dust by the rich."

FDR's Agriculture Secretary (and one-term Vice President) Henry Wallace once referred to Wang Anshi as "a Chinese New Dealer who lived 900 years ago" and said this:

> Under very great difficulties, he was faced… with problems which, allowing for the difference between historical periods, were almost identical with the problems met by Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933. The methods which he employed were strikingly similar.

Under Wang's New Policies program, the state extended low-interest loans to farmers, despite farm indebtedness already being a significant issue in China. Taxes were raised to help fund large-scale public works programs such as irrigation canals

and public granaries. "The system," writes James A. Mitchell, "demanded a highly centralized bureaucracy capable of accurately assessing land, resolving disputes, and enforcing regulations across the vast empire—a task that proved exceedingly difficult in practice."

No doubt Henry Wallace had this in mind when he claimed Wang's policies were "strikingly similar" to his boss FDR's. Under the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933, the Roosevelt administration paid farmers not to grow crops or raise livestock. Wallace himself, as Agriculture Secretary, once ordered the killing of six million healthy baby pigs to reduce supply and raise the price of pork. Wang would likely have applauded such bold policy initiatives.

FDR demagogued against monopolies, but his National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 was a brazen attempt to cartelize American enterprise. It imposed industry-wide price codes so that one business couldn't undercut another with lower prices. Nine hundred years earlier, Wang "reformed" the Chinese economy in part by controlling the price, production, and distribution of salt, tea, iron and other commodities. It was, as noted by Mitchell, a "level of government intervention which frequently led to corruption and inefficiency within the state-run monopolies themselves." Even critics in Wang's day charged that "the emphasis on monopolies…stifled innovation and competition, harming overall economic growth in the long run."

In a 2018 article in the *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, author Xuan Zhao argues that Wang's fiscal policies bear strong resemblance to the Keynesian policies of the New Deal. Both were rooted in the dubious notion that "government should pro-actively spend to stimulate the economy." He quotes Wang himself, who is recorded as having said that one of his aims was "to take from the rich to aid the poor." Moreover, writes Zhao, by injecting government more than ever into matters of investment and consumption, "Wang Anshi forged or restored the Chinese state into a countervailing power to the private sector."

Though FDR is still hailed in dwindling quarters as an economic savior, the record strongly suggests that his New Deal was a flop, riddled with counterproductive expense, debt, and corruption. It likely prolonged the Great Depression by at least seven years.

After seven years of Wang Anshi as chancellor of China, the Emperor had had enough. The Great Experimenter was dismissed, and spent his remaining days writing poetry. China scholar Wolfgang Drechsler notes that today in China, consensus regards Wang as a failure.

All of which reminds me of another quote, this one attributed to writer Wynne McLaughlin: "Maybe history wouldn't have to repeat itself if we listened once in a while."

# 5. CLASSICAL CHINA'S GIFTS TO THE WORLD

**by Lawrence W. Reed**

September 10, 2025

*The "Four Great Inventions": the compass, paper, printing, and gunpowder.*

Sinologists speak of the "Four Great Inventions" of China. The infamous "one-child policy" is not one of them; that is a political contrivance of more recent times and is producing a demographic catastrophe (see *The Ultimate Central Planning Nightmare*).

The Four Great Inventions are the compass, paper, printing, and gunpowder. They date to ancient times, and their impact worldwide has been massive and largely, if not overwhelmingly, beneficial. In the early 17th century, the English philosopher and statesman Francis Bacon credited modern Europe's emergence to the adoption of three of them. Readers may recall that these inventions were celebrated prominently in the opening ceremonies of the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

Of the handful of books published on the subject in English, the most comprehensive one appeared in 2002 and is titled *The Four Great Inventions of Ancient China: Their Origin, Development, Spread and Influence in the World*. Its author, Pan Jixing, passed away in 2020 at the age of 89 after a long life of research into the scientific contributions of China. He was famous at home and abroad for his career at the Chinese Academy of Sciences in Beijing. I draw liberally from his work in this article.

Did these inventions and their subsequent global influence come our way because of wise and generous government? Evidence in the affirmative is, at best, scant. Pan Jixing notes, "This could not have been done by any empire, religion, or great man in history." The records strongly suggest that the inventions themselves derived, sometimes serendipitously, from the initiative of individuals—either in search of profit or to satisfy curiosities. Governments later adopted them to serve their own purposes which, in the case of gunpowder, were not always constructive. And it was commerce that introduced them to other parts of the world.

## The Compass

Two small towns on Italy's Amalfi Coast claim to be the birthplace of a mariner named Gioja who, each also claims, invented the compass in 1302. However, the scientist, mathematician, and historian Amir D. Aczel published *The Riddle of the Compass: The Invention That Changed the World* in 2001 in which he convincingly argued

for an earlier Chinese origin. Alan Gurney's 2005 book, *Compass: A Story of Exploration and Innovation*, suggests a Chinese origin as well, and quotes a 13th-century pre-Gioja source who referenced a compass in China. Europeans greatly improved the device but likely did not invent it.

Pan Jixing believed that the impetus for the invention of the compass in China came from two directions: trade with foreigners, which required directional knowledge; and geomancy, the pseudo-scientific art of interpreting geographical patterns.

For more than 2,000 years, people have known of the magnetic attributes of lodestone. Strike it a few times against a piece of iron, and you can magnetize the iron. Shape the iron into a slender needle, put it in a vessel of water, and it aligns itself with Earth's magnetic field. Some version of that, without the water, was employed in parts of China to determine one's location on land as long ago as 400 BC. We know that sometime in the 12th century AD, Chinese mariners used it at sea. Pan Jixing notes that European navigation by compass "was roughly 100 years later than Chinese." Christopher Columbus used a compass to navigate during four transatlantic voyages.

No one disputes the difference the compass made in navigation. For guiding travelers, explorers, merchants, and sailors, it was revolutionary. This short video explains that significance.

## Paper

When I taught college economics at Northwood University nearly 50 years ago, as many as 430 students per semester sat in my classes and took exams every three weeks. I'm grateful they didn't have to chisel their answers on chunks of rock as in the (very) olden days, or I would have had to grade them on the spot or haul them home in a dump truck.

We can be grateful to the Chinese for inventing paper in the 2nd century BC. They did not use it at first for writing, but for wrapping and padding, according to Cambridge University scientist and China scholar Joseph Needham. In those early times, Chinese people wrote on animal skins, rocks, leaves, pottery, even the shoulder blades of oxen.

A eunuch named Cai Lun is credited with revolutionizing papermaking in 105 AD. He experimented with new materials such as hemp and mulberry bark that finally made paper useful for writing, and cheap as well, as explained in this short video.

Cai Lun's improvements, writes Pan Jixing, constitute "an important milestone in the history of human civilization's development." It promoted the exchange of ideas and information so that people could "express what they think and what they want to say,

record them on the writing materials, and transmit them to distant places and even to later generations." Once Cai Lun's work spurred the mass production of inexpensive paper, it was only a matter of time before books would appear. For a comprehensive look at papermaking and its transmission through trade from China to Europe, see Dard Hunter's 2011 work on the topic.

The Chinese also invented paper money, around 1100 AD. It was issued privately at first and circulated as receipts for gold and silver, long before it was first used in Europe. The Chinese government was also the first state to manufacture unbacked "fiat" paper money and produce hyperinflation, long before the French became the first Europeans to destroy their paper money. Burned by the experience, China abandoned paper money in 1455 and did not return to it for centuries. Then in the 1930s and 1940s, the Chinese government created one of the most notable runaway paper money inflations in history.

## Printing

Once you have cheap, mass-produced paper, all you need to mass-produce books, money, newspapers, and the like is a printing press. Without it, reproducing a text requires each copy to be tediously created by hand.

Most Westerners believe the German craftsman Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press in the mid-15th century. While Gutenberg's movable-type press did allow for the fastest printing the world had yet seen, credit for the first printing press goes to China. People there used presses made of wood blocks for a thousand years until the 1040s, when a poor, self-taught rural peasant named Bi Sheng invented a movable-type machine that employed letters formed on hardened clay—400 years before Gutenberg.

Over the centuries, governments proved to be the greatest enemy of the printing press. Socialist and communist regimes and dictators of every stripe banned their private ownership because they represent an existential threat to government power. But that did not stop the spread of ideas and information. In my own pre-1989 travels to totalitarian countries, including the Soviet Union and Poland, I was amazed at the lengths to which people who loved freedom went in illegally printing whatever they wanted.

## Gunpowder

Credit for the invention of gunpowder goes to Chinese alchemists around 850 AD. Historians are divided as to what those medieval experimenters were attempting to create: some say it was gold; others such as Pan Jixing say it was a substance that

would grant immortality. In any event, one of them randomly combined saltpeter (potassium nitrate), sulfur, and charcoal and nearly blew himself up.

Word quickly spread about the new "fire drug" and the noise and light it produced. Refinements and adaptations led to crude rockets and fireworks that proved popular at festivals. By the early 10th century, the technology had advanced to military use in the form of the "gunpowder arrow." Chinese troops attached small packages of the explosive stuff on arrows and shot them at their enemies, hoping it would catch fire on impact. They also made primitive bombs. (Having been a teenager once, I can relate to that.)

Historian Jack Kelly is the author of a very entertaining book titled *Gunpowder: The History of the Explosive That Changed the World* (2004). He writes:

> A deeply rooted misconception in the West holds that the Chinese never used gunpowder for war, that they employed one of the most potent inventions in the history of mankind for idle entertainment and children's whizbangs. This received wisdom is categorically false. The notion of China's benign relationship with gunpowder sprang in part from Western prejudices about the Chinese character. Some viewed the Chinese as dilettantes who stumbled onto the secret of gunpowder but couldn't envision its potential. Others saw them as pacifist sages who wisely turned away from its destructive possibilities.

In the 10th century, the *Chinese* were putting gunpowder in bamboo tubes, adding a few metallic pellets, and igniting them to propel the pellets at their enemies. They called them fire lances; we call them guns.

From China, traders and travelers in the 1200s brought gunpowder weapons to Europe via the Silk Road. Combat would never be the same again.

My colleague Katrina Gulliver, FEE's Editorial Director, observes the following:

> While the Chinese may have given us the building blocks for much of what developed in the West (from our material of exchange: whether exchanging cash for goods or exchanging bullets), we should also note the smaller aspects of our lives that trace back to China. Silk, noodles, and even ice cream (definitely three "great inventions" in my view) all had their origins in China hundreds of years ago. This ingenuity and sophistication made China a source of fascination to Europe from the Middle Ages onwards, and few nations could claim such an influence on the pre-modern world. That they would later import one of Europe's worst inventions, communism, is a tragic twist.

# 6. SUN YAT-SEN: CHINA'S ENIGMATIC HERO

## by Katrina Gulliver

November 29, 2025

*His legacy spans the ideological divide.*

Sun Yat-sen, known as the father of modern China, casts a long shadow. He was China's first post-imperial leader, a unique linchpin in the country's modernization. His legacy remains unique—revered in both the communist mainland and in Taiwan, Sun represented the first generation of Chinese elites to be educated abroad, and to bring a cosmopolitan worldview to their homeland.

The circumstances of his birth were hardly auspicious. Born in 1866 to a peasant family in Guangdong on the Southeast coast, his future would have been farming like his parents—but for the fact that an older brother had emigrated to Hawaii as a laborer. His brother sent for Sun to join him, and in 1878 at the age of 11, the future leader embarked across the ocean. He attended British and American schools on Oahu. There he would learn both English and Christianity, a Western understanding of the world that would influence him in the years to come.

He returned to China, studying there and in Hong Kong—eventually graduating from medical school in 1892. But the 26-year-old's ambitions ran toward politics, not being a local doctor. In 1894, Sun was again in Hawaii and established the "Revive China" association, a secret revolutionary organization. The members swore their allegiances to the goals of overthrowing the Qing dynasty (whom they saw as foreign usurpers), reviving China's identity, and establishing a unified government.

Sun made his first attempt at revolution in 1895, after China's defeat in the First Sino–Japanese War. He went to Hong Kong, and tried to instigate a rebellion in Guangzhou, but failed. He fled for Europe, where an attempt by Chinese authorities to capture him in London and send him back to China triggered a diplomatic incident. Before he could be smuggled out of the country, the British Foreign Office intervened, rescuing Sun and giving him national prominence in news reports. His next stop was Japan, in an attempt to build up support, both financial and practical, for his goals.

As Sun tried to build alliances and plan for China's future, fate would turn in his favor, as public sympathy for the Qing dynasty was fading. From 1899 to 1901, the Boxer

Rebellion uprising cost hundreds of thousands of lives, and left China battered. Sun, however, saw an opportunity. He founded a new organization in 1905, the *Tongmenghui* (United League) in Tokyo, and they put out a newspaper, *The People's Journal* (*Min Bao*). He would begin to gather stronger support from influential figures, who felt that China needed to modernize, and find a new path. But Sun kept creating plans for political uprisings that did not succeed.

He still believed that he needed more international support. He established revolutionary cells in Europe (made up of Chinese residents abroad, with some foreign allies). But the ruling Qing government had influence, and their pressure led foreign nations to disavow any support for Sun and his cohorts. Few foreign states wanted to be involved in another nation's political problems, or to harbor a seditionist. In 1907, the Japanese authorities asked him to leave. He was also banned from French Indochina and Hong Kong.

He would spend the succeeding years in the US and Canada, raising money for his efforts—and hatching revolutionary plots that were fated to fail. In November 1910, he convened a conference in Penang, Malaya (now Malaysia), to plan another revolt from afar, this time with the goal of capturing Guangzhou. This would become the disastrous March 29 Revolution. Around a hundred revolutionaries tried to force their way into the Viceroy's residence; government troops opened fire, and at least 86 of the rebels were killed.

While he continued to try to direct such efforts from abroad, there were others in China who were also trying to make changes. Sun was in Colorado when he heard that a rebel group had overthrown the regional government in Wuhan. Other regions would soon follow.

Returning to China, Sun proclaimed the Republic of China, and the Qing emperor abdicated. But history is rarely so clean. Sun had no real power base, and in turn relinquished leadership to Yuan Shikai, a military officer who controlled the army. Sun was then part of an attempt to overthrow Yuan, after which he fled the country again. The jostling for control of China was just beginning.

Yuan Shikai died in 1916—leaving a power vacuum that gave way to what is now known as the Warlord period. Regional leaders and aspirants were grabbing territory, infrastructure, and attempting to expand their influence. For the Chinese people, it was chaos.

Sun hovered in the orbit of power, briefly gaining control of factions—and even the title of leader—but he could not harness China to his ambitions. A dynamic and charismatic figure, he had attracted many followers, but could not retain power. His

knowledge of the West had enabled him to gain money and support around the world, yet his vision for China was not of Western liberalism: his plan included economic control by the state and redistribution of property.

In his last decade, he had turned for support to the new Soviet Union, and reorganized his party along the hierarchy of Soviet Communist lines. Whether his leadership in the longer term would have led to a communist state is unclear. But Sun died of cancer at 58, before his ambitions (for himself and his country) could come to pass.

His legacy spans the ideological divide: to the communists in China, he is a "pioneer of the revolution"; while to the nationalists in Taiwan, he is still regarded as the father of the republic. A rare distinction, perhaps befitting someone who tried to be so many things.

# 7. CHINA'S GREAT PHILOSOPHERS WOULD BE HORRIFIED BY WHAT MAO AND THE CCP CREATED

## by Lawrence W. Reed

July 10, 2022

*The teachings of Lao-tzu and Confucius aimed to achieve humane conditions and a virtuous people. The self-serving propaganda of the CCP is in a completely different league.*

When the author of *The Coming Collapse of China*, Gordon Chang, predicted the imminent demise of the Chinese Communist Party's rule two decades ago, he argued that "regimes collapse when people are no longer afraid and think they're no longer alone."

Chang's forecast has yet to materialize. The State that Mao built is still in business. But two facts are worth noting. One: It took the Soviet Union 74 years to implode and disappear, and a year before it happened, few analysts saw it coming. At this moment, the CCP's reign of terror in Beijing is just 73 years old. In China's extensive history, seven or eight decades is a mere flash in the pan.

Second, Mao's CCP is wildly out of step with the Chinese philosophies that long dominated the country's intellectual and cultural climate, namely, Taoism and Confucianism. If Chang's prediction eventually proves true, we will someday assess the regime of Mao and his ideological successors as a deadly aberration in Chinese political and ethical thought.

The late Austrian School economist, historian, and political theorist Murray Rothbard identified the founder of Taoism, Lao-tzu, as "the first libertarian intellectual." Wrote Rothbard:

> For Lao-tzu the individual and his happiness was the key unit and goal of society. If social institutions hampered the individual's flowering and his happiness, then those institutions should be reduced or abolished altogether. To the individualist Lao-tzu, government, with its "laws and regulations more numerous than the hairs of an ox," was a vicious oppressor of the individual, and "more to be feared than fierce tigers…"
>
> After referring to the common experience of mankind with government, Lao-tzu came to this incisive conclusion: "The more artificial taboos and

> restrictions there are in the world, the more the people are impoverished… The more that laws and regulations are given prominence, the more thieves and robbers there will be."

Confucius was a 6th-century BC contemporary of Lao-tzu and even more influential over the centuries. For challenging elitist authoritarianism, he was revolutionary in his day. He spoke of the "Mandate of Heaven," the notion that rulers must exercise power lightly and justly or Heaven would see to it that the people overthrew them. Confucius defended the right of rebellion against tyrants, whereas Mao and his successors brook no dissent and crushed resistance with calculating brutality.

Mao believed that all power "flows from the barrel of a gun"—effectively an exaltation of force and a "might makes right" perspective. By contrast, both Taoism and Confucianism emphasize harmony and mutual respect. The founders of those ancient but enduring philosophies would be horrified to know that a Chinese leader starved and slaughtered 65 million of his countrymen to impose a system cooked up by a degenerate German scribbler named Karl Marx.

Mao's bloody Cultural Revolution of the 1960s tried to cement his virulent Marxism as the sole ideology of China. His objective was to eliminate the "Four Olds" of custom, culture, habit, and ideas. Lao-tzu and Confucius never called for the violent imposition of their ideas to the exclusion of others.

Traditional Chinese philosophers like Lao-tzu and Confucius were culture-*makers*. Mao was the ultimate cultural *nihilist*, an enemy of culture itself. Whereas true culture spontaneously bubbles up among people as they interact, the artificial social arrangements that Mao sought to create in culture's place were top-down, narcissistic and savage. It represented one maniac's delusions far more than it reflected consensus or pluralistic institutions.

Even though leaders after Mao drifted from the most extreme and doctrinaire of Maoist ideas and practices, they all staunchly rallied (and still rally) around the one-party, authoritarian state as the locus of wisdom. They tolerate no threat to their monopoly on power. As he enters the second decade of his tenure, the current President of China, Xi Jinping, is ratcheting up oppression as he forms his own cult of personality. He heads an evil autocracy that persecutes minorities, arrogates total power to itself, and suppresses those who dare challenge its barbarity.

The teachings of Lao-tzu and Confucius aimed to achieve humane conditions and a virtuous people. The self-serving propaganda of the CCP is in a completely different league, aimed at maintaining power at seemingly any cost.

Of all the important Chinese philosophers, my personal favorite is Mencius. Born two centuries after Confucius, he is regarded by scholars as nearly the equal of Confucius in his influence. It is, in fact, through the more prolific Mencius that we understand Confucius himself. Mencius interpreted Confucius and took the elder's teachings to their logical conclusions—to what lovers of liberty today identify as an ancient version of 19th-century "classical liberalism."

Writing at Libertarianism.org in 2020, Paul Meany explained that Mencius believed individual growth was a very personal thing. It is far better to encourage it than to compel it:

> Similarly to Confucius, Mencius believed that the government existed to cultivate a virtuous citizenry. This at first sounds like a recipe for an overbearing authoritarian regime of paternalism, and yet Mencius's beliefs do not remotely resemble those of a totalitarian. Mencius did not agree with heavy-handed, top-down approaches.

Mencius, writes Meany, held economic views that Adam Smith defended some 2,000 years later. The Chinese philosopher argued against government monopolies and price-fixing. He defended free trade and opposed warfare as a means to national prosperity. He expected government officials to act with fairness, justice and integrity:

> Mencius held those in power to strict standards. Like Confucius, Mencius believed leaders ought to be of the highest ethical character, given that their example would filter down to the rest of the population. If leaders did not practice ethical conduct, they could corrupt an entire society. If leaders did not keep clean moral characters or failed to fulfill their duties, it was morally permissible for them to be removed from office and replaced, by force if necessary.

The followers of Taoist and Confucian thought rarely succeeded in securing the kind of minimal and benevolent State they wrote about. Governments are experts at thwarting, at least temporarily, the goals of those who wish to put the State in its proper place. But no Chinese scholar worth his salt would argue that Chinese culture hasn't been profoundly shaped over the centuries by these two philosophies. Moreover, there can be little doubt that if Lao-tzu, Confucius, or Mencius could pronounce judgment on today's Chinese government, they would express profound contempt. The CCP has surely lost any "mandate" from Heaven if it ever had one.

The day the regime dies is the day when from beyond the grave, great thinking men like Lao-tzu, Confucius, and Mencius will smile in unqualified approval.

# 8. WHAT CHINA'S HYPERINFLATION IN THE 1940S CAN TEACH AMERICANS

**by Lawrence W. Reed**

May 11, 2022

*Unbacked paper and its inflationary consequences are almost as old as the country where paper money originated—China.*

Not so long ago, when the dollar was "as good as gold" and so were many other currencies, economists spoke of paper money that wasn't connected to a precious metal as "irredeemable," "inconvertible," "unbacked," or "fiat."

None of those adjectives were complimentary.

The world is now accustomed to paper money that comports with those pejoratives. Most people today never imagine a sound alternative in which paper is tied to a metal, even as they complain about the soaring prices that fiat paper causes. It's as if we are surprised to see that the streets are wet and are demanding to know where the water came from.

As if by instinct, the market provides escape hatches so people don't drown in the government's paper. Even in socialist, hyperinflationary Venezuela in recent years, Bitcoin is proving to be one such escape hatch.

## The Ghost of Inflation

America's first experiment with fiat money (Massachusetts, 1690) did not go well. A century later, the Second Continental Congress printed until its paper money became "not worth a continental." For readers interested in those and other stories of inflation, I compiled two free eBooks, one titled *When Money Goes Bad* and the other titled *America's Money: A History*.

My primary point in this short essay is this: Unbacked paper and its inflationary consequences are almost as old as the country where paper money originated—China. The lessons from it are essentially the same as the lessons from the world's other, numerous fiat paper experiences.

Paper money first appeared during China's Song Dynasty in the 11th century AD. Made from mulberry bark, it served as a receipt or substitute for the real thing (gold and silver), and hence was "backed" and "redeemable." But later governments abused it by over-issuing the paper and severing its connection to precious metals.

For example, from first-hand experience the famous explorer Marco Polo recounted China's paper inflation of the 13th century. In *The Travels of Marco Polo*, he wrote:

> All these pieces of paper are issued with as much solemnity and authority as if they were of pure gold or silver; and on every piece a variety of officials, whose duty it is, have to write their names, and to put their seals. And when all is prepared duly, the chief officer deputed by the Khan smears the seal entrusted to him with vermilion, and impresses it on the paper, so that the form of the seal remains imprinted upon it in red; the money is then authentic. Anyone forging it would be punished with death. And the Khan causes every year to be made such a vast quantity of this money, which costs him nothing, that it must equal in amount all the treasure of the world.

The greatest hyperinflation in all Chinese history occurred less than a century ago. It played a huge role in the collapse of the Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek and the ascendancy to power of Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party in 1949. According to entrepreneur Jay Habegger:

> Between 1935 and 1949, China experienced a hyperinflation in which prices rose by more than a thousandfold. The immediate cause of the inflation is easy to isolate: the Nationalist government continually injected large amounts of paper currency into the Chinese economy. The monetary expansion was so severe that during World War II, Nationalist printing presses were unable to keep up, and Chinese currency printed in England had to be flown in over the Himalayas.

The Chinese money supply stood at about 3.6 billion yuan when war broke out with Japan in 1937. By 1945, it had soared to 1,506 billion. Economist Richard Ebeling explained the price effects of this hyper-expansion:

> As one very rough indicator, we can use the wholesale price index of Shanghai during this period, with May 1937 equaling 1. By the end of 1941 the Shanghai wholesale price index stood at 15.98. By December 1945 it had reached 177,088, and by the end of 1947 it was 16,759,000. In December 1948 the index had risen to 36,788,000,000, and in April 1949 it was at 151,733,000,000,000.

The government of Chiang Kai-shek desperately "fought" runaway prices by recalling and reissuing paper notes, proclaiming the new ones to be tied to gold even as it forced citizens to turn their gold in to the regime (as Franklin Roosevelt did in 1933). But the promise to pay proved little more than a renewed license to cheat, as the astronomical numbers cited above strongly suggest.

A gripping account of the hyperinflation and the communist takeover can be found in Helen Zia's recent book, *Last Boat Out of Shanghai: The Epic Story of the Chinese Who Fled Mao's Revolution*.

## An Important Lesson

Money originated in the marketplace as a medium of exchange. Governments, sooner or later, love to take it over, monopolize it, and then debase it to accommodate their thirst to spend. Prices soar, savings erode and economies fall apart in the chaos.

It's an old story. It's a battle we still wage today. Neither China nor America nor any other country is immune from an age-old verdict of history and economics: Print too much and the money goes to hell.

# 9. THE SURPRISING ACT OF CONTRITION THAT MADE HAN WUDI ARGUABLY CHINA'S GREATEST EMPEROR —DESPITE HIS FLAWS

## by Lawrence W. Reed

August 7, 2022

*After more than five decades on the throne, Emperor Han Wudi publicly apologized to all of China for his rampant spending and reckless wars.*

In the middle of the 2nd century BC, as the Roman Republic began its century-long slide into the dictatorship of the emperors, a ruler 6,000 miles to the east was just getting started. For 54 years, he reigned over China, a record on the throne that would stand for 18 centuries. His original name was Liu Che, but he is formally known as Wu of Han and more commonly called Han Wudi. Hang on, I promise this will get interesting.

Depending on how you count them, China's emperors numbered as few as 158 and as many as 557. Much of the disparity stems from scores who claimed they were Emperor but either ruled only a small portion or not at all. I asked an historian of ancient China who was the greatest of them. I hoped he would give me a name of one who either abdicated, or at least left the people freer when he checked out than when he checked in.

Alas, just as in the West, not many at the top in China ever walked away from power. So, in gauging "greatness," historians (perhaps betraying a state-worshiping bias) usually rank highest the rulers who strengthened the state, even if they weakened the individual. (It's a sad commentary on the history profession, but that's another story.)

Apparently, two names dominate when you ask historians of China who the greatest emperor was: Qin Shi Huang and Han Wudi. I investigated them both and can tell you that my favorite of the two is the latter. But that's like saying I prefer Al Capone to Bugsy Moran.

Qin Shi Huang, who ruled from 247 to 221 BC, is regarded as China's first emperor because he united several bickering states under one regime for the first time. He didn't do it by sending them engraved invitations. He invaded them, plundered their property, executed hundreds of thousands, engaged in book burnings, and, in his

spare time, buried scholars alive. "He also built the Great Wall and commissioned the Terracotta Army, thereby gifting China with billions of tourist revenue millennia later," writes one historian. It's doubtful, though, that Qin Shi Huang built either with that motive in mind.

Slavery was widespread and extensive under Qin Shi Huang. (Perhaps *The New York Times*'s Nikole Hannah-Jones should undertake a "247 BC Project.")

Qin Shi Huang was so ruthless and brutal that, to borrow a line from Joe Pesci in *My Cousin Vinny*, "I'm done with this guy."

Han Wudi was no paragon of virtue, but he's measurably more appealing. I say that even though his make-work schemes and subsidies remind me of Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal. If Qin Shi Huang united the Chinese politically and militarily, then we can say Han Wudi united it ideologically while spending a ton of money along the way.

The Han Dynasty lasted for nearly four and a half centuries, from 202 BC to 220 AD (but for a brief intermission from 9 AD to 23 AD). Han Wudi was the seventh of its 30 rulers and governed from the age of 15 in 141 BC until his death in 87 BC. Here are the highlights of his tenure:

- He declared Confucianism the official state philosophy. On the surface, that's a move in the right direction because Confucius taught that rulers should exercise a light touch, be answerable to the people, and practice high moral character. Han Wudi, however, banned competing philosophies and practiced the centralizing impulses of one of them known in Chinese history as "Legalism."

- He doubled the size of the empire by force of arms, ultimately stretching it to the Korean peninsula in the east to the jungles of Vietnam in the southeast, to the steppes of Asia in the west. When other peoples got in the way, he could be just as brutal as Qin Shi Huang.

- He threw a lot of public money at the arts. The Imperial Music Bureau proved to be one of his bureaucracies that long outlasted him. Support for art seems to be a common fetish of men of power; perhaps they think it softens their image or lulls the public into accepting them. You decide.

- He, along with other rulers of the Han Dynasty, moderated the practice of slave labor. Local officials were limited to 30 slaves apiece, though higher officials could possess as many as 200.

- Han Wudi loved "infrastructure" projects. No doubt ancient China needed better roads and dams, but when the state built them, they also gave the Emperor a vast source of patronage jobs and loyal beneficiaries. Han Wudi's government constructed expensive canals, dikes, highways, and bridges. The famous Silk Road was begun under his administration, and it was during his days, it is believed, that the Chinese learned of the existence of the distant Roman Republic for the first time.

- Coinage in Han Dynasty times was mostly copper. Because Chinese people believed Heaven was round and the Earth was square, their copper coins were round with a square punched out of the middle. To help cover his extravagant spending and assuage his centralizing instincts, Han Wudi forbade private coinage and declared a state monopoly over the mint.

- As the quality of the state's coinage declined and Han Wudi's spending soared, he needed ever more revenue. So he established state monopolies over salt, wine, and iron and raked off the monopoly profits for the government. He also jacked up taxes to levels that prompted uprisings around the country late in his reign.

In Han Wudi's final years, his taxing and spending so drained the strength of the empire that retreat became his only option. Popular unrest focused his attention at home as China's economy shrank under the burdens he imposed. Increasingly paranoid, he ordered mass executions of mostly innocent people on charges of political conspiracy and even witchcraft.

All in all, a mixed record. If you ask me what the single best thing was that Han Wudi ever did, I have a ready answer. Hands down, it was his Repenting Edict of Luntai. Issued in 89 BC two years before his death, it was a remarkable gesture that almost no potentate in world history ever emulated in the centuries since. After more than five decades on the throne, Han Wudi publicly apologized to the whole Chinese nation for his numerous policy mistakes. Not even Franklin Roosevelt ever did that.

Chinese historian Gongsun Rushui writes:

> …[A]s a result of years of war and reckless large-scale construction works in his later years, the state's coffers were nearly empty. People resented authorities, and bandits and thieves appeared in many places. The "disaster of witchcraft" led to the deaths of Empress Wei and the Crown Prince, and it also impacted tens of thousands of people… All these took a heavy toll on the emperor, making him reflect deeply upon himself…

> He said to his court officials, "Since I was enthroned, I have behaved recklessly and made life miserable for the people. I feel regretful for what I have done. From now on, anything that harms people and wastes state resources must be stopped."

No kidding. Han Wudi really meant it, too. He even rejected proposed tax increases, restrained the military, and embraced the old "Taoist" policy of laissez faire. It was one of the sharpest and boldest turnarounds in the history of public policy—begun with a remarkable *mea culpa* from the supreme leader himself.

Xi Jinping, are you listening? Joe Biden, there's something here for you to learn, too.

Han Wudi the reformer spent his last two years reforming his own half-century of mischief. If that doesn't make him a "great" emperor, at least it makes him better than the rest.

# 10. THE COMPATIBLE TEACHINGS OF CHRIST AND CONFUCIUS

## by Lawrence W. Reed

May 1, 2025

*It should surprise no one that the murdering megalomaniac, Mao Zedong, hated both Christ and Confucius.*

You can judge a person, claims a time-honored adage, by the enemies he keeps.

In reading some Chinese history, I learned that the mass-murdering founder of Beijing's communist state, Mao Zedong, despised the Chinese philosopher Confucius from the 6th century BC. Mao attempted to stamp out the Confucian legacy by banning it and killing its advocates. The people should look to the state for wisdom and virtue, Mao stupidly believed, not to a long-dead babbler who sounds like a Chinese version of Dale Carnegie.

One reason Mao hated Confucius is that the ancient thinker spoke of the "Mandate of Heaven," the notion that rulers must exercise power lightly and justly or Heaven would see to it that the people overthrew them. Confucius defended the right of rebellion against tyrants. In contrast, Mao crushed dissent and resistance with calculating brutality, slaughtering an estimated 60 million of his countrymen to impose a rotten system cooked up by a degenerate German lunatic named Karl Marx.

Whereas Confucius was a consummate culture *maker*, Mao was the ultimate cultural *nihilist*, an enemy of culture itself. The former was a man of peace and virtue; he communicated wise advice echoed centuries later by Jesus Christ himself. Consider the following.

In Matthew 19:19, Jesus implores us to "honor your father and mother." Half a millennium earlier, Confucius wrote, "When you serve your mother and father, it is alright to try to correct them occasionally. But if you see that they will not listen to you, keep your respect for them and don't distance yourself from them."

In Luke 6:31, Jesus gave us the Golden Rule: "Do to others as you would have them do to you." Confucius said as much, though with a negative spin, when he wrote, "What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others."

Jesus stressed that leadership is not using one's power to intimidate. It springs from integrity, justice, service, and mercy. Confucius said, "A good man does not give orders, but leads by example."

Jesus urged us to aim for the righteous and eternal while avoiding worshipping the material and temporary. Confucius argued, "The superior man thinks of virtue; the small man thinks of comfort," and, "The superior man loves his soul; the inferior man loves his property."

"For those who exalt themselves will be humbled," says Jesus in Matthew 23:12, "and those who humble themselves will be exalted." He urged continuous self-improvement without bragging about it, and so did Confucius: "It is the way of the superior man to prefer the concealment of his virtue, while it daily becomes more illustrious, and it is the way of the mean man to seek notoriety, while he daily goes more and more to ruin."

Jesus believed in introspection. In Matthew 7:5, he says, "First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye." Confucius also advocated introspection: "The superior man examines his heart, that there may be nothing wrong there, and that he may have no cause for dissatisfaction with himself." He also wrote, "When you meet someone better than yourself, turn your thoughts to becoming his equal. When you meet someone not as good as you are, look within and examine your own self."

Both men would argue, I'm sure, that it is far better to count your own blessings in appreciation than to count the other guy's in envy.

Confucius and Jesus reminded us that good character is essential in small matters. "Men do not stumble over mountains, but over molehills," wrote the Chinese philosopher. Jesus says in Luke 16:10, "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much."

Don't wallow in unwholesomeness. Both men said this repeatedly. Confucius expressed it thusly: "The more man meditates upon good thoughts, the better will be his world and the world at large." The Apostle Paul was surely echoing Jesus in Philippians 4:8 when he said, "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think on these things."

A supreme value that our modern-day know-it-alls dismiss as relative or irrelevant was at the core of the teachings of both Confucius and Jesus. It's called "truth," and

neither man would ever denigrate it through such prevarications as "political correctness." One Confucian proverb declares, "The beginning of wisdom is to call things by their proper name." Another one says, "Three things cannot long be hidden: the sun, the moon, and the truth."

Jesus personified truth, cautioned against bearing false witness, and told us in John 8:32, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free."

If you spoke of "his truth" or "her truth" to Christ or Confucius, I'm confident that both men would rebuke you in these terms: "There is only *the* truth, period."

Mao, by the way, didn't like Jesus either.

# 11. MENCIUS: THE ANCIENT CHINESE PHILOSOPHER WHO MADE A POWERFUL CASE FOR LIMITED GOVERNMENT

## by Lawrence W. Reed

July 13, 2022

*There's a reason Mao Zedong tried to flush his teachings down the memory hole after coming to power in 1949.*

A very long time ago, a Chinese scholar wrote, "The people are the most important element in a nation; the land and grain come next; the sovereign counts for the least." That sovereign, moreover, should rule by the consent of those he governs, and if he is a tyrant, the governed have every right to get rid of him, one way or the other.

These are the sentiments of a wise man named Mencius (372–289 BC), arguably the first or second most influential philosopher in all Chinese history. Most sinologists rank Confucius (551–479 BC) at the top, but since most of what we know about his teachings we know through the interpretations of his follower Mencius, a case can be made that the latter was ultimately more consequential. These two men, incidentally, are the only ancient Chinese philosophers so well known that their names have been Latinized for use in the West.

Consider this essay a follow-on to my earlier one titled "China's Great Philosophers Would Be Horrified by What Mao and the CCP Created." Therein, I argued that "Mencius interpreted Confucius and took the elder's teachings to their logical conclusions—to what lovers of liberty today identify as an ancient version of 19th-century classical liberalism."

Michael Hart in *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential People in History* notes that among the principles advanced by this ancient scholar were free trade, light taxes, and the right of the people to revolution:

> Mencius believed that a king's authority derives from Heaven; but a king who ignores the welfare of the people will, rightly, be overthrown. Since the last part of that sentence effectively overrules the first part, Mencius was in fact asserting (long before John Locke) that the people have a right to revolt against unjust rulers. It was an idea that became generally accepted in China… For roughly twenty-two centuries, his ideas were studied throughout a region that

> included over 20 percent of the world's population. Only a few philosophers anywhere have had so great an influence.

The 19th-century Scottish linguist and authority on early Chinese texts, James Legge, noted that Mencius was not "a favorite with the rulers of China" because, like any good Confucian, he did not believe in the "divine right" of any politician. Hundreds of years after Mencius, Europeans would finally come to the same conclusion.

Leaders, Mencius held, must be of the highest ethical character and treat their "subjects" accordingly. Their rule should be a "gentle touch" that spurs people to live lives of honest enterprise. For obvious reasons, this ancient Chinese thinker was always far more popular with the ruled than he was with those who ruled.

Mencius, writes Paul Meany at Libertarianism.org, "did not agree with heavy-handed, top-down approaches." He made that point clear in a story about a farmer:

> One day a farmer was inspecting his crops. Seeing that his crops were not ready for harvesting, the nervous farmer begins to pull on the sprouts to help them grow faster. When he returned home and told his family what he had done, his son checked on the rice plants and saw that they had all shriveled up. The moral of the story is that you cannot force something to grow. Instead, you must provide the correct environment. Likewise, people flourish morally not due to commands or threats of punishment.

Some people seek to rule others, and almost by definition, such people are the least qualified to do so. Indeed, government may be the only occupation for which the best hires are those who don't want the job.

Thomas Jefferson wrote that he had never "been able to conceive how any rational being could propose happiness to himself from the exercise of power over others." British author J.R.R. Tolkien said that "the most improper job of any man, even saints (who at any rate were at least unwilling to take it on), is bossing other men. Not one in a million is fit for it, and least of all those who seek the opportunity."

Centuries earlier, Mencius wrote:

> The superior man has three things in which he delights, and to be ruler over the kingdom is not one of them. That his father and mother are both alive, and that the condition of his brothers affords no cause for anxiety—this is one delight. That, when looking up, he has no occasion for shame before Heaven, and, below, he has no occasion to blush before men—this is a second delight. That he can get from the whole kingdom the most talented individuals, and teach and nourish them—this is the third delight.

When Mao Zedong foisted communism on China in 1949, he attempted to flush Mencius down the Orwellian memory hole for being a relic of the country's "decadent" and "feudal" past. Of course, the real reason for Mao's hostility should be more obvious: He could not tolerate a teacher who questioned authority, defended free trade and private property, or ranked the individual and his family ahead of the State, or who challenged the State in any meaningful way.

To Mencius, the purpose of the State was not to serve itself or treat people as serfs or puppets, but to create an environment in which individuals could flourish. The State should practice virtue so as to be a good example. Its taxation should not exceed one-ninth of what the people produced. And it should not fix prices in the marketplace: "If a fine shoe and a shoddy shoe are the same price, will anyone make the former?" he asked with a flair for rhetorical skepticism.

Paul Meany notes that Mencius condemned rulers who heavily taxed their people and then flaunted their rich lifestyles:

> In one of his [Mencius's] dialogues, a king asks if it is acceptable to reduce the heavy tax burden he has slowly raised over time. Mencius replies, "Suppose there is a person who every day appropriates one of his neighbor's chickens. Someone tells him, 'This is not the Way of a gentleman.' He then asks, 'May I reduce it to appropriating one chicken every month and wait until next year to stop?'" Mencius concludes with a striking maxim: "If one knows that it is not righteous, then one should quickly stop."
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> …Confucians such as Mencius recognized that the state was not all-powerful. And even if somehow the government were competent to micromanage every aspect of life, it would be immoral to do so. Confucians valued freedom and lived by the maxim, "Do not impose upon others what you yourself do not desire."

In the West, we often assume that freedom and limited government are ideals exclusive to the West. But Eastern scholars such as Confucius and Mencius are examples that show us this is not the case. More than two millennia ago, they identified freedom and limited government as elements of virtue. They knew that huge, overbearing government was an enemy of virtue itself.

Wisdom has been around for a very long time.

# 12. THE ULTIMATE CENTRAL PLANNING NIGHTMARE: HOW MANY KIDS YOU CAN HAVE

## by Lawrence W. Reed

July 13, 2025

*Left-leaning idiots in the West embraced China's one-child policy as a bright idea.*

> God has implanted in mankind all that is necessary to enable it to accomplish its destinies. There is a providential social physiology, as well as a providential human physiology. The social organs are constituted so as to enable them to develop harmoniously in the grand air of liberty. Away, then, with quacks and organizers! Away with their rings, and their chains, and their hooks, and their pincers! Away with their artificial methods! Away with their social laboratories, their governmental whims, their centralization, their tariffs, their universities, their State religions, their inflationary or monopolizing banks, their limitations, their restrictions, their moralizations, and their equalization by taxation! And now, after having vainly inflicted upon the social body so many systems, let them end where they ought to have begun—reject all systems, and try liberty—liberty, which is an act of faith in God and in His work.
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> – Frederic Bastiat, *The Law*

Nearly half a century ago, Beijing's central planners thought they had come up with a solution to China's "problem" of over-population. They imposed upon families a "one-child" policy, enforced by fines, police-state intimidation, and even forced sterilizations and compulsory abortions.

Of all the boneheaded delusions human beings have suffered through, perhaps the most preposterous is what economists call "central planning." It suggests that a small number of elitists with power (read: guns) can tell the rest of us how best to arrange our economic and social affairs. Confident in their arrogant fantasies, its quack practitioners disfigure whole economies and wreck lives and liberties in the process. China's one-child policy was central planning on steroids.

The results? Not pretty. Though the policy was scaled back and eventually abolished almost a decade ago, China now faces a demographic catastrophe largely because of it. The fertility rate is far below the replacement rate required to sustain a population. Earlier this year, the United Nations projected that the number of Chinese by 2100

will decline by half—from the current 1.4 billion to something under 700 million. Other projections are even more dire for the country.

How will a dwindling number of young workers be able to afford a growing burden of huge numbers of old people? Where will innovation come from if those who innovate (primarily those in their 20s and 30s) are evaporating? See this article from the BBC for similar questions posed by the burgeoning demographic crisis.

In just the last two years, some 36,000 preschools across China have closed. Why? There are no longer enough children to attend them.

The macro statistics, alarming as they are, mask the unspeakable cruelties suffered by real people in the decades of the one-child policy's enforcement. Nicholas D. Kristof, writing in the *New York Review of Books*, offered this chilling assessment:

> Perhaps no government policy anywhere in the world affected more people in a more intimate and brutal way than China's one-child policy. In the West, there's a tendency to approve of it as a necessary if overzealous effort to curb China's population growth and overcome poverty. In fact, it was unnecessary and has led to a rapid aging of China's population that may undermine the country's economic prospects. The scholar Wang Feng has declared the one-child policy to be China's worst policy mistake, worse even than the Cultural Revolution or the Great Leap Forward (which led to the worst famine in world history). The one-child policy broke up families and destroyed lives on an epic scale…

The staggering decline in population, which *Newsweek* says is "unprecedented in the absence of war, disease or famine," may not have been planned, but it is certainly the result of central planning, and in more ways than one. The one-child policy massively and artificially suppressed birth rates. Premier Xi Jinping is desperately offering incentives and subsidies to encourage births, but under his increasingly authoritarian rule, the Chinese people see few reasons to either get married or have offspring. If you don't believe the future shows promise, why bring children into the world?

The largely capitalist countries of the West have witnessed falling birth rates too, but nothing like China's. Having fewer children is what naturally happens in freedom when standards of living rise high enough, and child mortality falls low enough, so that parents don't have to have ten kids in the hope that maybe two or three of them will survive. Central planners in 1970s China put their confidence in their own schemes to order people around, however, instead of in free people to manage their own affairs. Now the whole country is on the verge of paying a terrible price.

Left-leaning idiots in the West embraced China's one-child policy as a bright idea. One of them, *New York Times* columnist and state worshiper Thomas Friedman, expressed admiration for what dictators can accomplish when they attempt to regulate population size. See this shocking 2021 article by Jacob Sullum for more on that sad story.

Long ago, Adam Smith wrote derisively of the central planner, the "man of systems" in his words:

> He seems to imagine that he can arrange the different members of a great society with as much ease as the hand arranges the different pieces upon a chessboard. He does not consider that the pieces upon the chessboard have no other principle of motion besides that which the hand impresses upon them; but that, in the great chessboard of human society, every single piece has a principle of motion of its own, altogether different from that which the legislature might choose to impress upon it.

China's population crisis is a man-made, central planning nightmare. The country's lunatic authoritarians have only themselves to blame. What a shame that so many innocent people must suffer for the mistakes of those so-called "planners."