



PREFACE



THIS is a book that introduces the history of a great people through the prism of that people's own historical memories. The epigraph is drawn from a letter by Sima Qian, China's greatest historian, in which he describes how he suffered mutilating punishment and stayed alive and working in order to complete the great history his father had begun and to transmit knowledge of China's past and its great men to later generations.

*Cang zhi ming shan*, literally "store it name mountain," is a cryptic enough phrase even by the standards of literary Chinese. "Name mountain," *ming shan*, probably was not the name of a mountain; it may have been an expression used to refer to the imperial archives. The phrase also represents the intersection of two images that have great resonance in Chinese culture. Real and metaphorical mountains have had great power over the minds of the Chinese at many times and in many ways. Buddhist monasteries often were built in mountainous areas. Some sacred mountains were ancient centers of pilgrimage and veneration. Emperors were buried in real mountains, like the tomb of Empress Wu and her husband, or in great tomb mounds that were *called* mountains, like the famous tomb of the First Emperor of Qin. Landscape paintings were and are called "mountain and water paintings." Water always flows on and away, like time or one's life, but mountains have weight, endure. Men might change the course of a river, but they could scarcely scratch the surface of a mountain. The solitary viewer in a landscape painting was delighted by implacable heights and cliffs beyond the power of human meddling. Even men, at least the greatest man, Confucius, might seem to their disciples as elusive and awesome and solid as a mountain.

The word *ming*, "name," comes even closer to the heart of the culture. Confucius taught that the world could be restored to order and virtue if only people conformed to the traditional roles designated by the names of their positions in society. "Name" in the sense of an individual's "good name" or fame was terribly important, not just for oneself but because it cast glory back over parents and ancestors and might survive one's own death and conquer the ceaseless flow of time.

Stories of *mingren*, “name people,” “famous people,” were even more important to the Chinese than to other traditional cultures as expressions of their sense of the past and their deepest values. The stories that were told were largely of high-status individuals, but they definitely were shared and beloved by many of China’s common people. Confucianism was thought of as the teaching of a very real and vulnerable human being who tried to revive a way of life created by other men, the sage kings and early Zhou kings. Traditional lore about the medieval loss of the north to foreign invaders centered not on a “lost cause” but on stories of the tragic hero Yue Fei. Even Maoism was a variation of “impersonal,” “objective” Marxism inseparable from the life, leadership, and words of one man. The optimism about human potentialities that runs through the Chinese tradition from Confucius to Mao has been inseparable from stories of the realization of the highest values in actual lives. Moreover, all these famous people, even legendary ancestors and heroes who after their deaths became gods, were conceived of as real, mortal, limited human beings, living in society and dependent on others, not gods on earth. Often their stories can be read at many levels, so that their moral and intellectual brilliance is not lost sight of, but the complexities, the hidden chains of cause, the flaws of heroes, and the unwanted consequences of virtuous action also are revealed. It is, I suspect, in large part because of its obsession with the stories of its famous people that Chinese culture is so rich and varied in its moral imagination, so at home, indeed delighted, with the complexities and ambiguities of human character and action. About half the length of the great historical work that Sima Qian planned to store in the Mountain of Fame is taken up by biographies of individuals.

This book, then, reflects and makes use of the Chinese fascination with famous people. It is intended for people who never have paid much attention to China and now want a quick and graspable introduction to some main themes in its stirring history. In writing it I have had in mind a tourist who is about to go there; a practical person whose main interest is in understanding and dealing with China today; a scholar wondering what a Chinese perspective might do for his own thinking about religion, philosophy, history; a young person of Chinese ancestry trying to find some clues to a heritage only dimly perceived; or just a reader who likes good stories. For all these readers and more, an approach through biography has a number of advantages. Since every individual has a family (ancestors, even if not descendants), lives under some kind of government, makes a living, has a place in society, suffers pain and disappointment, and dies, a look at a well-chosen life can give us some sense of the family and class structures, economics, politics, religions, and philosophies of an age, and how they interacted in individual experiences and historic trends. Biography satisfies a

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very deeply rooted taste for stories with beginnings and endings, and it appeals to our need to make sense of our own lives.

There is no shortage of overviews of China's past, of all lengths and qualities. But a balanced overview of such a vast subject either is too long and complex for rapid assimilation or is such a breathless rush of strange names, dates, and ideas that the reader gets little sense of the real drama and importance of the subject. This book does not aim to be balanced, but rather to give the reader a deep enough encounter with some key people, ideas, and times to really engage his or her attention and moral imagination. The biographical approach inevitably underemphasizes abstract reasoning and beliefs in gods and other worlds, none of which were in short supply in China, and discussion of large impersonal trends in history, which most modern historians would want to emphasize much more than this book does. The latter limitation can be overcome to a degree by focusing not just on individual lives but on the backgrounds and contexts that shaped these individuals and constrained their thoughts and actions. I have hoped that by making this a book about lives *and times* I could overcome some of the limitations of a general biographical approach and make this book somewhat better rounded as a brief introduction to main themes and trends in Chinese history. But it makes no pretense at being fully rounded, and occasionally I will point out to the reader major themes that are getting short shrift in it.

This book provides some introduction to the great religious traditions, to philosophy, and to the arts, but it gives fullest attention to some long continuities in politics and political culture. Here the study of lives and times turns out to be singularly powerful, and the results help us to explicate some trends in nonpolitical philosophy and some very general traditional values. A few sentences of anticipatory summary may help the reader keep track of these political continuities and transformations as they surface repeatedly in the chapters that follow. We will see the emergence in the age of Confucius of a set of definitions of political life that focused on "the Way of the Ruler and the Minister" (*jun chen zhi dao*), the one-to-one relation between a hereditary sovereign and the individual, usually of good family but with no hereditary right to office, who sought to prove his selflessness, learning, and practical adeptness and thus to gain employment as a minister. The ruler's most important task was to find good ministers and then give them sufficient responsibility to carry out their duties, and to listen to their advice even when it was unpalatable. The minister, especially the scholar-minister bearing the lore of tradition and all its good and bad examples, had great moral authority but no autonomous power; he could be dismissed at any time. Chinese moral thought has devoted a great deal of attention to the complexities and ambiguities of the minister's position.

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Chinese political history down to our own century can be read as a succession of developments in the nature of the ruler-minister relation, including shifts in the balance of power between the two, in bureaucratic organization, and in modes of recruitment to the bureaucracy. The chapters that follow contain stories of lives expressing and reshaping Chinese concepts of these roles, and thus the ways in which political action could be conceived, of people gaining power or losing it by acting out or violating these traditional roles. In modern times the ruler–minister relation could not provide the mobilization of the common people or the solidarity of ruler and ruled that modern nation-building require, but large elements of the moral styles and modes of personal relations associated with it survive even today.

That is only one way of finding a connecting thread in the rich fabric I have sought to present here. Readers are invited to find their own, to see continuities and confrontations among the people and stories presented here, to remember stories I should have included but did not. In developing the approaches that have gone into this book, I have learned a great deal from the reactions of the more than one thousand students who have studied these lives with me, from the various kind Chinese hosts who took me to see places connected with these lives and discussed them with me, and from the specialists in various fields who have shaped my understanding of the large range of subjects touched on here. My greatest and least repayable obligation is to the dead, to the men and women who lived these lives and told these stories over the centuries. This book is one more small indication that their names live on and their stories still are told.