



NEEDHAM RESEARCH INSTITUTE

## 6<sup>th</sup> JOSEPH NEEDHAM MEMORIAL LECTURE

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To be held by kind permission of the Master and Fellows of Clare College, Cambridge at the  
Riley Auditorium, Gillespie Centre, Memorial Court  
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# Finding China's Present in Its Past

by

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### Abstract

When we look at China today, we forget that this vast continental power faces east. To the west, the altitude of the wide Tibetan plateau, and the deserts and mountains of Central Asia and the steppe, constricted early contact with regions in Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean that the

West too easily thinks of as the sources of civilisation. In its own climate, dominated in the summer by the Pacific Monsoon, alternating in the winter with the Westerlies, China's agriculture developed separately and differently. And this is true of China's culture as a whole. In place of the familiar ancient Egyptian or Greek monuments of temples and deity figures in stone, the early culture is written in a wealth of bronze banqueting vessels, orchestras of bell chimes with zithers and lacquered furniture carefully preserved in immense deep tombs to ensure a rich afterlife for the ancestors. The central role of the family, in which the ancestors continue to be present, is rarely recognised, although this social structure was and remained the model for the Chinese state. The huge population provided a highly organised, skilled work force, capable of creating thousands of terracotta soldiers for the First Emperor and realising today's formidable infrastructure of high-speed railways. Even with communication along the steppe, across the Central Asian deserts and over the sea, China's unique culture became and has remained distinct.