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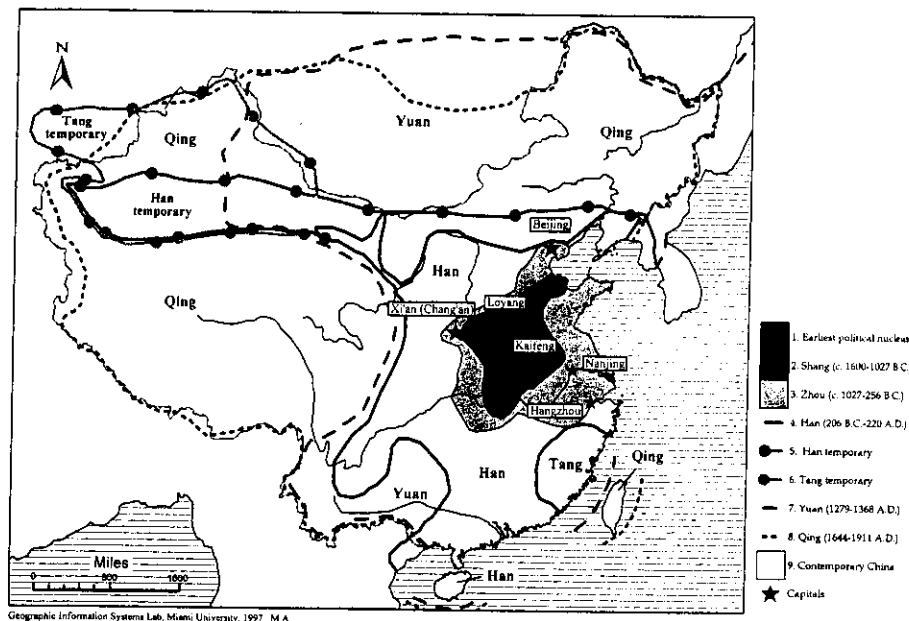
# The Historical Context

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In Chapter 2, Stanley Toops showed how China is situated within Asia and how its people blend into the three tiers of its natural landscape. He also introduced some of the cultural diversity that has resulted from the blending. In this chapter, too, we will emphasize how nature both limits and encourages human occupancy of the land, but now our focus is on the history of human settlement, conquest, and government in China. As we begin half a million years ago and move forward to the present, another kind of blending becomes evident: China's isolation from much of the rest of the planet let it develop a unique culture that contributed extensively to civilizations elsewhere. At the same time, this culture was able to absorb conquests, technology, migrations, and religions from outside without losing its own identity. Even periods of disunity and conquests by Europeans and Japanese during the past two centuries have left China's unique culture and institutions fundamentally intact.

Chapter 2 introduced you to the distinction between Frontier China and China Proper and between southeastern and northeastern China. As we review the histories of China's imperial dynasties in this chapter it will quickly become evident that China's imperial civilization began in Frontier China but has its base in China Proper. Periodically, parts of northern China have been conquered by groups of invaders coming in from the Frontier, and the Mongols (briefly) and the Manchus (more enduringly) conquered the whole country. Yet those invaders themselves soon adopted the habits and institutions of China Proper. And China Proper itself has a long historical division; southeastern China's culture is as old and solid as that of the northeast. Those in the northeast conquered those in the southeast. That conquest has not been forgotten.

This chapter introduces a number of other themes that, like those in the prior two paragraphs, are treated more fully in subsequent chapters. China experienced feudalism and developed a centralized state long before those social and political processes came to Europe. It developed some unique relationships between government officials and merchants that often pitted



Map 3.1 Historical Boundaries of China

Note: Although the Zhou dynasty did not fall until 221 B.C., its territory was significantly decreased in 256 B.C. by the barbarian invasion.

south against north and region against region yet encouraged agriculture, commerce, and the early growth of cities. It repeatedly tried to conquer and control people in adjoining territories. It has sometimes welcomed traders from around the world and sometimes kept them more at arm's length. The early parts of new dynasties often brought exciting growth and innovation; the latter parts often brought decline and stagnation. When the European powers first tested the empire with the 1839 Opium War, the empire was in a period of decline. That war exposed China's technological backwardness and resistance to change and opened up a century of conquest and humiliation by outside powers. Yet China has once again found the strength to rebound as it seeks to bring its technology to world levels.

## ■ THE PEOPLES OF CHINA

### □ Early Inhabitants

As far as we know, the ancestors of the Chinese have lived for the past half-million years in the area now covered by the modern provinces of

China Proper. China Proper is—as Chapter 2 explained—the area south of the Great Wall (which is just north of Beijing) and east of the Tibetan massif (the uplifted highlands with the two darkest shadings on Map 2.4). The earliest remains of *Homo erectus* found in China Proper are of Peking (Beijing) Man, dated approximately 500,000 B.C.; since they are fossilized, it is hard to differentiate physical characteristics from those of fossilized *Homo erectus* remains discovered elsewhere in the world. There is, however, some evidence that by about 200,000 B.C., after *Homo erectus* had merged with other humanoid species, the population, at least of northern China, had developed certain physical features associated with modern Chinese. The handheld stone choppers and knives these people fashioned were similar to those at other Paleolithic sites in East Asia but different from the stone tools made in Paleolithic Europe, India, and Africa (Chang, 1986:22–70; Gernet, 1968:19–39; Watson, 1961:22–55; Howells, 1983). This suggests that China had by then become quite isolated within its mountain and desert borders. China was to remain largely isolated from areas and cultures to the west until Portuguese adventurers arrived by sea in the sixteenth century and British naval guns finally opened China's ports to residence by foreigners in the nineteenth century. Though isolated, the Chinese borrowed extensively from neighboring regions (March, 1974:61–67), developed many inventions of their own, and united large populations and regions while central Asian and European states and empires rose and fell (Lattimore, 1940:27–39).

The Chinese have always been very conscious and proud of their long and glorious past. That consciousness and pride remain true today, and one really cannot understand contemporary China without considerable knowledge of its history.

### □ North and South

China covers a huge area, larger than the United States if one includes Tibet (Xizang), Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, and Manchuria (Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning), where cultures and physical types remain basically different from those of China Proper (Lattimore, 1940:53–80; Cheng, 1966; Pulleyblank, 1983). Even the provinces within China Proper (which itself originally contained a wide but closely related variety of cultures and physical types) cover territory large enough to hold most of the countries of western Europe. In the third century B.C., with the creation of empire under the Qin dynasty (221 B.C.), the people and culture of northern China conquered the central and southern regions of China Proper. Soon they were spreading their culture and then themselves southward.

From the time of the Han dynasty (202 B.C.–220 A.D.) and its consolidation of empire, the inhabitants called themselves “people of Han.” Map 3.1 shows you how the Han dynasty moved into territory farther south and west than previous dynasties. The southernmost people conquered by the

Han were distantly related to but distinct from them. Qin and Han expansion also took place at the expense of the several more closely related but distinct peoples and cultures of central and southern China. Some of these southerners had almost certainly created what we may call "civilization"—settled agriculture, metals, writing, and cities—at least as early as or earlier than these developments in the north, where in the dry climate the evidence is better preserved (Chang, 1986:95–106, 192–242, 368–408; Li, 1985:189–221). Such early developments in the south would be a logical result of its proximity to the original sources of cultivated rice, pigs, chickens, water buffaloes, and early making of bronze, all in adjacent Southeast Asia (northern Vietnam and northern Thailand), probably well before they appeared in what is now China. Transmittal was easy, and there was probably also some movement of peoples. Before the Qin conquest forcibly united all Chinese into a single empire, the Guangdong (see Map 2.2) area was joined in a single state with what is now northern Vietnam, the state of Yueh, which spoke a common language (Meacham, 1983). But it is hard to imagine historical China without even one of the key elements derived from Southeast Asia—buffaloes for plowing the soil, rice and pigs as staples in the diet (Te-Tzu Chang, 1983:70–77), and bronze for casting (Li, 1985:265–314; Barnard, 1983; Franklin, 1983). These presumably spread in time into central and northern China, but the north was generally too dry for rice and buffaloes and only marginally hospitable for pigs and chickens.

In the course of the Qin and Han conquests, a single written language was imposed as well as a common spoken language, the ancestor of modern standard spoken Chinese, for the officials who administered the empire. Originally, northern culture overlaid the widely different cultures of the south. With the fall of the Han dynasty in A.D. 220 began the long migration of northerners southward over some 2,000 years, which, of course, added further pressures toward a national mode, in addition to the northern troops and administrators who had been operating in the south since the third century B.C. Distinct traces of different regional cultures and speech patterns remain among Han Chinese in the south, including differences in diet and cuisine as well as strong provincial identity amounting almost to clannishness. But the southward wave of Han Chinese conquest and settlement has taken all of the good agricultural land and greatly reduced the original non-Han population, who now live only in mountainous areas mainly unfit for agriculture, to which they have been driven by Han pressures. In a few subprovincial areas of this sort they constitute a majority, yet their numbers are small, and they are divided among themselves by cultural and linguistic differences. Some 91 percent of China's people are Han, with the remainder widely scattered and fragmented. As Chapter 8 explains, these percentages are somewhat inaccurate because many Han in recent years have married non-Han or asserted non-Han identity to avoid

the one-child policy of the government, which does not apply to non-Han. Over the centuries since the Qin and Han conquest of the south, there has been widespread intermarriage as well as pressures for cultural conformity, so that the many originally quite separate and distinct cultures of central and southern China have been overlaid by a common imperial stamp. Traces of the originally wide variety of physical types as well as aspects of local or regional culture continue to be apparent beneath that stamp. Chapter 4 will tell you more about these divisions.

#### □ The Outer Areas

The outer areas—the Frontier, which was introduced in Chapter 2—are a separate case, originally inhabited by people only slightly related to the Han Chinese (Lattimore, 1940: 255–279; "Mysterious," 1998). The clearest cases are the Tibetans, Mongols, and Uygurs, the latter the dominant inhabitants of Xinjiang. Since 1950 the Chinese government has not only forcibly occupied these areas but promoted large-scale settlement there of Han Chinese as administrators and technicians, who now constitute the largest portion of the population of Xinjiang and a growing proportion of the population of Tibet. Outer Mongolia (Lattimore, 1940:489–510), north of the Gobi Desert, declared its independence from China in 1921 as the Mongolian Peoples' Republic, but Inner Mongolia, along the steppe frontier, was heavily occupied by Han Chinese, mainly as farmers dependent on new irrigation and road and rail lines. They now outnumber the remaining Mongols by something like 20 to 1, and the distinct Mongol culture is fading, and significant numbers of Han Chinese have also settled in Outer Mongolia as technicians. Manchuria (Lattimore, 1940: 103–150), known in China simply as "the Northeast" in an effort to soft-pedal the area's contended history as a target of Russian and Japanese ambitions (see Chapter 7), has been overwhelmed by mass Han Chinese migration since the late nineteenth century. This immigration has almost obliterated the original Tungusic, Manchu, and Mongol population as the northeast received refugees from overcrowded and drought-ridden northern China and developed its own surplus agricultural system and the largest heavy industrial complex in East Asia, thanks to its major resources of coal, iron, oil, and hydro (water) power.

The Chinese government's "solution" to the problem of non-Han minorities was to establish autonomous areas in the few pockets in the south where non-Han peoples remained a majority and in Tibet, Xinjiang, and Inner Mongolia. "Autonomous" is a bad joke, since the ruling hand of the Chinese state is omnipresent, and nearly all positions of authority are held by Han or by collaborators. In Tibet (as Chapter 6 explains), the Chinese state has tried to eradicate a separate Tibetan identity and so viciously repressed Tibetan efforts to assert it or to seek a voice in their own affairs

that China has been repeatedly accused of genocide. The “autonomous” formula has convinced no one and in Chinese parlance is best referred to as “great Han chauvinism.” Since minorities are such a small and fragmented percentage of the total population, often occupying strategically sensitive borders where neighboring states like to play on their discontent, the Chinese state feels free to ride roughshod over them and their interests.

## ■ POLITICAL PATTERNS OF THE PAST

### □ Feudalism

China’s recorded history begins with the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600–1027 B.C.; see Map 3.1 and Table 3.1), whose authenticity was questioned by Western scholars until excavations in the 1920s uncovered the remains of the last Shang capital, Anyang, and a great number of inscriptions giving the names of Shang kings (Li, 1957). Later excavations (Keightley, 1983; Maspero, 1978:24–33) rounded out the picture of the Shang as being dependent upon slaves captured in chronic wars with surrounding groups, already referred to as “barbarians,” and as managing a productive agricultural system on the fertile loess (wind-laid, yellow-brown soil) of northern China. The chief Shang crop was millet, probably native to northern China, slowly supplemented by rice as rice moved northward. The major technological achievement of the Shang was in the working of bronze, producing objects whose technical perfection has never been equaled (Cheng, 1960; Creel, 1937:57–218; Leslie, Mackerias, and Wang, 1973:9–14; Gernet, 1968:43–66; Watson, 1961:57–101; Levenson and Schurmann, 1969:4–26). Excavations in central and southern China, where high temperatures and humidity have tended to obliterate much of the evidence, have nevertheless made it clear, as hinted at earlier, that Shang achievements were paralleled, perhaps even preceded, farther south, where writing, bronze, and a surplus-producing agriculture based mainly on rice were used (Chang, 1980; Hsu, 1995:1–32).

The Shang built large and ornate palaces whose remains can tell us a good deal about the wealth generated by agricultural surpluses, including the richly decorated chariots that were buried in the royal tombs with their horses and large numbers of followers or slaves. Writing, clearly the ancestor of modern written Chinese, slowly evolved and expanded to include abstractions; many of the characters can still be read, and the system was inherited by the next dynasty, the Zhou (Te-Tzu Chang, 1983:81–94, 107–129; Chang, 1986:295–307; Leslie, Mackerias, and Wang, 1973:15–22; Li, 1985:442–459). The Zhou’s successor, the Qin dynasty, would impose this northern script on all of China, replacing the different scripts already in use farther south.

In about 1027 B.C., a great slave revolt was joined by one of the Shang feudal vassals, the Zhou who guarded the western frontiers (Hsu, 1995:33–67). Originally a “barbarian” group, the Zhou had acquired most of Shang culture and technology and used what became the traditional Chinese justification for rebellion, citing the injustices and oppression of the Shang rulers and declaring that “heaven commands us to destroy it” (Te-Tzu Chang, 1983:44–55; Maspero, 1978:86–92; Hsu, 1995:68–111). The last Shang king, alleged to have been a monster of depravity, died in the flames of his palace.

The Shang had ruled from successive capitals, frequently moved, in the central Yellow River valley, including the site of modern Zhengzhou, capital of Henan province (see Map 2.2). This was the heartland of early agriculture, but the Zhou established their new capital near modern Xi’an (see Map 3.1 and Shaanxi province on Map 2.2), their old base. Warfare continued with other groups around the fringes of the Zhou domains and periodically with groups to the south, all still called “barbarians.”

The Zhou adopted the feudal solution used by the Shang, a network of supposed vassals owing loyalty to the Zhou king (Maspero, 1978:34–63; Li, 1985:460–476; Hsu, 1995:112–257). This resembled the system in medieval Europe, whereby a central state with pretensions to wider power but without the means to enforce it made alliances with local and regional groups, symbolized by ritual homage, provision of troops, and periodic gifts, in exchange for their control over their regional lands as fiefs granted by the king. For perhaps the first two or three centuries of Zhou rule, this system seemed to work reasonably well (Levenson and Schurmann, 1969:27–55; Watson, 1961:109–146; Chang, 1986:339–360; Creel, 1937:219–387). But China was changing as regional vassals increased their power and ambitions beyond the ability of the central state to control.

### □ The Decline of Feudalism

More basically, the spread of iron tools greatly increased farm production, hastened the clearing of remaining forests with iron axes as well as with fire, expedited new irrigation systems, and taken together supported a major increase in population, from perhaps 5 or 10 million under the late Shang to perhaps 20 million by mid-Zhou, spurred by rising food output, which also provided surpluses to be exchanged in trade (Li, 1985:16–58). Towns and cities began to dot the plain and the Yangtze valley, and a merchant class of some size emerged.

As in medieval Europe, none of this fit well with the feudal system based on fixed serfdom and the dominance of a hereditary aristocracy (Elvin, 1973:23–34). Serfs could escape to the new towns and begin a new life. We don’t know much about the life of the common people in the first

**Table 3.1 China's Imperial Dynasties and Beyond**

Dynasty	In China	In the Rest of the World
Xia 2100–1600 B.C. (?)	Chinese characters developed	2700 B.C. Egyptians build Great Pyramid
Shang 1600–1027 B.C. (?)	Advanced bronze casting	1250 B.C. Moses and the exodus from Egypt 1200 B.C. Trojan War
Zhou 1027–211 B.C. Western Zhou 1027–771 B.C. Eastern Zhou 771–221 B.C.	Feudalism Emperors called "Sons of Heaven" Spring and Autumn Period 771–476 B.C. Confucius 551–479 B.C. Warring States Period 476–221 B.C.	753 B.C. Rome founded 560–483 B.C. Buddha in India 399 B.C. Death of Socrates 336–323 B.C. Alexander the Great
Qin 221–206 B.C.	China unified Great Wall unified	
Han 202 B.C.–220 A.D. Western Han 206 B.C.–A.D. 9 Eastern Han A.D. 25–220	Confucianism adopted Silk Road opens Buddhism to China Paper invented	54 B.C. Caesar invades Britain
Three Kingdoms A.D. 220–280 Eight Dynasties A.D. 265–589	Period of disunity Invasion and more division	451 A.D. Attila the Hun defeated 476 A.D. Fall of Rome
Sui A.D. 589–618	Grand Canal built	
Tang A.D. 618–907	Expanding trade First dated printed book	"Dark Ages" in Europe A.D. 742–814 Charlemagne
Five Dynasties A.D. 907–960	Period of disunity	

(continues)

Dynasty	In China	In the Rest of the World
Qidan A.D. 936–1122 Jin A.D. 1115–1234	Rule northern China	A.D. 1096 First Crusade
Song A.D. 960–1279 Northern Song A.D. 960–1126 Southern Song A.D. 1127–1279	Rule southern China Capital in Kaifeng Capitals in Nanjing, Hangzhou	Medieval Europe
Yuan A.D. 1279–1368	Genghis and Kublai Khan invade from Mongolia	A.D. 1215 Magna Carta A.D. 1300 Renaissance A.D. 1347–1351 Black Death
Ming A.D. 1368–1644	Return to rule by Chinese	A.D. 1450 Printing in Europe A.D. 1492 Columbus reaches America A.D. 1517 Reformation A.D. 1637 First British trade with Canton
Qing A.D. 1644–1911	Manchu rulers	A.D. 1776 American Revolution A.D. 1789 French Revolution
Republic A.D. 1912–1949	KMT Nationalist rule	A.D. 1917 Russia's communist revolution A.D. 1939–1945 World War II
People's Republic 1949–	Communist rule	

few centuries of Zhou rule, but it may be revealing that the arrangement mentioned by Mencius much later (third century B.C.), which he called the "well field system," included a checkerboard plan with a well in the central plot (Latourette, 1964:27, 44). Serfs were supposed to give priority to irrigating and cultivating that plot, which belonged to the feudal lord and only after that could work on the outer plots assigned to them. Serfs were bound to the lord and to his land for life, and on the lord's death could not leave but became serfs to his heir. As the economy altered and agricultural surpluses offered new opportunities for merchants and town dwellers to live and make money, such a system became increasingly hard to maintain (Li, 1985:477-490).

By this time, most writing was done with brush and ink, as in all subsequent centuries, on silk or on strips of bamboo. It was thus that the main body of the Chinese classics was originally written under the mid-Zhou: the *I-ching*, or *Classic of Change* (*Yijing*—a cryptic handbook for diviners), the *Book of Songs*, the *Book of Rituals*, and collections of historical documents (Levenson and Schurmann, 1969:56-65).

New agricultural productivity freed increasing numbers from farm labor to serve as artisans, scribes, transport workers, soldiers, officials, scholars, and merchants. Towns and cities became more important as trade centers than as centers of feudal control. At the same time, many of the original Zhou vassals were evolving toward separate stedom, as in late medieval Europe, each with its own distinctive culture. After some four centuries of Zhou rule, the political, economic, and social structure began to show strains, and eventually it disintegrated.

In 771 B.C. (the first authenticated date in Chinese history) the Zhou capital near Xi'an was sacked by rebels, and though it was rebuilt, the capital was moved to Loyang—shown on Map 3.1—in the central Yellow River valley so as to better control the Zhou domains. It was to be a vain hope, as the feudal structure continued to break up, and vassals, now emerging states, increasingly ignored Zhou authority and fought each other for dominance. The old Zhou base in the Wei valley near modern Xi'an was given as a fief to a supposedly loyal noble of the Qin clan, the new guardians of the frontier. Five centuries later, the Qin were to sweep away the crumbling remnants of Zhou pretension to found the first all-China empire (Gernet, 1968:69-84).

#### □ Toward a Centralized State

The Qin were, in fact, the smallest and weakest of the major contenders among the former Zhou vassals, at least to begin with (Latourette, 1964:40-48; Li, 1985:222-239). The other rivals were various northern and central states as well as the state of Qu in the Yangtze valley and Yueh in the far south. It is still too early to speak of any of them, or of the Zhou,

as "China"; each was culturally, linguistically, and politically distinct, and for some time there were also minor racial differences (Li, 1985:59-188). The 500 final years of feudalism over which they presided are known as the Spring and Autumn and the Warring States Periods. Though they shared technology, no one state dominated until the Qin conquest in 221 B.C. (Gernet, 1968:87-108; Walker, 1953:41-72; Maspero, 1978:171-268; Hsu, 1995:258-287). The state of Qu provides a good example of the differences, in that its base along the central portion of the Yangtze River led to rapid development of trade and of towns and cities. But Qu was ultimately defeated by a coalition of northern states in 632 B.C. and again in 301 B.C. (Walker, 1953:20-40). This may have been one of those contests that changes the course of history, giving the future to a peasant-based authoritarian empire, beginning with the Qin, rather than to a state where trade and merchants were prominent.

Increasing food production made it possible to field large armies of men who could be spared from farming for at least parts of the year and could be fed on surpluses. Warfare became larger in scale and more ruthless, no longer the earlier chivalric contests between aristocrats but efforts at wholesale conquest and fights for survival. The crossbow with a trigger mechanism, developed by or before this time, greatly increased firepower, range, and accuracy, and by the fourth century B.C., foot soldiers were supported by armed cavalry. All this undermined the earlier dominance of hereditary aristocrats, their chariots, and their personal retinues (Walker, 1953:73-101). Bronze and copper coins were minted by each state, standing armies proliferated, and bureaucracies began to appear. These changes offered a new range of opportunities for able commoners. For many it was a positive and welcome change, but for others the passing of the old order and the disruptions of warfare offered only chaos and moral confusion. Confucius, who lived in the Spring and Autumn Period (see Table 3.1), made it clear that his prescriptions were an effort to reestablish order and what he referred to as "harmony" following the values of an earlier "golden age." As fighting continued, Qin exterminated the remnant of Zhou power in 256 B.C., with no ceremony, and went on a generation later to overwhelm all the other states in a series of lightning campaigns ending in 221 B.C. (Levenson and Schurmann, 1969:66-78). China derives its name from Qin (Ch'in in Wade-Giles transliteration).

The chaos of the Warring States led to the growth of formulas for restoring order, like that of Confucius (551-479 B.C.) and his later disciple Mencius (372-289 B.C.), which stressed the need for order within a social hierarchy (Maspero, 1978:287-294; Martin and Shui, 1972:1-12; de Bary, Chan, and Watson, 1960:17-35, 100-111, 256-266; Schurmann and Schell, 1967:9-21, 34-66; Waley, 1939). The most important of these, after Confucianism, was Daoism, which through its cryptic text, the *Dao de jing*, or "Classic of the Way," represented a different approach to the

troubles of the time (de Bary, Chan, and Watson, 1960:50–87; Maspero, 1978:305–316). The supposed author Laozi, which means simply “the old one,” is a shadowy figure who was a contemporary of Confucius (Martin and Shui, 1972:13–17). Where Confucius emphasized the importance of rules for human behavior and gave advice to rulers, Daoism urged believers to relax, go with the flow, and use nature as the pattern, especially water, which flows around obstructions and seeks the lowest places. Whatever exists is natural and hence good. In practice, both Confucianism and Daoism had an appeal for most Chinese, who tended to follow both at different times, Daoism in retirement or when things went badly and Confucianism when in office; or, as has been said, they were workday Confucians and weekend Daoists. Other later philosophical schools, especially under the Qin, adopted the doctrines called Legalism, which emphasized harsh laws to control behavior instead of Confucianism’s dependence on morality (Schwartz, 1985; de Bary, Chan, and Watson, 1960:136–158; Gernet, 1968:111–125; Maspero, 1978:321–328). Chapter 12 discusses these thinkers in greater depth.

The Qin conquest in 221 B.C. imposed stern measures to ensure conformity within the new empire. Primogeniture, whereby the eldest son inherits all of his father’s property and status, was abolished, as a possible basis for power that might threaten the state. Land was now privately owned and freely bought and sold, which completed the end of the former feudal system. Walls had been built before to discourage raids along the northern steppe border, but these were consolidated and rebuilt under the Qin as the Great Wall, which runs east and west approximately along a line between areas to the south where normal rainfall is enough for farming and those to the north that are too dry. The Great Wall and the system of imperial roads and canals were built by forced labor, levied as part of taxes (corvée), which caused much suffering. Those who asked questions, the intellectuals, were suppressed by the new totalitarian state. Empire building is a rough business anywhere, but for all its excesses the Qin laid the groundwork for the dynasties that followed and for the modern state. These moves were doubtless popular, but the oppressively heavy set of state controls led to revolts that toppled the Qin in only fifteen years and burned the emperor’s magnificent palace as rebels occupied the capital near modern-day Xi’an in 206 B.C. (Bodde, 1967; Lattimore, 1940:429–446; Latourette, 1964:66–75).

By 202 B.C. a new rebel leader emerged out of the civil war, Liu Bang, who founded a new dynasty, which he called Han (Grousset, 1959:48–53). He placed his capital on the site of modern-day Xi’an (see Maps 2.2 and 3.1). The harsher aspects of Qin rule were softened by the more humane morality of Confucianism, but many of the empire-building systems of the Qin were retained. The new dynasty emphasized the Confucian precept

that government exists to serve the people and that unjust rulers must forfeit the support of the ruled while encouraging educated men to serve the state (de Bary, Chan, and Watson, 1960:172–199; Li, 1985:240–262; Chu, 1972; Wang, 1982; Loewe, 1994).

What remains of the glory of the Qin was rediscovered near Xi’an in the 1970s as excavations were begun at the massive tomb of the Qin emperor, Qin Shihuang, revealing a terra cotta (pottery) army, each of the thousands of life-size figures individually portrayed and set to guard the tomb’s entrance. The idea of empire is contagious, and the Han extended their boundaries still further. In 111 B.C., emperor Han Wudi reclaimed the Qin conquests of Guangdong and into northern Vietnam and added southern Manchuria and northern Korea to the empire in 109–108 B.C. (see Maps 2.2 and 3.1). Earlier he had conquered the desert of Xinjiang, mainly to guard the “Silk Roads” westward (Map 2.1), and built watchtowers and garrison posts along it while mounting several successful campaigns against the ancestors of the Mongols in Inner Mongolia (Latourette, 1964:78–87; Grousset, 1959:54–62).

Silk caravans crossed the desert of Xinjiang by any one of three main routes and then handed over to a series of central Asian groups, who carried the silk to the shores of the Mediterranean, whence it went by ship to Rome, the biggest market, which paid for it in gold, since they had nothing to offer in exchange that the Chinese wanted (Yü, 1967). Tibet remained outside the empire. Wudi’s endless campaigns and the burdens they imposed nearly caused a revolt, but following the advice of the imperial censors, he issued a famous penitential edict promising to be a better and less oppressive ruler. Han rule was briefly broken by a palace coup in A.D. 9 when the empress’s nephew Wang Mang declared himself emperor of a new dynasty (Loewe, 1974:256–306; Grousset, 1959:63–67), but he was overthrown in A.D. 23 and the Han reestablished in A.D. 25, now as the Eastern Han, with its capital at Loyang (Map 3.1), where most of the dynasty’s former grandeur was continued. But no political order lasts forever, and in the face of rebellion the last Han ruler abdicated in A.D. 220.

### □ The Move South

There followed a confused and confusing period sometimes called the Six Dynasties where originally “barbarian” groups ruled most of the north, while the south was contested among a number of Chinese rivals (Elvin, 1973:35–53). Buddhism had come in from India during the Han, and now, in this “time of troubles,” it spread widely and for a time eclipsed Confucianism while at the folk level merging with Daoism (de Bary, Chan, and Watson, 1960:279–410; Grousset, 1959:81–88). But the model of a unified

empire established by the Han remained in people's minds, and after three and a half centuries of fragmentation, a new all-China dynasty, the Sui, re-created the empire of the Han. The fall of the Han dynasty had stimulated a mass movement southward of Chinese fleeing trouble in the north, a major new wave in the Han people's occupation of the south, driving most of the original non-Han inhabitants up into the mountains as the Han took the good agricultural land. This process was to continue cumulatively over the next 1,500 years or more and included the incorporation of Fujian both within the Chinese sphere and into the empires of Sui and Tang. Fujian is mountainous, and its easiest communications are by sea from the coast; its people were among the first to develop trade with Taiwan and Southeast Asia. The language of Fujian people remains different from standard Chinese but essentially the same as Taiwanese, since most of the people of Taiwan migrated from coastal Fujian beginning after A.D. 1600 (Lattourette, 1964:110-137).

The move south meant a series of adjustments to a very different environment from that in the north, where most Han had previously lived (Lattimore, 1940:469-471). New tools suited to wet-rice agriculture were developed, including the endless chain of paddles driven by two men pushing pedals on a crank, designed to move water efficiently from one paddy level to another. Rice, the dominant crop, was now transplanted from seedbeds to irrigated fields, and in the warmer and wetter southern climate yields greatly increased as a result, and two or even three crops a year became possible. Irrigation, intensive cultivation, and the creation of more or less level paddies by terracing on slopes required huge amounts of labor, provided by a growing population sustained by increased food output. In this period also began the use of human manure, or "night soil," to build the nitrogen levels that boosted yields and increased in supply as the population grew. Perhaps the clearest and most potentially destructive impact of the rising southern population was, however, the removal of most of the original forest cover to clear land for farming. As the population continued to rise, steeper and steeper slopes were invaded by terraces and the area covered by trees greatly reduced, producing, as in the north where deforestation was much older, erosion, siltation of stream and irrigation channels, and flooding. But forests harbored wild beasts such as tigers and also offered refuge for bandits, both used as peasant reasons for destroying them, often by fire.

By about the eighth century A.D., half or more of the population lived in the south, which also provided most of the imperial revenue and the food supply to feed the capital (still retained in the north because of tradition) and to guard the threatened area of the northern and northwestern frontier. But the north, the cradle of empire, had become a marginal area economically, or at least agriculturally, as the progressive removal of the forest since before Shang times led to massive erosion, siltation of streams

and irrigation systems, and consequent severe and chronic flooding, especially of the silt-laden Yellow River but also of all the other streams in the north. Irrigated and cultivated land shrank disastrously, and much of the north could no longer feed itself and had to depend on southern imports of rice. The Grand Canal was built to link the north with the south for such transport.

In the south, the wetter and warmer climate meant that forests or second growth could more easily reestablish itself, especially if it was left alone, but as the population continued to increase that became less and less common, and large areas reverted to grass and brush, much less effective in retarding erosion. The growing population not only cleared more land to farm but cut from all hillsides twigs and grass for use as fuel or as fodder for penned animals. Trade, both along rivers and the sea coast, flourished in the south and supported a growing number of cities. Most places could be reached by cheap water transport, sometimes in no other way, whereas in the north most streams (including the heavily silted Yellow River) were not navigable, and goods had to be transported by pack animal, cart, and human porters at far greater cost.

The south also benefited from overseas trade in far greater volume than before, and port cities, especially along the coast from the mouth of the Yangtze River south, multiplied and prospered on the trade with Taiwan and Southeast Asia. Permanent colonies of Chinese merchants were established in the Philippines, Vietnam, Java, and elsewhere, and there was a great advance in shipbuilding, drawing its wood from near-coastal southern forests, especially in mountainous Fujian. Such developments tended to reemphasize the cultural differences of Cantonese and Fujianese from the main body of Chinese, and such differences remain. Canton (Guangzhou) and ports north of it such as Swatow (Shantou) and Amoy (Xiamen) joined Fuzhou and other Fujianese ports in generating a maritime, mercantile, seagoing world that contrasted with the inward-centered and agricultural world of the rest of China, with its imperial capital far inland and its revenue heavily dependent on the land tax. The Cantonese and Fujianese (Min) spoken languages remain distinct from standard Chinese, not mutually intelligible with it, and there is a prejudice among most other Chinese against the Cantonese, especially, as wily traders communicating with each other in their own spoken language and practicing clannishness and sharp dealing. Even their food and other customs are different. The Cantonese return the compliment by stereotyping northerners as slow-witted peasants or interfering bureaucrats. But there was a growing north-south trade as well, especially in tea, which had been adopted as the national drink during the Tang dynasty and was grown mainly in the misty hills of the south, in the mountains south of the Yangtze River, where it did not compete with rice for land and profited from the ample rainfall. To serve both domestic and overseas trade, the Chinese developed instruments

of long-distance credit called "flying money" and, finally in the tenth century, paper money (Elvin, 1973:146–163).

### □ Rebellion, Radiance, and More Rebellion

The Sui dynasty that reunified China in A.D. 589 did so by harsh methods and hence is often compared with the Qin. The Sui rebuilt the Great Wall and constructed the first Grand Canal, all with forced (*corvée*) labor. Rebellion soon spread, as in the last years of the Qin, and out of the fighting emerged a new dynasty, the Tang, which presided over an even greater empire than the Han. The Tang is considered by most Chinese the high point of their history. Elite culture flourished, and poetry achieved new richness, especially in the work of Li Bai and Du Fu, still thought to be China's greatest poets (see Chapter 13). The Tang capital, now named Chang'an (which means "Long Peace"; see Map 3.1), was again in the Wei valley on the site of modern Xi'an, which carried the aura of a great tradition because the first capital of the Han dynasty had been located there. It was a highly cosmopolitan place to which merchants and travelers came from as far as the eastern Roman empire and from most of Asia in between: Nestorian Christians (see Chapter 12), Jews, Muslims, Turks, Indians, Persians, and others thronged the streets of the capital. Tang conquests reached far into Central Asia, where they acquired horses for the imperial stables. Perhaps the best-known aspect of Tang art is their mass production of glazed porcelain figures and paintings of their beloved horses. Under Tang rule, the development of the south continued apace as more land was cleared for farming by northern migrants and as trade flourished. Renewed contacts westward revealed, as in Han times, no other civilization that could rival the Celestial Empire, and Tang China was clearly the zenith of power and sophistication. Did not all other people the Chinese encountered acknowledge this, by tribute, praise, and imitation of Chinese culture, and is that not the sincerest form of flattery (Grousset, 1959:121–177)?

Like the Han, Tang rule was briefly broken by rebellion in the mid-eighth century, and although the imperial order was restored, regional commanders continued to build their power, while rich landed families managed to slip off the tax rolls (Peterson, 1979:464–560). The civil service system begun under the Han was reestablished and strengthened but was increasingly undermined by the rich and powerful. In the mid-ninth century, the state moved against the Buddhist establishment (Weinstein, 1987) as a potential rival, confiscating the extensive temple and monastery lands and their wealth, but this was not enough to turn the tide. Total revenues fell by the end of the century, accompanied by spreading rebellion (Latourette, 1964:142–174; Elvin, 1973:54–68). In 907 one of the rebels usurped the throne and declared the Tang at an end, but fighting continued until 960, when one of the contending generals announced a new dynasty,

the Song. The Song have been criticized by Chinese scholars because they gave up the wasteful and unprofitable building of empire and were ultimately overwhelmed by the hated Mongols. But the Song decision to avoid the endless wars of empire was wise and concentrated the state's energies on the provinces south of the Great Wall and east of the deserts and mountains of the west, the most productive and profitable area. The chronic struggle to hold Vietnam, Korea, Mongolia, Tibet, and Xinjiang was abandoned; these conquests had never even begun to pay their way, and the state now controlled the richest land and enterprises.

### □ Southern Strategies

The Song capital was fixed at Kaifeng, on the great bend of the Yellow River (see Map 3.1), where the rebuilt Grand Canal could bring to it the rice surpluses of the Yangtze valley and where it could better administer the south, now the heart of the economy. Kaifeng became a major industrial center with a greater production of iron and steel than the whole of Europe would have in the eighteenth century and used coal as metallurgical fuel and for heating houses seven centuries before the West. China's total population passed 100 million for the first time, and Kaifeng contained over a million people. The carved wooden blocks used since the Han dynasty for printing were supplemented by movable type, which was pressed onto paper, also invented in the Han, to produce books. Literacy grew, and popular literature boomed. Paper currency issued by the state served the needs of an expanded commerce. Government officials distributed printed pamphlets to promote improved agricultural techniques; there were also ingenious new metal tools and proto-machines and new improved crop strains. It was an age of good government, with the rich landed families and regional commanders under central control for the time and revenues correspondingly healthy.

An important reason for the Song success was the re-creation of the civil service and its strengthening to new heights. Most officials were selected from among those who passed the imperial examinations (whose history is discussed in Chapter 4); imperial relatives, a plague in the past, were barred from taking those exams. Once in power, officials were regularly rated for merit and promoted or passed over accordingly. Lists of successful candidates from this time include nearly half from families who had never before produced an official—a remarkable degree of mobility and opportunity whatever one's birth. This largely civilian government tended to have a low opinion of the military, and the army did not match the efficiency of the civil service. Soldiers were recruited largely from the poorer classes, and they faced formidable opponents in the mounted warriors from the steppe, who progressively detached much of the northwest and the northeastern borderland, marginal areas to be sure, but traditionally

part of the empire. There were efforts at reforming and beefing up the military, but these failed due to the rigid opposition of conservatives at the capital (Latourette, 1964:175–207; Grousset, 1959:178–194).

The price was high: the siege and capture of Kaifeng in 1126 by a mounted nomad group originally from Manchuria, the ancestors of the Manchus. The Song army regrouped and pushed the nomads north of the Yangtze but were obliged to shift their capital south to Nanjing for four years, and then to Hangzhou (see Map 3.1), where they presided over continued flourishing in the arts and technology, building on advances in the Kaifeng period, now known as Northern Song (the Hangzhou period is called Southern Song). This is thought to be the greatest period of Chinese landscape and nature painting, which together with vernacular literature and drama, blossomed in the rich urban culture of Hangzhou, which was dominated by the growing merchant group but increasingly shared with city dwellers there and in many other large southern cities. Cut off from normal trade routes through the northwest, the Song turned in earnest to developing more sea routes to Southeast Asia and India. Ports on the southeast coast flourished and became home to large numbers of resident foreign merchants, mostly Arabs. Foreign accounts agree that these were the world's largest port cities of the time.

There was a striking advance in the size and design of oceangoing ships, some of which could carry over 600 people as well as cargo, far larger than anywhere else until modern times. The earlier Chinese invention of the compass was a vital navigational aid, and these ships used multiple masts, separate watertight compartments (not known elsewhere until much later), and the stern-post rudder. In all of this, Song ships predated modern ships by many centuries. Ironically, they helped make it possible for Europeans much later, after they adopted much of Chinese ship technology, to make the sea voyage to Asia, also using the gunpowder invented in China to subdue those they visited. Hangzhou itself had a population over 1.5 million, but there were some six large cities within 300 miles and a network of smaller ones, depending like Hangzhou on the intricate system of waterways that crisscrossed the Yangtze delta and adjacent areas. Marco Polo, who actually saw Hangzhou only later under Mongol rule, marveled at its size and wealth and called it the greatest city in the world, a judgment confirmed by several other Western travelers of his period (Gernet, 1962). Chapter 8 discusses China's urban history in greater depth.

The Southern Song was also an exciting time of technological innovation and even of what seem like early steps toward the emergence of modern science. Confucian scholars like Zhu Xi pursued what they called "the investigation of things" (de Bary, Chan, and Watson, 1960:489–490), and in agriculture, manufacturing, and transport a variety of new machines and

tools were developed—cultivators and threshers, pumps for lifting water, machines to card and spin and weave textile fibers, windlasses, inclined planes, canal locks, water clocks, and water-powered mills (Hommel, 1937). It all looked like eighteenth-century Europe, with commercialization, urbanization, a widening market (including overseas), rising demand, and hence both the incentive and the capital to pursue mechanical invention and other measures to increase production. Would these developments have led to a true industrial revolution in thirteenth-century China, with all its profound consequences? We will never know because the final Mongol onslaught cut them off, and later dynasties failed to replicate the details of the Song pattern. But it is tempting to think that if the Song had had just a little longer, China might have continued to lead the world, and the rise of modern Europe might not have happened as it did.

The Southern Song dynasty was far wealthier than Northern Song and had a booming economy. Unfortunately, this did not make it immune to the administrative and financial problems it inherited, but it kept functioning reasonably well until the end. Overseas trade, now a major source of revenue, was far larger than in Europe as late as the nineteenth century. Porcelain, perfected under the Tang, joined silk and lacquer as exports, and the finest pieces, called celadon, mostly made for the imperial court, have never been equaled, with their subtle bluish green or shades of white and gray glazes, exquisitely shaped. Government and private schools multiplied, to educate both the sons of the rich and the able sons of the less well-to-do. The explosion of printing and publication led to the spread of libraries and book shops and the appearance of anthologies and encyclopedias, as well as maps of the empire based on a grid of coordinates (Grousset, 1959:195–221). Mathematics was further developed, including the appearance of algebra and the use of the zero. So why did the Song succumb?

The Song were overrun in the end because the Mongols were formidable fighters who had already conquered the world's largest empire, extending even into Europe, and because of some drastic Song errors. In 1222 the Song foolishly made an alliance with the Mongols and within two years reoccupied Kaifeng, but a year later they were desperately defending their gains. For forty years the fighting raged in the north, where the heavily fortified Chinese cities were both defended and attacked with the help of explosive weapons, including cannons, which the Mongols had learned about from their great neighbor (Elvin, 1973:84–90). Song naval ships on the Yangtze mounted cannons and mortars and helped to hold back the Mongol tide, all before this devastating new technology spread to Europe, where it was quickly copied. But the Song were chronically weakened by factionalism at court, divided counsels, and inconsistent, often faulty, strategy (Murphey, 1996:113–122).

### □ Unity and Cultural Continuity

By 1273 the Mongols had triumphed in the north and soon poured south, where Hangzhou surrendered in 1276. One false move against an opponent like the Mongols was usually all it took. But the Song put up a longer and more effective resistance to them than any of their other opponents—and the Mongols could never have won without the help of Chinese technicians, artillery experts, and siege engineers. Their rule in China, to which they gave the dynastic title of Yuan (see Map 3.1), lasted much less than a century and depended on many thousands of Chinese collaborators to administer the empire (Langlois, 1981). They also employed many foreigners, including Marco Polo, who served as a minor Yuan official from 1275 to 1292. His account of his experience has been dismissed by many, but on his deathbed he told his confessor, "I have not told the half of what I saw." Richard Lister (1976) and Marco Polo (1982) provide readable accounts of his travels; Frances Wood (1996) disputes his tale, but Jonathan Spence (1996b) points out reasons to believe it.

Kublai Khan, the Mongol ruler whom Marco Polo served, fixed his new capital at Beijing and became almost entirely Chinese culturally, though the welcome he extended to travelers and innovations from all over the world and the many rewards he gave to his fellow Mongols disturbed his subjects (Martin and Shui, 1972:95–107; Rossabi, 1988; Grousset, 1959:231–247). His successors were far less able, and the empire began to fall apart soon after Kublai's death in 1294, torn by rivalries among Mongol commanders and by widespread revolts among the Chinese against the exploitative Mongol rule (Murphey, 1996:121–122). By the end of the 1330s, most of China was in rebellion, and by 1350 control of the vital Yangtze valley was lost. A peasant rebel leader welded together Chinese forces, chased the remaining Mongols back into the steppe north of the Great Wall, and founded a new dynasty, the Ming, which was to restore Chinese pride and grandeur, from a new capital first at Nanjing and then at Beijing.

The imperial capital thus moved progressively eastward, from the Wei valley and Chang'an where the Zhou, Han, Sui, and Tang had ruled, to Loyang in later Han and Tang, to Kaifeng and Hangzhou under the Song, and finally north to Beijing (see Map 3.1). This migration reflected the eastward movement of the main area of threat to the imperial frontiers, from the nomads of the northwestern steppe in the Han to the Turkish tribes in the Tang to those that harried the Northern Song, then to the Mongols, and finally to the Manchus of Manchuria and their predecessors. But these northern capitals were increasingly unable to feed themselves, as the north declined ecologically and economically; hence the Grand Canal was extended to Beijing by the Mongols to bring food up from the south. Putting the capital on the exposed frontier (Beijing is only some 40 miles

from the borders of Inner Mongolia) made less sense economically than establishing one in the growing southern heart of the country, such as Nanjing. The imperial tradition of locating the capital close to frontier threats exerted too strong a pull, however, and even obliged the Ming to move to Beijing from Nanjing.

Chinese history readily divides into dynastic periods and into what is called the dynastic cycle. Most post-Qin dynasties (but not the Yuan) lasted about three centuries, sometimes preceded by a brief whirlwind period of empire building such as the Qin or the Sui. The first century of a new dynasty would be one of vigor, expansion, and efficiency; the second would build on or consolidate what the first had achieved; and in the third vigor and efficiency would wane, corruption would mount, banditry and rebellion would multiply, and the dynasty would ultimately fall. A new group coming to power (again with the exception of the Mongols) would rarely attempt to change the system, only its management. Culture was continuous, even during interdynastic periods of chaos. By Tang times, most of the elements of modern Chinese culture were present. Irrigated rice was supplemented or replaced in the more arid parts of the north by wheat noodles (said to have been brought to Europe by Marco Polo or others along the Silk Roads as the origin of spaghetti) and steamed bread, or for poorer people by millet and *gaoliang* (a sorghum introduced from central Asia and, like millet, tolerant of drought).

Food was eaten with chopsticks since at least the Zhou dynasty, a model adopted early by Korea, Vietnam, and Japan, although the rest of the world ate with fingers. The Chinese cuisine is justly famous, including as it does such a wide variety of ingredients (the Chinese have few dietary inhibitions), flavors, and sauces. What went on the rice—vegetable or animal—was sliced small so that its flavors were maximized and distributed and also so it could cook quickly over a hot but brief fire. There was an increasing shortage of fuel as the rising population cut down the forests and people were reduced to twigs, leaves, and dried grasses for cooking. The universal cooking utensil was the thin cast-iron saucer-shaped pot (*wok* in Cantonese, the dialect of Guangzhou) still in use, which heats quickly but holds the heat and distributes it evenly, the technique we now call "stir-frying." Not only Cantonese words like *wok* but much of the Chinese food served in restaurants in this country and elsewhere betray their Cantonese origins, since Cantonese are the great majority of all overseas Chinese and, like many other immigrant groups, have used their native cuisine as a means of livelihood.

The Chinese landscape became converted more and more into an artificial one of irrigated and terraced rice paddies, fish and duck ponds, villages, and market towns where the peasants sold their surplus products or exchanged them for salt, cloth, tools, or other necessities not produced in

all villages. Teahouses became the common centers for socializing, relaxation, and gossip and for the negotiation of business or marriage contracts. Fortune-tellers, scribes, booksellers, itinerant peddlers, actors or jugglers, and storytellers enlivened the market towns and cities and the periodic markets held on a smaller scale in most villages at regular intervals (see Chapter 13). All this made it less necessary for people to travel far from their native places, and most never went beyond the nearest market town. Beyond it they would have found for the most part only more villages and towns like those they knew, except for the provincial capital and, of course, the imperial capital. In the dry north and the mountains of the south, many goods moved by human porter. The wheelbarrow and the flexible bamboo carrying pole were early Chinese inventions that greatly enhanced the ability to transport heavy weights, balanced as they were by each design (wheelbarrows had their single wheel in the middle, more efficient than the Western copy) and hence enabling porters to wheel or trot all day with loads far exceeding their unaided capacity. Most of these and many other aspects of Chinese culture have remained essentially unchanged today, as has the deep Chinese sense of history and of the great tradition to which they are heir.

#### □ The Rise and Fall of Ming

The Ming dynasty, officially founded in 1368, fit the dynastic pattern of a first century of vigor and expansion, a second of complacency, and a third of decline and fall (Elvin, 1973:69–83). Probably the most spectacular aspect of the first century was the expeditionary voyages of Admiral Zheng He, seven altogether between 1405 and 1433, from ports on the southeast coast with fleets of up to sixty ships (Martin and Shui, 1972: 109–116). They toured most of Southeast Asia, the east and west coasts of India (where Vasco da Gama ninety years later was to make his first Asian landfall), Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), the Persian Gulf, Aden, Jidda (from where seven Chinese went to Mecca), and on to east Africa. Some ships may have gone as far as the Cape of Good Hope or even around it. They brought back giraffes, zebras, and ostriches to amaze the court and tributary agreements from a host of newly contacted states. The ships carried export goods, mainly silks and porcelains, and brought back foreign luxuries such as spices and tropical woods. The economic motive for these huge ventures may have been important, but the chief aim was probably political, to show the flag and command respect for the empire. Chapter 7 says more about these missions.

Despite their size, Zheng He's ships were fast sailors with their four decks, large crews, and cargo capacity, faster than the Spanish galleons or Portuguese caravels of a century or two later. Their rig was designed to take advantage of the monsoonal wind patterns; properly timed voyages



Photo: Robert E. Gerner

*An early Chinese invention, the carrying pole, is still commonly used in China.*

could count on sailing with the wind for about half the year as far as Africa, and returning with the opposite monsoon in the other half. Like Song ships, they were built with separate watertight compartments, and despite their many encounters with storms, few were ever lost (Elvin, 1973:131–145). Such exploits of seamanship and exploration were unprecedented in the world. Their grand scale was an expression of new imperial pride, but they contributed little to the Ming economy and made no lasting impression on the Chinese mind, which continued to think of theirs as the only civilized empire and had little curiosity about foreign places. The expeditions were very expensive and, perhaps mainly for that reason, were stopped after 1433. The emperor may have felt he had made his imperial point, and it seems unlikely that trade profits even began to cover the costs. Another factor was the decision to move the capital from Nanjing to Beijing in 1421 to better command the chronically troubled northern frontier, where there was an attempted revival of Mongol power (Elvin, 1973:91–110, 203–234).

But the abandonment of the expeditions, like the move to Beijing, was a symptom of the Ming's basic conservatism and traditionalism. China's relations by sea had always been given a far lower priority than its land frontiers. Zheng He's explorations and contacts were not followed up. The Ming turned inward, rebuilt the Great Wall in the form we see today in the few parts near Beijing that have been restored, and reasserted the Chinese

style in everything, partly as a reaction against the hated Mongol conquest. They devoted their energies to the development of their home base, which since Shang times they had called the Middle Kingdom, meaning not only the center of the world but one that combined the advantages of a golden mean, avoiding the extremes of desert, jungle, mountains, or cold around its borders. In whatever direction one went from China, the physical environment worsened: north (too cold), south (too hot and jungly), west (too mountainous and dry), or east into a vast and, in cultural or economic terms, empty ocean. The Chinese attributed the lack of civilization they noted in all "barbarians" to their far less favorable environment as well as to their distance from the only center of enlightenment. China was indeed the most productive area of comparable size anywhere in the world, bigger than all of Europe, more populous, and with a far greater volume of trade, domestic and foreign. The Chinese saw their interests as best served by further embellishing their home base rather than by pursuing less rewarding foreign contacts.

For some time this worked well. Prosperity increased, and with it population, trade, and cities, continuing the developments under the Song. Rice yields rose with the introduction of more productive and earlier-ripening varieties introduced from Vietnam and actively promoted by the state. In the sixteenth century, new crops from the New World, most importantly maize (corn), potatoes, and peanuts, came in via the Spanish connection in the Philippines. New irrigation and better application of manure swelled total output further (Elvin, 1973:113–130), and there was a boom in silk production as well as in cotton, introduced from India and soon the basic material of clothing for all but the rich, who often wore silk. New supplies of silver came in to pay for the exports of silk, tea, porcelain, lacquerware, and other goods, and more and more of the economy was commercialized. Merchant guilds acquired new, though unofficial, power in the growing cities and followed the luxurious lifestyle of the elite. Right through the last century of the Ming, despite political decay, technological innovation continued on Song foundations, including the development of mechanical looms. Popular literature and drama flourished, and fine porcelains, including the famous Ming blue-and-white pattern, spread beyond the court and were found in many merchant houses. Beijing was rebuilt on its Mongol foundations and filled with gorgeous palaces. The civil service system inherited from the Song also worked well until the final collapse. It was a confident and prosperous time (Struve, 1984; Hucker, 1969; Chan, 1982).

But by the end of the sixteenth century, there was a clear decline in administrative effectiveness, made worse by a succession of weak emperors and the rise of palace eunuchs to power (see Chapter 4). Banditry and piracy multiplied as government efficiency declined and poorer areas suffered increasing distress. Increased population, probably by now about 130

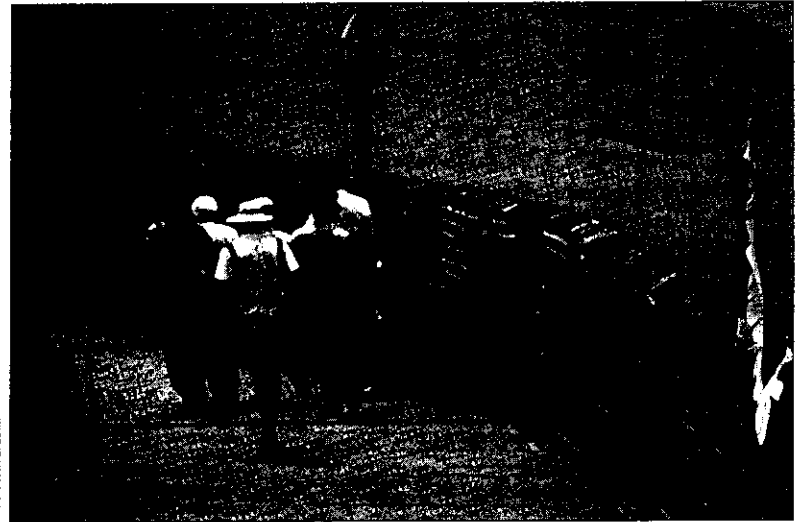


Photo: Robert E. Gambr

*The Great Wall north of Beijing, a section cleaned up for tourists (above) and a section left unchanged since the Ming rebuilt it (below).*



Photo: Robert E. Gambr

million, was not accompanied by a commensurate increase in the number of officials, who were thus overworked and less effective, as well as prone to bribery to maintain their incomes. Famine and rebellion spread, and the Manchus, waiting on the northeastern border, took their opportunity to establish their own dynasty, the Qing, in 1644 (Latourette, 1964:247–274; Huang, 1981).

### □ The Rise and Fall of Qing

Unlike the Mongols, the Qing successfully reproduced the Chinese pattern in all ways, and their control rested on widespread Chinese collaboration; Chinese filled about 90 percent of all official posts. The dynasty was fortunate in producing three successive able emperors, who presided over the reconquest of all of the empire and even added Tibet for the first time (see Chapter 6). The “barbarian” invaders on the steppe to the west were finally crushed for good, and Taiwan was conquered and added to the empire. The peace and order provided by the Qing and its efficient administration led to new heights of prosperity, trade, and urbanization, far beyond Ming levels, and also to a population that probably tripled between 1620 and the dynasty’s end in 1911, gained another 100 million by 1950, and doubled again between 1950 and 1983 to over a billion (Chao, 1987:41; Grousset, 1959:295; Ma, 1967). By the end of the eighteenth century, production was no longer keeping pace, and in the course of the nineteenth century China fell gradually into poverty and rebellion, as Europe and the United States rode a wave of new prosperity and technological/industrial revolution. Chinese technology had long been superior, but now it fell disastrously behind, to its great loss (Elvin, 1973:285–316). Yet until as late as 1850, foreigners described China as prosperous, orderly, and admirable for its Confucian-based civil service that was open to any young man with the skill to pass the imperial examinations.

We know more about China at this period than at any before it, not only from the voluminous Chinese records but from the numerous foreign accounts, which are generally highly positive and, among other things, noted that China’s foreign trade as late as the 1830s was probably larger than England’s, whereas its domestic trade was many times larger. Portuguese traders had arrived at Guangzhou (Canton) early in the sixteenth century, and Jesuit missionaries were shortly thereafter at work even in Beijing. By the eighteenth century, the British became the dominant traders with China, buying silk and tea that they paid for in silver, accompanied by French, Dutch, and other European merchants and finally by Americans. From the mid-eighteenth century, all foreign traders were restricted to Guangzhou, the chief port for foreign trade, a condition they found increasingly irritating as British and European power grew while

their merchants at Guangzhou continued to be treated like minor barbarians. A party sent by King George in 1793 to request wider trade privileges and diplomatic representation at Beijing was haughtily rebuffed (see Chapter 7), as was a subsequent mission in 1816 (Schurmann and Schell, 1967:104–113).

But despite the grand exterior, all was not well domestically, as population continued to outrun production in the absence of major technological change. As under the Ming, the number of administrator-officials stayed the same while the population rapidly expanded, and both efficiency and honesty suffered. China continued to protect itself against the disruptions of institutional and technological change, looking backward to its great tradition rather than forward, and was especially opposed to any ideas or innovations of foreign origin. As China declined in the nineteenth century and was wracked by increasing rebellions (Perry, 1980; Fairbank, 1992:187–232), the Qing had entered its third century. There might have been a different response from a new and vigorous administration, but the Qing were now old, rigid, fearful of change, and as originally alien conquerors, anxious not to depart in any way from their role as guardians of the ancient Chinese way in all things. The emperor Qianlong, who reigned from 1735 to 1799, was a great patron of art and rebuilt or refurbished the imperial capital inherited from the Ming in essentially the same form one can see it today. There he and other emperors received “tribute missions” from “barbarian chieftains,” who knelt abjectly before the throne. China was slow to recognize that external threat now came from the “sea barbarians” instead of from its landward frontiers and looked down on them as inferior, despite their clear technological and military superiority.

Matters came to a head in 1839 over opium, which the British and Americans had begun to export from India and Persia to China in exchange for silver. The resulting drain of silver from China was worrying, and in any case the opium trade had been declared illegal. Chinese efforts to destroy the opium stored at Guangzhou led to war in which the Chinese army and navy were totally humiliated by modern British weapons. The Treaty of Nanjing, signed in 1842, granted the access the foreigners had long sought and the right to reside and trade at several coastal ports, the “treaty ports” (Fairbank, 1978). Such humiliations were destined to continue and grow in scope for over a century. A war in 1858–1860 extended foreign privileges further and opened the interior to missionaries and the rivers to foreign shipping. The empire had the help of volunteer foreign troops to put down the Taiping (see Spence, 1996a) and Nian rebellions that took over extensive territory in southern China. The Taiping rebels ruled much of Jiangsu, Anhui, and Zhejiang provinces (see Map 2.2) for eleven years. The fighting and radical social experiments (see Chapters 11 and 12) left well over 20 million casualties and formerly lush fields as barren wasteland. The Qing emperor found himself at the mercy of the foreigners

and regional warlords who helped squelch the rebellions; his treasury was depleted. Foreign Christian missionaries sought converts without the traditional supervision always imposed on such activities in the past. Powerful landlords raised their own armies and collected their own taxes. In an effort to catch up, mathematics, science, and foreign languages were made part of school curricula, and sons of prominent Chinese were sent abroad for study. Still, China suffered humiliating defeat in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895. Reform efforts in 1898 to improve the navy, railroads, banking, agriculture, and industry were cut short when the young emperor who endorsed them was arrested by his aunt, who took over as Empress Dowager. Chapters 6 and 7 discuss these matters further.

But China's decline into poverty was primarily the result of its own internal problems, as summarized earlier, and, indeed, one can argue that the foreign traders helped China, by widening the market and introducing railways, telegraph lines, and other aspects of "modernization," much more than they harmed it, although the psychological hurt to Chinese pride was deep.

#### □ Beyond the Dynasties

In 1911 the dynasty toppled or fell of its own weight; a republic was inaugurated under Sun Yat-sen, the nationalist leader, but China was soon torn by fighting among regional warlords and was partially unified only in 1927 under Chiang Kai-shek, with its new capital at Nanjing (Fairbank, 1992:279–293). There was some progress in the short decade before the Japanese attacked, burning Nanjing in 1937; killing perhaps 300,000 unarmed men, women, and children; and raping and torturing 100,000 women (Spence, 1990:447–450; Chang, 1997). The long war against Japan that followed, from a refugee capital in Chongqing in Sichuan, exhausted Chiang's Nationalist (Kuomintang, or KMT) government while it built the strength of the Chinese communists, who waged a guerrilla war in the north and captured the leadership of Chinese nationalism. Resumed civil war after the defeat of Japan ended in a total communist victory in 1949, and Chiang and his government fled to Taiwan, where his successors remain in power. Beijing was again made the capital to get in line with imperial tradition.

Hong Kong, ceded to Britain in 1841, joined the treaty ports as a major center of foreign trade and an entrepôt for trade with the rest of China; it remained a British colony until its return to China in 1997. Cut off from its hinterland in 1949, it built a profitable new structure of light industry and banking and successfully housed and employed the stream of refugees from the rest of China. Hong Kong's example of economic development was important to China as it pursued its own development, and the areas of the southeast near Hong Kong shared in its prosperity, producing

goods for export as well as for domestic consumption. New industrial cities multiplied in every province, led by Shanghai, China's biggest city since about 1900, which still supports an economic and industrial boom and supplies technicians and skilled labor to other growing cities. To this extent, the semicolonial foreign period with its example of "modernization" in the treaty ports has provided a model for developing modern China, whatever its imperialist nature and its denunciation by communists and Nationalists alike (see Chapters 6, 7, and 10 for more detail).

Manchuria (the "Northeast"), its industrial plant built by the Japanese after 1905 when they wrested control from the Russians and built a dense railway network, remains the chief center of heavy industry, but many other new ones have arisen in the provinces south of the Great Wall. As one result, China is now probably the most polluted country in the world and has been stripped of forests to supply wood for its huge and still growing population, now over 1.2 billion; this has drastically increased erosion, siltation, and flooding (see Chapter 9).

#### ■ CHINESE ATTITUDES AND OURS ABOUT CHINA

Most Chinese still feel a deep pride in their country, not only in its modern achievements but in the long record of Chinese superiority. The record of Chinese firsts is impressive: paper and printing, porcelain, the compass, gunpowder and cannons, lacquer, distillation (during the Han, many centuries ahead of Europe), ship design, the wheelbarrow, the double-acting piston bellows, the square pallet chain pump for raising water, iron suspension bridges, canal locks, water clocks, discovery of the circulation of the blood (also during the Han, 2,000 years before Europe), breakthroughs in metallurgy, and many, many more (Needham, 1981; Hommel, 1937). Unfortunately for later centuries, these discoveries or innovations were not followed up by thoughts about how to put them to new practical uses outside the confines of low-technology agriculture. Except for the early Zhou dynasty and some later periods like the Song, there really was not a group in China one could call "scientists" (Elvin, 1973:177–199); most innovations were worked out by artisans, who were often illiterate, whereas philosophers, who dealt in abstractions, looked down on manual workers and manual work. Chinese intellectuals generally did not speculate about how changes in technology might affect society and commerce and the natural environment or devise experiments to observe the workings of the forces of nature—a key factor in the much later Western successes during the scientific revolution. They preferred to observe and speculate about human behavior and values. The general mindset of the Confucian power holders against change as disruptive doubtless also

retarded the kind of scientific inquiry that led to the industrial revolution in Europe.

China did develop astronomy very early, noting and recording eclipses and sunspots in Zhou times and devising an accurate calendar. Early achievements in mathematics, mechanics, physics, and biology tended to lapse in later centuries, as did the development of instruments for predicting earthquakes, remarkable in their time. Some intellectuals in the Southern Song dynasty revived a brief interest in science, and under the Mongol Yuan dynasty Chinese scientists resumed work in mathematics and also built a large array of instruments and structures for astronomical observations. But by the time the Jesuits, carriers of the latest scientific advances in Europe, arrived at the Ming court with great curiosity about these Yuan instruments, the Chinese said they had forgotten how to use them and the mathematics that went with them. The response of the court astronomers to their realization that the ancient calculations predicting the movement of the heavenly bodies no longer fit observable reality was not that the theory needed revision but that "the heavens are out of order." Such a response could never have happened in Europe after 1600; those scientists would have sought to revise the theory so it would accord with empirical reality.

Despite such blind spots and the overriding importance of technology and science in the modern world, one cannot dismiss imperial China in any sense as a failure. For some 2,000 years it led the world in technology as in the art of government, in power as well as in sophistication, as all who encountered the Middle Kingdom acknowledged. It is difficult to measure economic well-being in the past, as it is now, but it seems likely that for most of their history until perhaps 1850, most Chinese were better off materially than most people elsewhere. As for that elusive quality we call happiness, who really knows, but China's rich literature certainly gives a picture of a generally contented populace with a strong sense of humor and a love of life. Indeed, the Chinese still value long life as the greatest of all goals, some testimony to their enjoyment of living and its pleasures. Family, and next to that food, remain the biggest values, as they have been for thousands of years. All these things are surely worth something, perhaps even more than modern technological leadership.

As Chapter 8 explains further, China has long produced more cities, and larger ones, than the rest of the world, and its urban experience is rich. European observers were impressed by it and by the huge streams of trade flowing along all China's rivers, lakes, and canals as well as in and out of its coastal ports. For all its growing technological backwardness as the nineteenth century wore on, China remained vibrantly alive; since the 1950s and the death of Mao in 1976, with his irrational utopian ideas that cost heavily in retarding economic progress as well as in lives lost, China has concentrated on maximizing its economic development and raising its technological levels toward world standards. It developed national identity

and unity long before Europe and other parts of the world. Its chief failure is in denying its people anything approaching free expression, let alone a genuine democracy. It is a police state pure and simple, where all dissent is suppressed and where non-Han like the Tibetans are cruelly oppressed. It is just possible—but unlikely—that more scope may be allowed for individual freedom and initiative and for the aspirations of the many subject minorities. When one adds the record of environmental destruction since 1950, what is the best way to judge China's "success"? That depends, like so many things, on one's point of view and the topics about which one asks questions. As you read the rest of this book, with its discussion of many realms of Chinese life, this question will come to your mind more than once: What are the most important questions to ask about China's success or failure?

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