



## A HASTY GUIDE TO THE HISTORY OF CHINA

### I. Prehistory

China evidently developed agriculture along the Yellow River approximately at the same time as that in Egypt and Babylon along the Nile and the Euphrates. These farming communities, living off wheat not rice, may have numbered a million by 3000 BC. Archaeological remains of these numerous early communities can be easily visited (e.g. in Sian).

But early historical evidence of China is later than in the Near East. Thus the earliest dynasty, the Hsia (about 2000 BC) is still legendary, despite recent claims to have found their capital at a village at Erlitu between Loyang and Chengzhou.

The legends about the Hsia dynasty make them out as philosophers or master-irrigators. It seems likely that real historical evidence about this dynasty will be found, in the next generation or so. But remember that even so, this will still be late compared with Egypt (first dynasty c.3200 BC) or Babylon.

### II. The SHANG Dynasty. c.1600-1000 BC

This dynasty also once used to be regarded as legendary. But it is now accepted that its 30 kings had various capitals in the region of the Yellow River and ruled most of the plain dependent on it or its tributaries, i.e. about half of what is now north China (north of the Yangtse). This kingdom did not include Peking and the north, then desolate, nor Manchuria, while all China south of the Yangtse was lived in by ethnically non-Chinese peoples related to the Thais.

This dynasty is that of the bronze age in China. The perfect casting of bronze vessels of all sorts, was remarkable (the best vessels are now in the museum in Taiwan) and has never been surpassed.

The population of China proper may have been five million in 1000 BC when the Shang dynasty collapsed. That in what

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Note: a map on page 11 gives approximate geographical positions of places mentioned.





is now China south of the Yangtse may have been one million.

Shang officials made careful astronomical observations. They also used an advanced pictographic script fairly close to that of China of to-day. They worshipped the sun and there appears to have been a priestly bureaucracy at the last capital Anyang, where many oracle bones for divination were dug up in the 1920s.

### III. The CHOU Dynasty. 1000-770 BC

This dynasty extended the size of the area in settled agriculture and the Yangtse basin also began to be brought under cultivation. Rice was apparently introduced from the south (Thailand?). But the rulers failed to establish any real political control over the extended area. China gradually broke up into feudal entities, which eventually seem to have been not quite dissimilar to that in the European feudal system. The kings at Loyang became increasingly the formal rulers of a network of independent fiefs among whom which still interspersed 'barbarian' (i.e. non-Chinese) tribes.

### IV. EASTERN CHOU. Epoch of Warring States 770-230 BC

The disintegration of the political unity continued but the population increased thanks to the further extension of agriculture south of the Yangtse. This must have been because of widespread cultivation of rice. There may have been about 25 million in northern China by 400 BC and about another 2 or 3 million south of the Yangtse in the region now known as China.

Eventually the feudal entities coalesced round six main entities, themselves subdivided feudally. Each one encouraged schools of philosophy, art and pottery etc. Confucius (551 - 479 or later) preached clear thinking, self-discipline, and kindly paternalism effectively enough to secure his survival as a dominant influence until the 20th century. But he was only one of many





exploratory thinkers, whose number, diversity and ingenuity recalls Greece of the same time. The books of these thinkers were soon written on silk, the most remarkable of Chinese products, whose culture probably dates from the Hsia dynasty.

V. The CHIN Conquest. 230-221 BC

After many generations of fighting and the eclipse of the old dynasty, the whole of what was then China was swiftly conquered by the prince of Ch'in, a fief at the western end of the Yellow River. He gave China its current name. The victory was achieved by the accumulation of a vast and efficient army well led by Shih Huang Ti, who proclaimed himself "the first emperor", a title which few have disputed and which in practical terms he deserved. He was as it were the Napoleon of China. He broke up all the old feudal states and replaced the old nobility with his officers. The country was reorganised into 36 provinces; law, weights, coinage and measures, were standardised. So were axle widths of carts, to encourage inter-provincial commerce along the cart tracks where irregular axle widths had caused innumerable delays and accidents. There was a general proscription of all but basic books on practical matters on the grounds that free thought as well as feudalism had led to decay. This illiberal move was accompanied by the standardisation of script. Old complex script was forgotten. Seventy "official scholars" alone were allowed to possess books.

Shih Huang Ti reigned a very short time but his rule transformed China. He is the emperor commemorated in his tomb outside Sian by the "buried army". The frontier wall against northern barbarians (Huns) known as "The Great Wall" was also begun by him. Mao is said to have envied him, and to have even boasted that he killed more philosophers than he.

It seems likely that the population reached about 50 million as a result of this reunification by 200 BC, a figure which it inexplicably stayed at for approximately a thousand years - this demographic sluggishness matching that of Europe in the late Roman and early medieval eras almost exactly.

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VI. The HAN Dynasty. 202 BC - 220 AD

(except for interregnum of Wang Mang of 23 AD, Hsin Dynasty)

This was really the golden age of China, comparable to the contemporaneous Roman empire in Europe. After the "first emperor's" death, a short period of confusion followed. But a new strong man came forward from a new family to manage, more humanely, the great achievements of his predecessor. The Han were tolerant managers of the Chin achievement, private scholarship and speculation being soon allowed. The emperors ran China with civil servants not feudal nobles nor soldiers. Confucius's ideals became the conscious philosophy of the civil servants after 140. These were all trained at a Grand College after 124 BC and after 6 AD examinations were introduced not very unlike those introduced in England by Sir Chas. Trevelyan in 1860.

Under this dynasty, all the primitive tribes in south China were mopped up and Sinkiang conquered, so that by 100 BC China had approximately its present dimensions. Subsequent expeditions took Chinese generals to Turkestan and even the Persian Gulf and the Caspian, opening the way for a trade in silk with Rome.

But population continued static at about 45 million to 60 million, the first census of households being in the year 2 AD.

Missionaries from India brought Buddhism in the first century AD. It was tolerated and in many respects (and people) combined with Confucianism. A more earthy but mystical religion, Taoism, appeared in the second century AD. It too was tolerated.

The intellectual and technological achievements of the Han included the invention of paper (traditionally 105 AD) which replaced silk for writing; an accurate rendering for  $\pi$ ; the astrolabe (third century); charts of the heavens; elaborate figure painting and calligraphy; and probably a primitive form of porcelain.

This sunny era was interrupted only by Wang Mang (9-23 AD) who sought a socialist revolution by e.g. nationalisation of land, manumission of slaves, high taxes on wine and a price freeze, bans on usury etc.

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VII. Era of Division 220-589.

The collapse of the Han led to the division of China, for much of this time, into two or three sub kingdoms each beset by barbarian invasions and conquests from central Asia. Each barbarians' victory over Chinese Kingdoms was followed as a rule by slavish emulation of Chinese precedents - a rule followed by subsequent invaders.

This era again mysteriously reflects events in Europe, at the end of Rome.

The main technological development was the devising of the stirrup, though perhaps this was in Korea, about 500 AD. Political weakness enabled the further flourishing of Buddhism, sometimes repressed, and sometimes enhanced by the introduction of Greek patterns.

The Mongols incidently began their career as the scourge of north China about 400 AD.

VIII. Reunification under the CH'EN (589-618) and T'ANG (618-907)

The empire was reunited by conquest by dynasties which more or less accepted Buddhism as their official religion though Confucianism still marked the bureaucratic mandarinat. Chinese Buddhism also developed many characteristics of its own. With the capture of so much of India by Islam, China became really the centre of Buddhism.

The greatest of the restored emperors was the T'ang emperor Li Shih Min (627-649), who combined military conquests with patronage of art and letters, and a liberal tolerant spirit. Chinese suzerainty was recognised by the petty states of central Asia. Persian and Indian culture thereby penetrated. A Nestorian Christian church was even set up in Ch'ang An (Sian) the T'ang capital. The beautiful T'ang tricoloured pottery and painting dates from his day, and the charming murals on the walls of uncovered tombs show the T'ang court as elegant, free and gay.

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The combination of strength and charm, however, could not last. The most brilliant of the T'ang emperors Hsuan Tsing (712-756) founded schools in every district, patronised painting (particularly landscape) and under him was devised the first real porcelain. Greek patterns were very popular. Buddhists probably produced the first wood blocks for printing on paper in his time. But the emperor was much under the influence of his famous concubine Yang Kuei-Feu, recalled at Sian. Perhaps she was the imperial lady who was said only to have laughed when she heard the sound of tearing silk. At all events she was expensive and led her emperor to ruin. The later T'ang emperors suffered numerous setbacks from gathering barbarians.

IX. Five Dynasties (607-59) and THE SUNG (960-1279)

There followed five dynasties of short duration and then China was again united under the Sung, who were like the T'ang: also humane, scholarly and philosophically minded. Their capital was at Kaifeng. Under them printing made considerable progress. Thus a Buddhist canon was printed in Szechuan by imperial order from 130,000 blocks. Various administrative reforms were introduced by Wang An Shih (1069-1074), a socialist prime minister. This was the golden age of landscape painting, usually done on silk. One emperor, Hui Tung, was himself a fine painter. Two great encyclopedias were published. Tea began to be drunk widely. The mariners' compass began to be employed and there was much commerce with the Arabs, who had many representatives in Chinese ports. Celladon glazed porcelain was invented and the porcelain produced by high fired glazes at this time has perhaps never been equalled. It was also under the Sung that the population began to increase substantially, based on the further exploitation of the rice growing potential of the Yangtse valley. There was a definite shift in the country's political centre of gravity towards the south. Explosives seem to have been made under the Sung also, though they made little use of them.

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X. The MONGOLS c.1194-1368 (The YUAN Dynasty 1260-1368)

The Sung were displaced by the most violent eruption in the history of Asia, the Mongols, who rapidly expanded by means of a powerful military machine, employing strict discipline, extreme mobility, espionage, terror and superior siege equipment. The Mongols captured Chinese towns easily but had a good deal of trouble imposing themselves on the countryside. They therefore changed from a policy of execution in punishment for rebellion to one of massacre of whole populations. Some suggest that China lost 35 million people in these wars ( a good example of how conventional wars can cause much loss of life ?). The Mongol King, Genghiz Khan, first established himself in North China, and his grandson Kublai conquered the south (1260). He established his capital at Peking, then an innovation. Once he had won, he ruled, as was usual with barbarians, according to Chinese precedents, imposing his own warrior aristocracy on the remains of the old bureaucracy. Muslims and Nestorian Christians were tolerated and Buddhists favoured. Some painters continued, and Yuan cobalt blue porcelain was original and beautiful.

The Mongols sought to expand further. They failed to capture Japan (1281) and Indo China (1288), but secured the submission of Burma and nearly all central Asia. At home, Kublai and his successors improved the roads, and secured the grand canal from the Yangtse to Peking, facilitating both commerce and repression. Their currency declined through excessive use of paper money.

The Mongols introduced both the theatre and novels to China thought both were looked upon as debased, and so remained for many centuries so that the best classical Chinese novels (of the 17th and 18th centuries) were anonymous.

XI. The MING 1368-1644

The Mongol emperors declined with power, following a familiar pattern. In the upheavals that followed the death of Kublai's last descendant, a Buddhist monk turned rebel, found an army, seized Nanking in 1356, set up an orderly government there, and eventually drove the Mongols out of the north.

The Ming were an indigenous Chinese dynasty, but they

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accepted the Mongol capital at Peking (1420) in order to secure the northern frontier against barbarian attack.

A series of extraordinary naval expeditions under the eunuch Cheng Ho took Chinese fleets to Africa, to Java, and the straits of Hormuz.

The next century saw the beginning of Western trade, after the Portuguese reached Canton in 1520. A permanent Portuguese trading post was established at Macao in 1557 while the Jesuits, led by the great monk Matteo Ricci, were allowed to establish themselves at Peking in 1601 after they had shown the benefits of certain western products such as maps, calendars, cannon and clocks.

Most of the 16th century the Ming were busy fighting the Japanese and later the Manchus, a semi Mongolian people whose capital was established at Mukden.

The Ming emperors commissioned a vast quantity of porcelain, distinguished by overglaze enamel, often very successfully in combination with underglaze blue.

## XII The MANCHUS (CH'ING Dynasty) 1644-1912

The last Ming emperor hanged himself on a (still pointed out) tree when a bandit occupied Peking. The Regent asked a Manchu general to help him remove the bandit. He did so but remained as the first Manchu emperor. The Manchus behaved in the beginning like a more humane version of their distant kinsmen the Mongols. They filled the central administration with their own countrymen but insisted that they adopt Confucian principles and go through the old competitive examinations. Manchus were appointed as colleagues of Chinese in all posts of provincial administration. The conquest was accompanied by the imposition of the Manchu shaved head with the queue.

China in 1644 probably had a population of 150 million. By 1801 it was 300 million thanks no doubt to the maintenance of peace and the decline of the great plagues.

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But by then there was little further scope for the extension of land under cultivation. This must have been one reason for the serious troubles of the 19th century such as the Taiping rebellion (1857-65), in which many died, in a kind of primitive Christian revolt, and the rise of militant nationalism in the 20th.

The Chinese had no special interest in the various Portuguese, Dutch and Russian traders who arrived in the 16th and 17th centuries. They were treated as the Chinese had always treated merchants, Arab, Persian or Indian; tolerantly, provided they remained at a distance. The Western trade with China in the 18th century was still entirely in the latter's favour: we bought silk and tea and had little to offer in return. After 1780, however, the opium trade to Canton became of importance, as did Western manufactured goods. This led to the eventual establishment of the British at Hong Kong in 1842 (the population there was then barely 10,000 in comparison with 5 million (?) to-day) alongside Macao. Other Western interests led to the growth of Shanghai and the eventual system of concessions (the French, British, Russian and German communities were secure from Chinese law) in several cities.

The vast increase of Western goods as a result of the manufacturing revolution of the 19th century transformed our trade balance with China. By 1900 Western Europe had jointly reduced the enfeebled Chinese empire to the status of an economic satellite, supported occasionally by the use of troops (1860, 1900).

Discontent deriving from over-population and mal-administration first took the form of reactionary nationalism. Where this got nowhere, radical nationalism seemed the only alternative. The Manchus had meantime always continued to be resented as foreigners and their defeat in the Sino Japanese War over Korea 1894-95 ruined what prestige they had. A final effort was made at saving the empire by means of a liberal constitution in 1908 but this scheme was overtaken by the Revolution of 1911 which led to the eclipse of the last emperor and a long and complicated period of confusion and violence.

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Mingled with foreign intervention and international war, the outcome was the eventual triumph of the Communist party in 1949. This followed the conversion of the once radical nationalist party the Kuomintang of Sun Yatsen into a somewhat corrupt place-mongering organisation when Chiang Kai Shek, Sun's successor, returned to Peking in 1945. The long Japanese war and occupation of most of east China including Peking (1937-1945) had enhanced nationalism among the educated and prepared the way for the victory of a party which seemed to promise national regeneration. How it soon became more bureaucratic, brutal, and more concerned with place mongering than even the most extravagant dynasty in the past is another story.

September 1982



