

The First Imperial Period

Much of what came to constitute China Proper was unified for the first time in 221 B.C. In that year the western frontier state of Qin, the most aggressive of the Warring States, subjugated the last of its rival states. (Qin in Wade-Giles romanization is Ch'in, from which the English China probably derived.) Once the king of Qin consolidated his power, he took the title Shi Huangdi (First Emperor), a formulation previously reserved for deities and the mythological sage-emperors, and imposed Qin's centralized, nonhereditary bureaucratic system on his new empire. In subjugating the six other major states of Eastern Zhou, the Qin kings had relied heavily on Legalist scholar-advisers. Centralization, achieved by ruthless methods, was focused on standardizing legal codes and bureaucratic procedures, the forms of writing and coinage, and the pattern of thought and scholarship. To silence criticism of imperial rule, the kings banished or put to death many dissenting Confucian scholars and confiscated and burned their books. Qin aggrandizement was aided by frequent military expeditions pushing forward the frontiers in the north and south. To fend off barbarian intrusion, the fortification walls built by the various warring states were connected to make a 5,000-kilometer-long great wall. What is commonly referred to as the Great Wall is actually four great walls rebuilt or extended during the Western Han, Sui, Jin, and Ming periods, rather than a single, continuous wall. At its extremities, the Great Wall reaches from northeastern Heilongjiang Province to northwestern Gansu. A number of public works projects were also undertaken to consolidate and strengthen imperial rule. These activities required enormous levies of manpower and resources, not to mention repressive measures. Revolts broke out as soon as the first Qin emperor died in 210 B.C. His dynasty was extinguished less than twenty years after its triumph. The imperial system initiated during the Qin dynasty, however, set a pattern that was developed over the next two millennia.

After a short civil war, a new dynasty, called Han (206 B.C.-A.D. 220), emerged with its capital at Chang'an. The new empire retained much of the Qin administrative structure but retreated a bit from centralized rule by establishing vassal principalities in some areas for the sake of political convenience. The Han rulers modified some of the harsher aspects of the previous dynasty; Confucian ideals of government, out of favor during the Qin period, were adopted as the creed of the Han Empire, and Confucian scholars gained prominent status as the core of the civil

service. A civil service examination system also was initiated. Intellectual, literary, and artistic endeavors revived and flourished. The Han period produced China's most famous historian, Sima Qian (145-87 B.C.?), whose *Shiji* (Historical Records) provides a detailed chronicle from the time of a legendary Xia emperor to that of the Han emperor Wu Di (141-87 B.C.). Technological advances also marked this period. Two of the great Chinese inventions, paper and porcelain, date from Han times.

The Han dynasty, after which the members of the ethnic majority in China, the "people of Han," are named, was notable also for its military prowess. The empire expanded westward as far as the rim of the Tarim Basin (in modern Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region), making possible relatively secure caravan traffic across Central Asia to Antioch, Baghdad, and Alexandria. The paths of caravan traffic are often called the "silk route" because the route was used to export Chinese silk to the Roman Empire. Chinese armies also invaded and annexed parts of northern Vietnam and northern Korea toward the end of the second century B.C. Han control of peripheral regions was generally insecure, however. To ensure peace with non-Chinese local powers, the Han court developed a mutually beneficial "tributary system". Non-Chinese states were allowed to remain autonomous in exchange for symbolic acceptance of Han overlordship. Tributary ties were confirmed and strengthened through intermarriages at the ruling level and periodic exchanges of gifts and goods.

After 200 years, Han rule was interrupted briefly (in A.D. 9-24 by Wang Mang or, a reformer), and then restored for another 200 years. The Han rulers, however, were unable to adjust to what centralization had wrought: a growing population, increasing wealth and resultant financial difficulties and rivalries, and ever-more complex political institutions. Riddled with the corruption characteristic of the dynastic cycle, by A.D. 220 the Han Empire collapsed.

Era of Disunity

The collapse of the Han dynasty was followed by nearly four centuries of rule by warlords. The age of civil wars and disunity began with the era of the Three Kingdoms (Wei, Shu, and Wu), which had overlapping reigns during the period A.D. 220-80). In later times, fiction and drama greatly romanticized the reputed chivalry of this period. Unity was restored briefly in the early years of the Jin dynasty (A.D. 265-420), but the Jin could not long contain the invasions of the nomadic

peoples. In A.D. 317 the Jin court was forced to flee from Luoyang and reestablished

itself at Nanjing to the south. The transfer of the capital coincided with China's political fragmentation into a succession of dynasties that was to last from A.D. 304 to 589. During this period the process of sinicization accelerated among the non-Chinese arrivals in the north and among the aboriginal tribesmen in the south. This process was also accompanied by the increasing popularity of Buddhism (introduced into China in the first century A.D.) in both north and south China. Despite the political disunity of the times, there were notable technological advances. The invention of gunpowder (at that time for use only in fireworks) and the wheelbarrow is believed to date from the sixth or seventh century. Advances in medicine, astronomy, and cartography are also noted by historians.

The Imperial Era: II

Restoration of Empire

China was reunified in A.D. 589 by the short-lived Sui dynasty (A.D. 581-617), which has often been compared to the earlier Qin dynasty in tenure and the ruthlessness of its accomplishments. The Sui dynasty's early demise was attributed to the government's tyrannical demands on the people, who bore the crushing burden of taxes and compulsory labor. These resources were overstrained in the completion of the Grand Canal --a monumental engineering feat--and in the undertaking of other construction projects, including the reconstruction of the Great Wall. Weakened by costly and disastrous military campaigns against Korea in the early seventh century, the dynasty disintegrated through a combination of popular revolts, disloyalty, and assassination.

The Tang dynasty (A.D. 618-907), with its capital at Chang'an, is regarded by historians as a high point in Chinese civilization--equal, or even superior, to the Han period. Its territory, acquired through the military exploits of its early rulers, was greater than that of the Han. Stimulated by contact with India and the Middle East, the empire saw a flowering of creativity in many fields. Buddhism, originating in India around the time of Confucius, flourished during the Tang period, becoming thoroughly sinicized and a permanent part of Chinese traditional culture. Block printing was invented, making the written word available to vastly greater audiences. The Tang period was the golden age of literature and art. A government system supported by a large

class of Confucian literati selected through civil service examinations was perfected under Tang rule. This competitive procedure was designed to draw the best talents into government. But perhaps an even greater consideration for the Tang rulers, aware that imperial dependence on powerful aristocratic families and warlords would have destabilizing consequences, was to create a body of career officials having no autonomous territorial or functional power base. As it turned out, these scholar-officials acquired status in their local communities, family ties, and shared values that connected them to the imperial court. From Tang times until the closing days of the Qing empire in 1911, scholar-officials functioned often as intermediaries between the grass-roots level and the government.

By the middle of the eighth century A.D., Tang power had ebbed. Domestic economic instability and military defeat in 751 by Arabs at Talas, in Central Asia, marked the beginning of five centuries of steady military decline for the Chinese empire. Misrule, court intrigues, economic exploitation, and popular rebellions weakened the empire, making it possible for northern invaders to terminate the dynasty in 907. The next half-century saw the fragmentation of China into five northern dynasties and ten southern kingdoms.

But in 960 a new power, Song (960-1279), reunified most of China Proper. The Song period divides into two phases: Northern Song (960-1127) and Southern Song (1127-1279). The division was caused by the forced abandonment of north China in 1127 by the Song court, which could not push back the nomadic invaders.

The founders of the Song dynasty built an effective centralized bureaucracy staffed with civilian scholar-officials. Regional military governors and their supporters were replaced by centrally appointed officials. This system of civilian rule led to a greater concentration of power in the emperor and his palace bureaucracy than had been achieved in the previous dynasties.

The Song dynasty is notable for the development of cities not only for administrative purposes but also as centers of trade, industry, and maritime commerce. The landed scholar-officials, sometimes collectively referred to as the gentry, lived in the provincial centers alongside the shopkeepers, artisans, and merchants. A new group of wealthy commoners--the mercantile class--arose as printing and education spread, private trade grew, and a market economy began

to link the coastal provinces and the interior. Landholding and government employment were no longer the only means of gaining wealth and prestige.

Culturally, the Song refined many of the developments of the previous centuries. Included in these refinements were not only the Tang ideal of the universal man, who combined the qualities of scholar, poet, painter, and statesman, but also historical writings, painting, calligraphy, and hard-glazed porcelain. Song intellectuals sought answers to all philosophical and political questions in the Confucian Classics. This renewed interest in the Confucian ideals and society of ancient times coincided with the decline of Buddhism, which the Chinese regarded as foreign and offering few practical guidelines for the solution of political and other mundane problems.

The Song Neo-Confucian philosophers, finding a certain purity in the originality of the ancient classical texts, wrote commentaries on them. The most influential of these philosophers was Zhu Xi (b1130-1200), whose synthesis of Confucian thought and Buddhist, Taoist, and other ideas became the official imperial ideology from late Song times to the late nineteenth century. As incorporated into the examination system, Zhu Xi's philosophy evolved into a rigid official creed, which stressed the one-sided obligations of obedience and compliance of subject to ruler, child to father, wife to husband, and younger brother to elder brother. The effect was to inhibit the societal development of premodern China, resulting both in many generations of political, social, and spiritual stability and in a slowness of cultural and institutional change up to the nineteenth century. Neo-Confucian doctrines also came to play the dominant role in the intellectual life of Korea, Vietnam, and Japan.

The Imperial Era: III

Mongolian Interlude

By the mid-thirteenth century, the Mongols had subjugated north China, Korea, and the Muslim kingdoms of Central Asia and had twice penetrated Europe. With the resources of his vast empire, Kublai Khan (1215-94), a grandson of Genghis Khan (1167?-1227) and the supreme leader of all Mongol tribes, began his drive against the Southern Song. Even before the extinction of the Song dynasty, Kublai Khan had established the first alien dynasty to rule all China--the Yuan (1279-1368).

Although the Mongols sought to govern China through traditional institutions, using Chinese (Han) bureaucrats, they were not up to the task. The Han were discriminated against socially and politically. All important central and regional posts were monopolized by Mongols, who also preferred employing non-Chinese from other parts of the Mongol domain--Central Asia, the Middle East, and even Europe--in those positions for which no Mongol could be found. Chinese were more often employed in non-Chinese regions of the empire.

As in other periods of alien dynastic rule of China, a rich cultural diversity developed during the Yuan dynasty. The major cultural achievements were the development of drama and the novel and the increased use of the written vernacular. The Mongols' extensive West Asian and European contacts produced a fair amount of cultural exchange. Western musical instruments were introduced to enrich the Chinese performing arts. From this period dates the conversion to Islam, by Muslims of Central Asia, of growing numbers of Chinese in the northwest and southwest. Nestorianism and Roman Catholicism also enjoyed a period of toleration. Lamaism (Tibetan Buddhism) flourished, although native Taoism endured Mongol persecutions. Confucian governmental practices and examinations based on the Classics, which had fallen into disuse in north China during the period of disunity, were reinstated by the Mongols in the hope of maintaining order over Han society. Advances were realized in the fields of travel literature, cartography and geography, and scientific education. Certain key Chinese innovations, such as printing techniques, porcelain production, playing cards, and medical literature, were introduced in Europe, while the production of thin glass and cloisonne became popular in China. The first records of travel by Westerners date from this time. The most famous traveler of the period was the Venetian Marco Polo, whose account of his trip to "Cambaluc," the Great Khan's capital (now Beijing), and of life there astounded the people of Europe. The Mongols undertook extensive public works. Road and water communications were reorganized and improved. To provide against possible famines, granaries were ordered built throughout the empire. The city of Beijing was rebuilt with new palace grounds that included artificial lakes, hills and mountains, and parks. During the Yuan period, Beijing became the terminus of the Grand Canal, which was completely renovated. These commercially oriented improvements encouraged overland as well as maritime commerce

throughout Asia and facilitated the first direct Chinese contacts with Europe. Chinese and Mongol travelers to the West were able to provide assistance in such areas as hydraulic engineering, while bringing back to the Middle Kingdom new scientific discoveries and architectural innovations. Contacts with the West also brought the introduction to China of a major new food crop--sorghum--along with other foreign food products and methods of preparation.

The Chinese Regain Power

Rivalry among the Mongol imperial heirs, natural disasters, and numerous peasant uprisings led to the collapse of the Yuan dynasty. The Ming dynasty (1368-1644) was founded by a Han Chinese peasant and former Buddhist monk turned rebel army leader. Having its capital first at Nanjing (which means Southern Capital) and later at Beijing (or Northern Capital), the Ming reached the zenith of power during the first quarter of the fifteenth century. The Chinese armies reconquered Annam, as northern Vietnam was then known, in Southeast Asia and kept back the Mongols, while the Chinese fleet sailed the China seas and the Indian Ocean, cruising as far as the east coast of Africa. The maritime Asian nations sent envoys with tribute for the Chinese emperor. Internally, the Grand Canal was expanded to its farthest limits and proved to be a stimulus to domestic trade.

The Ming maritime expeditions stopped rather suddenly after 1433, the date of the last voyage. Historians have given as one of the reasons the great expense of large-scale expeditions at a time of preoccupation with northern defenses against the Mongols. Opposition at court also may have been a contributing factor, as conservative officials found the concept of expansion and commercial ventures alien to Chinese ideas of government. Pressure from the powerful Neo-Confucian bureaucracy led to a revival of strict agrarian-centered society. The stability of the Ming dynasty, which was without major disruptions of the population (then around 100 million), economy, arts, society, or politics, promoted a belief among the Chinese that they had achieved the most satisfactory civilization on earth and that nothing foreign was needed or welcome.

Long wars with the Mongols, incursions by the Japanese into Korea, and harassment of Chinese coastal cities by the Japanese in the sixteenth century weakened Ming rule, which became, as earlier Chinese dynasties had, ripe for an alien takeover. In 1644 the Manchus took Beijing from

the north and became masters of north China, establishing the last imperial dynasty, the Qing (1644-1911).

The Rise of the Manchus

Although the Manchus were not Han Chinese and were strongly resisted, especially in the south, they had assimilated a great deal of Chinese culture before conquering China Proper. Realizing that to dominate the empire they would have to do things the Chinese way, the Manchus retained many institutions of Ming and earlier Chinese derivation. They continued the Confucian court practices and temple rituals, over which the emperors had traditionally presided.

The Manchus continued the Confucian civil service system. Although Chinese were barred from the highest offices, Chinese officials predominated over Manchu officeholders outside the capital, except in military positions. The Neo-Confucian philosophy, emphasizing the obedience of subject to ruler, was enforced as the state creed. The Manchu emperors also supported Chinese literary and historical projects of enormous scope; the survival of much of China's ancient literature is attributed to these projects.

Ever suspicious of Han Chinese, the Qing rulers put into effect measures aimed at preventing the absorption of the Manchus into the dominant Han Chinese population. Han Chinese were prohibited from migrating into the Manchu homeland, and Manchus were forbidden to engage in trade or manual labor. Inter-marriage between the two groups was forbidden. In many government positions a system of dual appointments was used--the Chinese appointee was required to do the substantive work and the Manchu to ensure Han loyalty to Qing rule.

The Qing regime was determined to protect itself not only from internal rebellion but also from foreign invasion. After China Proper had been subdued, the Manchus conquered Outer Mongolia (now the Mongolian People's Republic) in the late seventeenth century. In the eighteenth century they gained control of Central Asia as far as the Pamir Mountains and established a protectorate over the area the Chinese call Xizang but commonly known in the West as Tibet. The Qing thus became the first dynasty to eliminate successfully all danger to China Proper from across its land borders. Under Manchu rule the empire grew to include a larger area than before or since; Taiwan, the last outpost of anti-

Manchu resistance, was also incorporated into China for the first time. In addition, Qing emperors received tribute from the various border states.

The chief threat to China's integrity did not come overland, as it had so often in the past, but by sea, reaching the southern coastal area first. Western traders, missionaries, and soldiers of fortune began to arrive in large numbers even before the Qing, in the sixteenth century. The empire's inability to evaluate correctly the nature of the new challenge or to respond flexibly to it resulted in the demise of the Qing and the collapse of the entire millennia-old framework of dynastic rule.