

## THE DYNASTIES SUMMARISED

### Historical Background:

The Chinese have a strong sense of both their real and mythological past and voluminous records have been kept which strengthen their confidence in their history. Through a mixture of a superior culture, technology, political institutions and sheer weight of numbers, the Chinese have been able to absorb the peoples and races surrounding them even though China was conquered twice - once by the Monguls in the 13th century and by the Manchus in the 17th.

Chinese history is documented in ancient writings dating back some 3,300 years and recent archaeological discoveries suggest a flourishing culture in what we now call the lower Huang He (or Yellow River) Valley of northern China between 2500 - 2000 B.C. -that is to say up to 5000 years ago.

Chinese civilisation, as described in mythology, begins with Pangu, the creator of the universe. The first prehistoric dynasty is said to be the Xia who date from about 2100 B.C. to 1600 B.C. Recent archaeological explorations have confirmed the existence of the Xia as written in ancient texts.

The fact that the Chinese saw an on-going threat to their way of life from societies on their borders they thought less well developed than themselves conditioned their view of the world. China was self-sufficient and needed little from outsiders. China thus became the middle of the world and its name, China, (Zhongguo) literally means Middle Kingdom.

A key ability of the Chinese people was their capacity to absorb the peoples of surrounding cultures into their own civilisation and to fend off the threats posed to them from the less developed societies around their borders. The result of this was that China saw itself as superior to all other nations, even to the West who proved to have far superior technologies in the mid 19th century.

### The Shang Dynasty (around 1600 - 1027 B.C.)

This dynasty (also known in its later stages as the Yin Dynasty) is believed to have been founded by a rebel leader who overthrew the last of the Xia emperors. It survived on agriculture, animal husbandry and hunting. It made two crucial contributions to the development of Chinese culture - a form of writing found on tortoise shells and flat cattle bones (known as "oracle bones") and bronze metallurgy. Examples of both survive today. Court life was lavish by the standards of the time. Burial rituals included the entombment of articles of value with an important royal corpse and with that perhaps the live burial of slaves or commoners.

### The Western Zhou Dynasty (around 1027 - 771 B.C.)

The last Shang ruler was overthrown by the leader of a border tribe called Zhou who placed their capital at Hao near the city of Xi'an. Overall, the Zhou Dynasty was the longest lasting (from 1027 - 221 B.C.) of all. The Zhou shared Shang culture and language and the early Zhou rulers spread their culture and influence, through conquest and colonisation, to much of China to the north of Chang Jiang (the Yangtse River). This was a major stage in the "sinicising" of a huge part of the north of what we now know as China. The Zhou rulers gradually extended their culture and increased central control of the people under their influence.

It was Zhou philosophers who proposed the doctrine of "the mandate of heaven" which saw the ruler as a "son of heaven" with divine right to rule, although a ruler's dethronement proved he had lost his mandate to rule.

## **Eastern Zhou Dynasty (around 771- 256 B.C.)**

In 771 B.C. the Zhou court was sacked, the king killed and the court moved east from the modern Shaanxi Province to the modern Henan Province. The power of the Zhou and its court diminished.

## **The Spring and Autumn and Warring States Periods (722 - 221 B.C.)**

These two periods were marked by disunity and civil strife but also provided an era of unprecedented cultural development, a genuine golden age.

The need of competing war lords for strong and loyal armies compelled increased economic production and the efficient collection of tax.

Coinage was introduced and the production of iron helped spur wars and the invention of farm implements.

Public works on an enormous scale were undertaken - canals, irrigation projects and huge defensive walls around cities and along stretches of the northern frontier.

Many different philosophies also sprang up in these turbulent times. Familiar to most of us is the School of Literati, which we in the west know as Confucianism. Confucius (551 - 479 B.C.), also known as Kong Zi believed in an ordered society - he said "Let the ruler be a ruler and the subject a subject". We might say "know your place"!

Mencius (372 - 289 B.C.) believed in the goodness of man and that a ruler could not rule without the tacit consent of the ruled.

On the other hand, Xun Zi thought that man was inherently selfish and evil and that the best government was totally authoritarian.

Xun Zi's thinking led to the establishment of the doctrine known as the School of Law which exalted the state, its prosperity and martial prowess at the expense of the people.

Fascism?

Taoism, a powerful rival to the Confucian school, also flourished during this period. This school of thought encouraged people to find their own way of dealing with the natural and supernatural world.

In an early precursor of Christian teaching, this period also saw the emergence of the doctrine of Mo Zi (470- 391 B.C.) which preached that all men were equal before God and mankind should practise universal love.

A busy period indeed.

## **Qin Dynasty (221 - 206 B.C.)**

A short lived but important dynasty. Much of what we now recognise as China was unified in 221 B.C. by the Qin's, the most western and most aggressive of the Warring states. (Qin is the word that was romanized as Ch' in and probably anglicised as China) In that year the king took the title of Emperor and subjugated the remaining six other Eastern states.

The king of Qin took the title First Emperor and promptly set about enlarging his territory. He standardised coinage and writing and centralised bureaucratic controls and expanded the frontier walls. What we know as the Great Wall of China was built to keep out barbarian intruders. The wall was actually four great walls rebuilt or extended during the Western Han, Sui, Jin and Ming periods.

As soon as the First Emperor died, civil war broke out.

This dynasty was also the one which gave China, and us, the terracotta warriors.

## **Han Dynasty ( 206 B.C. - 220 A.D.)**

The Han dynasty, after which the ethnic majority of the Chinese people are named, emerged with its capital at Chang'an.

The Han rulers were somewhat less repressive than their predecessors. Centralised rule was relaxed and Confucian principals, out of favour with the First Emperor, were reintroduced to the civil service.

A competitive civil service examination system was introduced and inventions from the period include paper and porcelain.

The Hans were an expansionist and aggressive people, expanding their empire westwards significantly. Their control over their new possessions was such that what we know as the "Silk Route" emerged, peaceful enough we can surmise for traders to progress if not totally freely, at least with reasonable safety.

Cleverly, they initiated the tributary system, which allowed the conquered territories to remain autonomous in return for acknowledging Han superiority and over-lordship. The last years of the Han saw the introduction of Buddhism to China and increasing corruption of the regime leading to its downfall. A confused and unsettled period followed.

## **The Era of Disunity (220 A.D. - 589 A.D.)**

Four centuries of rule by warlords, civil wars and disunity followed the downfall of the Han Dynasty. They began with the era of the Three Kingdoms, the later source for much romanticism of chivalry etc.

The Jin Dynasty (265 - 420) briefly re-united China but they lacked the strength to maintain their position. Following their demise, there was a succession of minor kingdoms but, never the less, "sinicisation" proceeded throughout.

It is worth noting that gunpowder, originally for use in fireworks, was invented during this period.

## **Sui Dynasty (581 - 618 A.D.)**

Short lived like the Qin Dynasty, the Sui's appear to have been just as nasty. Aggressive in their demands on their people for taxes and forced labour, they reconstructed the Great Wall and built the Grand Canal. They waged war on the Koreans and lost and their people revolted.

## **Tang Dynasty (618 - 907 A.D.)**

The Tang Dynasty is regarded as a high point in Chinese history, comparable to or even more so than the Han Dynasty because of the strength of developments in both the military and cultural spheres. The first part of the dynasty (the 7 and early part of the 8th centuries) was a period of expansion when the Chinese empire grew to its largest size to date. Trade with countries to both the east and west grew and in 731 China became a money economy. There was also a gradual migration of the population from north to south.

However a rebellion in 756 caused chaos and the court to flee the capital. The second period saw an unsuccessful effort to recover economically. The final period of the 9th century saw on the one hand a literary revival but economic and political decline. The beginning of the end of the Tang dynasty is marked by a military defeat by the Arabs in 751 at Talas in Central Asia. Steady military decline, and popular rebellions weakened the empire and in 907 northerners invaded. The result was fragmentation into five northern dynasties and ten southern kingdoms.

However the Tang dynasty should be remembered for some notable bequests to the generations that followed. The literary achievements of the period in both prose and poetry are still revered more than a thousand years later.

The invention of block printing helped spread literature, art flourished and Buddhism became a permanent part of Chinese culture.

The role of the civil service, entry to which was already by competitive examination, was refined and a body of independent career officials was created with civil servants who had no autonomous territorial or functional power. This system lasted substantially unchanged until the days of the Republic in 1911/12.

## **Song Dynasty (960 - 1279 A.D.)**

The Song Dynasty re-united most of China but was unable to eject the invaders from northern China so the dynasty is divided into two parts: Northern Song from 960 - 1276 and Southern Song from 1127 - 1279.

The year 960 saw the reunification of most of China under the Song dynasty. The first phase of the Song dynasty lasted until 1127 when the court was forced to abandon the north of China to nomadic invaders.

Notwithstanding this setback, the Songs went on to build a strong and centralised bureaucracy, concentrating more power in the hands of the Emperor than ever before.

Cities grew as did a new mercantile class and market forces led to the development of trade from the coast to the interior.

Printing and education spread and the Song refined not only the Tang ideal of the universal man but also historical writings, painting, and calligraphy were encouraged and hard glazed porcelain was invented.

There was a revival of interest in Confucianism and a decline of Buddhism. The ideas of the philosopher Zhu Xi (c 1130-1200) combined Confucian thought, Buddhism, Taoism and other ideology. This became the basis of official ideology up to the late 19th century, bringing both stability and conservatism in cultural and political institutions which inhibited change.

## **Yuan Dynasty (1279 - 1368)**

With Korea, and the Muslim kingdoms of central Asia under their control, the Mongols turned their attention to the landmass of China. First to fall into their grasp under the attack of Kublai Khan (1215 - 1294), a grandson of Ghengis Khan (around 1167 - 1227) was northern China. By 1279 Kublai Khan had established the first foreign dynasty to rule all of China - the Yuan.

Although the Mongols tried to harness the established bureaucratic channels to further their cause, the indigenous Han were discriminated against to the point that non-Chinese from other parts of the Mongol empire were given key positions over the Han.

Culture developed under the Yuan with drama and the novel among key developments.

Western musical instruments arrived in China and there were advances in cartography, geography and scientific education.

Marco Polo traveled to Beijing (then Cambaluc) and a huge programme of public works (e.g. granaries were built to help beat the effects of famine) and the Grand Canal reached Beijing.

A series of natural and self inflicted disasters as well as peasant uprisings led to the collapse of the dynasty.

## **Ming Dynasty (1368 - 1644)**

Chinese control of their own country was re-established by a Han peasant former Buddhist monk turned rebel.

The first Ming capital Nanjing (which means southern capital) but later it was transferred to Beijing (which means northern capital).

Militarily, the Ming army took northern Vietnam and their fleet sailed as far as the east coast of Africa, although maritime activity stopped suddenly in 1433.

Society stabilised and prospered and the complacent feeling arose that China needed nothing from outside. Inevitably foreign pinpricks around the land and sea borders weakened the empire and it collapsed in 1644.

## **Qing Dynasty (1644 - 1912)**

In 1644 the Manchus took Beijing from the north and established what was to be the last dynasty - the Qing.

They had previously absorbed much Chinese culture and wisely decided that they would continue to use many of the Chinese institutions unchanged - the Confucian based civil service and court practices, for example. They enforced the Neo-Confucian code of obedience by the ruled to the ruler.

The Manchu took positive steps to ensure that the numerically dominant Han did not absorb them - intermarriage was forbidden, Han Chinese were not allowed to travel to the Manchu homeland and so on. The Qing regime also conquered much of western Asia and Tibet. Taiwan - a cause of trouble today - was incorporated in China for the first time.

The Manchu support for Chinese ancient literature is a major reason for the survival of much of the Chinese archive.

Eventually the threat to the Qing came from the south, the sea and of course westerners including the British and dynastic rule came to an end in 1911.

The major failure of the Qing dynasty was not to recognise the threat posed by western ideas, traders and military and technological superiority. Its collapse led to the Republic.

***End***

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