

## **A Brief History of China**

China is often referred as the oldest surviving civilisation in the world, which boasts nearly 4,000 years of continuous history, or 5,000 years if you are Chinese and you believe in the legendary Xia Dynasty that was supposedly ruled by immortal emperors.

Given that 'China' covers so many people and so much land, with so much history, it is not surprising that this land has given us countless stories of emperors and ministers, heroes and villains, war and tragedy, and to narrate them all in any one text would be an impossible task. However, there are a few key stories that define China, and certain trends and patterns that emerge, driven by geography as much as the 'great men' that supposedly determine the destinies of empires. What follows is a brief guide to those major trends and forces, and the critical events that shaped Chinese history, and by extension, modern China. Given the sheer scope of the content I will cover, this is very much a summary of Chinese history, and I strongly encourage you to research further whichever parts of it that you find interesting, as in mere sentences I will go over hundreds of years of dramatic and fascinating history, full of colourful and compelling characters and their stories, and inevitably sacrifice detail for the sake of succinctness and comprehensiveness.

As with most 'recorded history', the history of China was written by historians, whom like all human beings, can be fallible, and so although certain narratives of history has emerged as the 'mainstream' understanding of history, it is important to consider the perspective of the narrator, and consider whether they have any reason or motivation to tell the story in the way they have told it. In the following guide, I will try to tell the story of China as objectively as possible, and point out where reasonable objections might exist. So this version of Chinese history may lack the vivid detail and drama of mainstream Chinese history, but I hope it will provide a reasonably accurate and broad overview of the story of China and the Chinese people.

### **The Cradle of the Yellow River**

The story of China starts on the banks of the Yellow River, the cradle of Chinese civilisation. If we ignore the folk-tales and legends of the mythical origin of Chinese civilisation, it is safe to assume that Chinese civilisation developed along similar lines to other great river agricultural civilisations, such as those along the Indus River, the Nile River and the rivers of Mesopotamia. The Yellow River brought fertility to the land, but it was also prone to catastrophic floods that periodically devastated communities up and down the river. It is likely that early Chinese tribes will have first begun to band together in an effort to contain the power of the river. The story of the first mortal Chinese emperor, and the only emperor the Chinese have given the title 'The Great', is that of a civil engineer, 'Da Yu'.

Da Yu, or 'The Great Yu', was credited with an ingenious solution to the devastating floods that plagued the Yellow River. Instead of attempting to build massive flood defences like his predecessors, Da Yu built huge networks of canals that diverted the power of the river, spreading it across a much greater area, so that not only did he reduce the intensity and regularity of damaging floods, his flood defences also helped to irrigate the land and make even greater areas of northern China arable. According to records of later dynasties, the king whom Da Yu served was so pleased with Da Yu's achievements that he named the engineer his heir to the throne. Although Da Yu was probably a legendary figure, there is archaeological evidence of water-engineering, canal-construction and river management projects along the Yellow River in the period he was supposed to have lived over 4,000

years ago. These huge civil engineering projects would have required planning across large territories and substantial coordination of manpower and resources, and it is almost certain that these projects forced cooperation, and gradually unification, of local towns and villages into small kingdom-states all along the Yellow River and its networks of tributaries.

The first (historically confirmed) Chinese Dynasty was the Shang Dynasty (1600 BC-1048 BC), from which little records remain, and it was probably just the most powerful state along the Yellow River, which gave it loose authority over other states within its sphere of influence. The Shang had a relatively primitive Bronze Age culture and government, and like many early civilisations, slavery was widespread. In 1048 the Shang Dynasty was toppled by one of its vassals, the Zhou, at the Battle of Muye, where the slaves in the Shang army rebelled and sided with the Zhou. Although slaves were instrumental in the Zhou victory, slavery was not abolished in the Zhou dynasty, although it did become less widespread and no longer formed a key component of the economic system like in the Greek city states or the Roman Empire.

### **Division and Unity**

Officially the Zhou Dynasty ruled from 1046 BC to 256 BC. In practice the central authority of the Zhou emperors collapsed from 771 BC onwards, leading to the Spring and Autumn Period, when dozens of small states paid homage to the Zhou emperors in name, but in practice maintained effective independence, and frequently went to war with each other for land, power and all the other things men go to war for. Despite the chaos of frequent wars, the Spring and Autumn Period (771 BC to 403 BC) was considered a cultural golden age, a flowering of Chinese philosophy, when literally hundreds of schools of thought competed and debated with each other in the courts of the kings and dukes of the land. The most important Chinese philosopher, Confucius, was born into this age. The Confucian School would in time dominate Chinese politics and philosophy, and to this day, it deeply influences everything from Chinese family values to political power in modern China.

Over time, the 'Spring and Autumn Period', the exact definition of which is disputed, developed into the Warring States Period (403 BC to 221 BC). It is a bit pointless to put an arbitrary cut-off for what was quite a gradual process, but essentially the smaller and weaker states were gradually gobbled up by stronger neighbours until only seven major states remained. Each of these states were sizeable 'countries' by modern standards, with their own distinct cultures and religions. By now the authority of the Zhou emperors had all but disintegrated, and the wars between the states escalated to new levels of intensity and regularity. This was partially because the states were now larger, and thus capable of sustaining larger armies for longer, and partially due to advances in technology, most notably the arrival of Iron Age technologies that allowed major states to mass produce weapons and armour, as well as civilian tools. Whereas wars in the Spring and Autumn Periods were mostly fought by small professional armies of noble warriors fighting on chariots, the Warring States saw an explosion in the scale of fighting as states conscripted huge numbers of peasants into infantry armies, fed by improved logistics and equipped with simple, but effective, mass-produced weapons like halberds and crossbows, which could be used effectively with minimal training.

The Warring States Period was finally ended in 221 BC, when the State of Qin, which exploited all the improvements and innovations in governance, logistics, industry, military technology and doctrine, defeated all six rival states in a 'short' eight year war. The victory of the Qin owed much to its excellent strategic advantages. The state of Qin was situated in the northwest of the 'Seven States',

occupying a fertile plain surrounded on all sides by rivers and mountains, which made its territory rich and easily defensible, allowing the Qin to amass manpower and resources and strike out into the North China Plain (which was also fertile, but a nightmare to defend) at will, whilst easily repelling counterattacks should these invasions suffer setbacks. Because of these strategic advantages, it is no coincidence that almost all of the early Chinese dynasties established their capitols in the Guanzhong region, or modern Shaanxi Province, and almost all the civil wars of these periods were won by whoever controlled Guanzhong.

The First Emperor of the Qin Dynasty is arguably the most important figure in Chinese history. By most accounts, he was a tyrant, although it is worth noting that these 'accounts' were written by the historians of the Han Dynasty, which replaced the Qin Dynasty, and would have required some sort of justification for this, and thus it would have served their interests in demonising the Qin emperor. Regardless the First Emperor adopted an absolutist form of government founded on the Legalist School of Thought, which imposed harsh discipline through the rule of law across the empire. He enforced policies which in modern times, would be regarded as genocide, as he standardised written language, measures of weight and distance, religious ceremonies and holidays, amongst many other aspects of life and governance. The Qin were ruthless in enforcing these new standards across its territories, with harsh punishments for any who opposed them. The most extreme example was the live burying of scholars and the burning of thousands of books, as the Qin literally eradicated history and ended the 'Hundred Schools of Thought', with only a handful tolerated and one, the Legalist School, adopted as state philosophy.

Ironically, it was these tyrannical policies, doubtlessly abhorrent to modern sensibilities, which forged the earliest, unified 'Chinese' identity and culture, and made 'China' a 'civilisation-state' instead of an empire like Rome. It is largely because of the First Emperor that modern China's 'core' is one of the most ethnically and culturally uniform places on the planet, despite the large territory it covers and the huge population it contains. I am of the 'school of thought' that claims most things that happen on a grand scale take place due to grand geopolitical forces, as opposed to individual 'great men', but I do believe that there are exceptions, and I believe that the First Emperor was one of them. If he had chosen to rule China in a looser, Rome-like style, I believe it is possible for separate 'Chinese' cultures to have grown within the space we regard as modern 'China', much like Europe splintered into dozens of smaller kingdoms, and later nation-states, upon the fall of the Roman Empire.

In fact the Qin did crumble, and much sooner than Rome. In 207 BC, the Qin capitol fell to rebel forces, and the Second Emperor of a Dynasty that was meant to last forever, was executed along with the rest of the imperial clan. The rebels were forces of the State of Chu, one of the seven states conquered by the First Emperor a generation earlier. The Chu rebels were only one of numerous rebel factions. Most, like the Chu, were led by the deposed nobility of the former independent states, resentful of their subjugation by the Qin, and eager to reclaim their 'birthright'. Their ranks were swollen by peasants angry at high tax levels, harsh punishments and the loss of their traditions and customs. In particular the First Emperor's epic engineering projects, the Great Wall, the Terracotta Army (his own very extravagant tomb) and giant palaces, placed an unbearable strain on the population, which rose up in rebellion.

For a while it looked like 'All Under Heaven' would return to the status quo of the Warring States Period, as the seven states were re-established over the ashes of the Qin Empire. The most powerful warlord in the new order, Xiang Yu, was seemingly driven only by his hatred of the Qin, and had no interest or ambition to reunite 'All Under Heaven' under his rule, as long as the other kings acknowledged his superiority. Xiang Yu's complacency gave his rival Chu warlord, whom Xiang Yu had exiled to the far west of China, considered a poor backwater, a chance to build his strength and challenge Xiang Yu for control of all of China.

His name was Liu Bang, who was born a common peasant in the State of Chu, and was only the leader of his small village when the rebellion against the Qin Dynasty began. Following a meteoric rise, his small army was the first to enter the Qin Capitol of Xianyang, which earned Liu Bang the title of 'King', although Xiang Yu had made sure that this 'kingdom' was the poorest and least developed in all of China. Despite this, Liu Bang, taking advantage of Xiang Yu's complacency, attacked and occupied Guanzhong whilst Xiang Yu was busy dealing with another rebellion in northeastern China, near what is now modern Beijing. By the time Xiang Yu had turned around to deal with Liu Bang, the latter had already used the resources of Guanzhong to establish himself as a major player. Unlike Xiang Yu, Liu Bang did not persecute the people of Guanzhong, because he aimed to unite 'All Under Heaven' again, not simply destroy the Qin Dynasty and establish the superiority of the Chu. In 206 BC, after a four-year war against Xiang Yu and other rival kings, Liu Bang had succeeded. Again the geostrategic advantages of Guanzhong proved decisive for Liu Bang just as it did for the First Emperor.

When Liu Bang was first granted the status of 'King' by the King of Chu whom he served when he conquered Xianyang, he was called the 'King of Hanzhong', a poor region on the periphery of Chinese civilisation at the time. So when he declared his intention to unite China, his army was called the 'Han Army', and he was the 'King of Han'. When Liu Bang achieved his final victory and united China, he declared himself to be the Emperor of the Han Dynasty.

### **The Han and Hun**

The Han Dynasty, established by Liu Bang in 206 BC, adopted a less extreme version of Legalism as its basic governing philosophy, and within two or three generations, the Confucian School of thought would gradually gain influence until it was adopted almost as a state religion. Internally, the early years of the Han Dynasty were perilous and unstable. The old states and their governing structures still persisted, and local lords held much power. The consort clan (the emperor's wives) nearly usurped the imperial clan after the death of Liu Bang, and after some 'minor chaos', Emperor Jing of Han, the second Han Emperor to exercise actual power, finally managed to consolidate imperial control over the local lords, replacing kingdoms and dukedoms with centrally administered provinces. To reduce the risk of rebellions, the Han Dynasty abolished slavery, conscription and placed heavy restrictions on the production of weapons and recruitment of soldiers. Whilst this was able to reduce the internal threats faced by the imperial court in Chang'an, the capitol of the Dynasty in Guanzhong, it also weakened the empire's fighting capabilities, particularly in the frontiers far from the capitol. This would prove dangerous as China faced its mortal enemy for the first time... the nomads of the northern steppes, whom would become a major preoccupation of every Chinese dynasty to come, and for good reason.

The Qin and Han Empires enjoyed relatively safe borders in the east, west and south. In the east lay the great Pacific, which provided a source of fishing income, and where Japan had yet to develop into any sort of military or even piracy threat. The south was the fertile mountains and valleys of the Yangtze River and its tributaries. These lands were home to tribal peoples who were regarded as barbarians by the Chinese of the Yellow River empires and kingdoms, and under the Qin Empire and Han Empire, Chinese armies and settlers gradually increased their influence and control of the Yangtze River Valley and the southern jungles beyond. Militarily the southern tribes were no match for the Chinese of the Han and Qin Empires, armed with iron weapons and practised in warfare on a large scale. However the Chinese had little resistance to tropical diseases and Chinese expansionism in the south reached its limits in Vietnam, where numerous Chinese armies were lost to attrition through disease, supply problems and local guerrilla attacks. Chinese dynasties over the next 2,000 years would occupy Vietnam for hundreds of years at various periods, but never successfully consolidate control and assimilate the population in the same manner as it did in the Yangtze River Valley, which is why the Yangtze River Valley is now considered part of the Chinese core, whereas Vietnam is an independent country, albeit part of the Chinese sphere of influence.

In the southwest the Chinese faced the great mountains and highlands of Tibet and in the northwest the barren deserts and plains of Xinjiang, (simply called the Western Regions then). Tibet was virtually impenetrable for armies of the day, given logistical capabilities, and this principle worked both ways, so the Han and Qin had little to fear from its south-western borders. The entire northern frontier was a whole different story however.

The great grasslands and steppes of what is modern day Xinjiang, Mongolia, Inner Mongolia and Manchuria were home to a host of nomadic peoples. Although the city-dwelling, crop-growing Chinese vastly outnumbered the pastoral nomads of the north, and possessed far superior technology and wealth, the nomads were a military headache for every Chinese dynasty. Whilst most Chinese people were farmers, all nomads were effective warriors, born into the saddle and masters of the simple, but brutally effective composite recurve bow. For every Chinese man taken from his fields to serve in the army, the Chinese government lost one man's production of food, and gained one extra non-productive mouth to feed. In contrast, nomads simply followed their animals, and could move wherever their animals could, raiding and looting each other as well as the settled Chinese simply added to their source of income.

The nomadic style of warfare was also alien to the Chinese, accustomed to attacking cities, occupying territory and subjugating a local population. The nomads however had no 'home territories' to be attacked, no ground that must be held, and they attacked with devastating speed, bypassing Chinese defences and armies and striking at weaker targets at will across the northern frontier. The Chinese armies of the Warring States Period, Qin Dynasty and early-Han Dynasty were all composed of conscripted infantry soldiers, woefully unprepared for military duties far from home, against superior cavalry armies who rarely gave battle on even terms, as they easily out-manoeuvred the Chinese and attacked and raided mercilessly until a larger Chinese army simply crumbled under the strain.

Ironically the Chinese fear of the northern nomads provided the catalyst that made them truly dangerous and powerful. After uniting China, the First Emperor, concerned that the northern nomads, whom the Chinese called 'fierce barbarians', or Xiongnu, would become a serious security

threat to his empire, sent his most famous general, Meng Tian, to launch pre-emptive strikes against the Xiongnu. Meng Tian succeeded in driving the disorganised and disunited nomads out of the Ordos Valley, a region suitable for both grazing and agriculture, and thus a natural source of conflict between nomadic and agricultural cultures. The First Emperor then attempted to consolidate this gain and contain the threat of nomad raids by building the Great Wall, or rather joining up and reinforcing the walls already built by the formerly independent states that bordered the fierce tribes of the north. The strain of such a huge engineering undertaking played a major role in the disintegration of Qin authority and the internal collapse of the empire.

Ironically, the First Emperor's attempts to weaken the Xiongnu also encouraged the tribes to unite against a common foe, and by the time Liu Bang reunified China in 206 BC, the northern tribes had consolidated into a dangerously powerful coalition, the Xiongnu Confederation, which dominated most of the Han Empire's northern frontier. Liu Bang initially attempted to confront the Xiongnu militarily, but following a heavy defeat in 200 BC, and realising that the Xiongnu were now far better organised than the tribes General Meng Tian had faced, he abandoned a military solution to the Xiongnu, and instead began a policy of appeasement called Heqin, which essentially involved marrying Han princesses to Xiongnu rulers, and paying off the Xiongnu with gifts. This policy was humiliating for the Han, but it gave the empire relative peace on the northern frontier and allowed the fragile young Han Empire to consolidate itself into a solid and united political entity.

The Heqin policy persisted until the reign of Emperor Wu of Han, who reversed the policy and initiated the Han-Xiongnu War. Although the Chinese layman in the street would credit Emperor Wu of Han with 'defeating the Xiongnu', in truth, he was only able to take the offensive because his father had already secured his empire internally, allowing him to spend vast resources buying fine Central Asian warhorses, bribing nomad tribes to his side, and training huge armies of professional cavalry soldiers who could fight the Xiongnu nomads on their own terms. By the time Emperor Wu launched his offensives against the Xiongnu, Han China could call on over 600,000 professional soldiers, including 250,000 cavalry. In addition, although Emperor Wu's reign saw several notable victories against the Xiongnu, by the time he died, the Xiongnu were far from defeated. Instead the war continued on and off for nearly 200 years as fortunes and the balance of power shifted and turned, until the Han achieved final victory at the Battle of Ikh Bayan in 89 AD, and finally destroyed the Xiongnu Confederation. There is an interesting theory that after their defeat by the Han, the surviving Xiongnu fled westwards, across Central Asia, until they reached the plains of Eastern Europe, where their descendents would form the Hunnic Empire that brought Rome to its knees. The nomadic Huns, also masters of horse and bow, shared many similarities with the Xiongnu, and it is not unreasonable to make the connection, although this view is disputed.

### **Golden Age and Fall**

With the empire safeguarded both internally and externally, the Han Empire entered a golden age of unparalleled power and prosperity. The Han Empire dominated the northern border and the Western Regions, and pushed Chinese power and influence into Korea and Manchuria in the northeast and Vietnam in the southwest. Trade blossomed in the years of relative peace; the Silk Road in particular brought together the three great civilisations of the age in commerce and trade, namely Rome, Parthian Persia and Han China. Silk robes were the garment of choice for all rich and powerful Romans, from the emperor to senators and rich merchants, and numerous famous Romans

are depicted wearing silk, even though the secrets of silk production was hidden far away in the Far East, in a land few Romans had heard of, and almost none ever visited. This is a fine illustration of the power of international trade.

In 97 AD, a Han envoy, Gan Ying, was despatched to make contact with Rome, whom the Han regarded as an equal power on the far side of the world. Gan Ying had gotten as far as Mesopotamia when his Parthian guides discouraged him from continuing, saying that the trip to Rome would take two more years and was highly dangerous. It is thought that the Parthians may have deliberately foiled the Han embassy because they were concerned about a potential alliance between Rome and the Han, as well as direct trade negotiations between the empires that may deprive the Parthian Empire of a healthy slice of profit from the silk trade as an intermediary.

Rather inevitably, like the Roman Empire in the west, the Han Empire began to stagnate and decline. Internal divisions emerged again, factions within the court fought battles of cloaks and daggers against each other, as emperors grew complacent and incompetent, and the imperial bureaucracy became bogged down in corruption and paralysed by factionalism. Eunuchs in particular accumulated vast political and economic power, and more or less controlled the emperors and ruled in his stead. Following a disastrous famine, which was taken as a sign that the Han Dynasty had lost the Mandate of Heaven, rebellions erupted across the empire in 184 AD, the most notable being the Yellow Turbans, which briefly threatened to overwhelm imperial forces. In a desperate bid to contain the crisis, the imperial court gave sanction to local governors to recruit and train troops of their own to deal with rebels with local forces, instead of waiting for assistance from an over-stretched imperial army.

This measure was successful in suppressing the Yellow Turbans, but the emperor had opened Pandora's Box. All of sudden, warlords across China controlled powerful armies that dwarfed the power of the dynasty's remaining forces. A new age of strife had begun...

### **Romance of the Three Kingdoms**

The "Romance of the Three Kingdoms" is arguably the most famous literature in East Asia. It is a highly fantasized epic that focuses on the struggles between the three principal powers in the chaos that accompanied the death-throes of the Han Empire. It is a story of great warriors, brilliant strategists, beautiful women, loyal heroes and treacherous villains, and has become the source material for numerous TV series, movies and video games in Asia.

The first few years following the Yellow Turban rebellion saw the rise and fall of a number of powerful warlords in quick succession until the geopolitical situation stabilised somewhat with the establishment of three 'kingdoms'. The Cao-Wei held power in most of northern and central China. Initially the Cao clan claimed to be servants of the emperor, fighting to restore the unity of the Han Empire against rebel warlords. In practice the Han Emperor was a puppet and hostage of the Cao clan, who would eventually purge the imperial clan altogether and rule as emperors themselves.

The Shu-Han were led by Liu Bei, a distant relative of the emperor, who, once the Emperor was killed by the Cao-Wei, claimed to be the legitimate successor of the Han Empire, and thus fought to restore the Han Empire and the Liu imperial clan to its 'rightful' place. In practice the Shu-Han held a relatively small part of China and could not match the other two factions for manpower or resources.

It was blessed however with exceptional strategists and generals, whose prowess has become legendary in Chinese history. Thanks to these men, the Shu-Han were able to punch above their weight considerably and played a far greater role than their material strength should suggest. It is also worth noting that the “Romance of the Three Kingdoms” is written very much from the biased perspective of the Shu-Han, because they represented the ‘legitimate’ imperial faction, whereas the Cao-Wei usurped imperial power and the Sun-Wu were essentially separatists.

The Sun-Wu ruled most of the Yangtze River Valley, and unlike the Cao-Wei and Shu-Han, who both declared ambitions to unite ‘All Under Heaven’ under their ‘legitimate rule’, the Sun-Wu simply wanted to maintain independence for itself and its people. This shows that even 400 years after the First Emperor’s unification efforts, the peoples of southern China, although nominally Han Chinese, maintained a strong sense of regionalism and identity. Indeed due to the mountainous terrain of southern China, the south has never been assimilated to the same degree as the north, or lost its independent streak entirely. Even as late as the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, independence-minded forces held significant power and influence in southern China until they were crushed by the Nationalists and Communists in the Republic of China, and the People’s Republic of China, respectively. Today the independence forces in Taiwan also reflect the difficulty of establishing central control in the far frontiers of the Chinese civilisation-state. Whether that control is justified or legitimate is an entirely different question.

After some years of chaos, the Chinese world stabilised into three kingdoms, the Wei, the Shu-Han and the Wu. So who would triumph? The answer was none of them. Militarily, the Cao-Wei achieved a degree of dominance, especially after the leading figures in the Shu-Han began to die off of old age, and a new generation of less talented individuals took over. However, the Cao clan also began to decline, and ironically, just as the Cao clan usurped the power of the Liu imperial clan of the Han Dynasty, the Sima clan would usurp the power of the Cao clan, following a well-timed coup in 249 AD, and ruled the Wei kingdom through puppet Cao emperors until they wiped out the Cao clan in 265 AD and ruled as the emperors of the new Jin Dynasty. In 263 the Wei/Jin had destroyed the kingdom of Shu-Han and Sun-Wu lasted for 15 more years before it too was conquered in 280 AD, and China was finally reunited after almost 100 years of civil war and strife. Again, it should be noted that the power who occupied Guanzhong, and placed its capital in Guanzhong, had won a Chinese civil war.

### **From Three Kingdoms to Sixteen**

Unfortunately the new peace was short-lived. Towards the end of the Han Dynasty, the Chinese had encouraged the nomads who sided with them in the Xiongnu-Han War to settle within the great wall, where some took up agriculture, whilst many continued a pastoral nomadic lifestyle. The idea was basically, ‘keep your friends close, your enemies closer’, and the nomads could not rise to threaten the empire again if they were kept under observation within the borders of the empire. In time these nomads would also serve in the Han armies, where their skill as horsemen was greatly valued, and the policy seemed effective, essentially using ‘tamed barbarians’ to counter more dangerous barbarians. However, when Han imperial power collapsed, these ‘tame’ barbarians became essentially independent again, and whilst the Chinese fought each other in the Three Kingdoms period, the tribes gradually gained strength of their own, which would come to have significant consequences in time.



The rise and fall of the Jin Dynasty (265-420 AD) is actually a fine illustration of the difficulties of maintaining control in China. Due to the sheer size of the 'country', it is impossible to administer the entire territory from a single imperial centre, and so the emperor, or whoever controls central imperial power, essentially must delegate actual control to provincial rulers, each in charge of a territory equivalent in size and population as a European country. The Cao-Wei fell to the Sima Clan partly because Cao emperors were too paranoid of delegating too much power to their relatives, fearing that their brothers, uncles and cousins might attempt to seize power for themselves or their sons. This meant that once the Sima clan carried out a coup near the capital, no force in the provinces were willing or able to confront the Sima clan and restore Cao imperial power. Perhaps influenced by this, the Sima clan was careful to position its own family members all across the Jin Empire, as governors of the provinces, generals and ministers. This however would lead to conflicts within the family as brothers, uncles and cousins turned on each other in succession conflicts in the War of the Eight Princes (291-306 AD) that crippled the young Dynasty.

With the Chinese core exhausted by over a century of near continuous conflict and chaos, the nomads struck again. The Wu Hu, as they were called, a loose coalition of semi-nomadic tribes, rebelled against the crumbling Jin Dynasty and soon swept most of northern and central China. The Jin Dynasty, the northern victors of a Chinese civil war, would be pushed into the Yangtze River valley in the south, in a pattern that would be repeated throughout history. The Jin lasted in the south until 420 AD when they were replaced by another southern dynasty. China entered its longest period of chaos and disunity that was called the 'Sixteen Kingdoms' and the 'Southern and Northern Dynasties' periods. Although the two terms are not the same, and refer to different periods with different actors, they are essentially overlapping periods of a greater period of disunity from around 300 AD until 581 AD and the establishment of the Sui Dynasty.

In a way this was China's own Dark Ages, where the golden age of the Han empire had crumbled into the chaos of civil war, followed by barbarian invasion and conquest, and the establishment of 'barbarian-kingdoms'. However, in a pattern that would be repeated many more times, the 'barbarians' who dominated northern China adopted Chinese language, systems of government, philosophy and even Chinese names. In essence, they had become so Chinese that it became difficult to distinguish between these northern 'barbarian kingdoms' and southern 'Chinese dynasties'.

### **The Sui Dynasty**

The Sui Dynasty (581- 618 AD) was the first of the northern kingdoms to finally unite northern China under one rule, and once more, this was the faction who controlled Guanzhong. In 588 AD, a massive invasion from the north finally subjugated the southern Chen Dynasty united all of China. The Sui emperors were hugely ambitious, and this ambition and arrogance would prove their downfall.

In the centuries of Chinese disunity and chaos, Korea had developed into an advanced civilisation of its own, influenced by, but independent of, China. The Goguryeo emperors of Korea rejected the new Chinese Dynasty's claim of superiority, which provoked the Sui into an invasion of Korea. The Sui Empire, partly for economic reasons and partly for military and political ones, began construction of the Grand Canal, the second largest civil engineering project in China after the Great Wall, and like

the construction of the Great Wall, such massive infrastructure projects were deeply unpopular with the peasants and their families who got conscripted into labour levies.

This resentment boiled over when the great Sui invasion of Korea ended in disaster as the Chinese armies, supposedly a million strong (this figure is either exaggerated or likely to include all of the support and logistical troops who did not actually serve on the frontline), disintegrated under pressure of over-stretched supply lines, difficulty of operating in mountainous terrain, and constant Korean guerrilla attacks.

Typically, major natural disasters and military defeats are blamed on the moral decline of the emperor and his imperial dynasty, and so the disastrous defeat in Korea provided the catalyst for a new series of uprisings, led by nobles who fed off the discontent of the masses, that led to the establishment of the Tang Dynasty.

### **The Tang Golden Age**

The Tang Dynasty (608-907 AD) was yet another Chinese dynasty that ruled from the north-western heartlands of Guanzhong, with its capitol in Chang'an, which in its time was the greatest city in the world in terms of size and wealth, rivalled only by Alexandria in Egypt and Constantinople, the capitol of Christendom, in modern Turkey. For the second time in Chinese history, the Tang Empire achieved Chinese hegemonic dominance over the world it knew about, as Chinese power extended into Korea in the northeast, Vietnam in the South, and Central Asia in the West. The Tang Dynasty also saw the high point of the Silk Road, before maritime trade routes would replace the importance of the Silk Road as the highway of commerce between China and the rest of the world. As the eastern end of the Silk Road, Chang'an became exceptionally rich and powerful, and by extension, the Tang Dynasty.

The Tang Dynasty, especially to those with a rose-tinted view of it, was notable for being an open-minded, liberal and tolerant empire. Buddhism, which originated in India, had arrived in China in the Sui Dynasty, but the Tang Dynasty was the first to adopt it as a national religion. Given Chinese dynasties' typically arrogant belief that it was at the centre of the world and above all other cultures and civilisations, and the often violent means it employed to maintain control, it was a little odd that the Tang Dynasty would adopt a foreign religion that encouraged pacifism as its guiding principle. None-the-less it did and Buddhist Temples were constructed across the empire, some of which still stands today, whilst Chinese monks travelled to India in arduous pilgrimages to bring back holy texts and relics that filled the temples. Ironically long after the Indians abandoned Buddhism, China continued to promote and spread Buddhism across Asia, with deep implications for the development of Asian culture and society.

Another mark of the Tang Dynasty's remarkable openness was that although it had adopted Buddhism as state religion, it tolerated other faiths and cultures within the empire, which meant that this was also when Islam first took hold in China, as Muslim traders from Central Asia, Persia and the Middle East arrived in significant numbers and settled along the Silk Road and within Chang'an itself, where a Muslim Quarter was established and remains to this day in the modern city of Xi'an. In time more radical and hard-line Islamic thought would arrive and contribute to religious division and conflicts within China, but the early age of Chinese imports of foreign religions were remarkably peaceful.

The decline of the Tang Dynasty began with a typical story of an emperor overly besotted by a beautiful empress, to the extent of neglecting his duties in managing the empire, leading to the rebellion of one of his most powerful generals, An Lu Shan. The rebellion was eventually suppressed, but the empire never recovered from its devastating impact, and finally crumbled into disunity in 907 AD.

### **The Song, Liao and Jin**

By the turn of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the Tang Empire was on its knees, wracked by peasant revolts, warlord rebellions and nomad raids. In 907 AD one of the nomad tribes, the Khitans, emerged out of Manchuria and conquered north-eastern China, an area roughly corresponding to modern Beijing and its surrounding districts, and established the Liao Dynasty, which again, was modelled on Chinese empires, although the Khitans were more careful to maintain their own culture and lifestyle than the nomads who conquered northern China in the Sixteen Kingdoms period.

The rest of China fell into civil war again in a period called the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (907-960 AD), when five dynasties rapidly rose and fell in northern China, whilst ten kingdoms ruled the south. Eventually, once more the northern empire managed to consolidate its control of the north, and then invaded and subjugated the south, to create a unified Song Dynasty. The Song Empire was quickly at war with the Liao Dynasty, keen to recover the Beijing region, which was called the 'Sixteen Prefectures', but once more the superior cavalry of the nomads meant that not only did the Song fail to make much progress, it faced the risk of losing even more territory to the Liao, and in the end an uneasy peace was agreed whereby the Song accepted a humiliating arrangement of paying tribute to the Liao Dynasty as a mark of its superiority. Officially though, the Song Dynasty had merely accepted the Liao Dynasty as an equal power.

In the early 1100s, the Liao Dynasty itself was threatened by yet another nomadic tribe from Manchuria called the Jurchens, who, with the support of the Song Dynasty, managed to topple the Liao Dynasty and set up yet another semi-nomadic empire in north-eastern China, the Jin Empire (this 'Jin' is a different Chinese word to the earlier Jin of the Sima Clan). The Jurchen-Jin Empire proved to be even more dangerous, aggressive and expansionist than the Khitan-Liao, and soon conquered much of the Yellow River regions and the North China Plain, including the Song Capital of Kaifeng, which for the first time in Chinese imperial history, was not in the Guanzhong region. This was probably because Chang'an was more or less destroyed in the chaotic end of the Tang Dynasty, and although the city was rebuilt, it never recovered its former glory and the Guanzhong region never recovered its importance in Chinese economics or politics. This was partly because the centre of Chinese civilisation had moved eastwards due to increasing influence of nomadic powers from Manchuria, and partly because the Grand Canal had helped to create a new economy that was not connected to the Guanzhong region.

The Song Dynasty is usually divided into the Northern Song and Southern Song periods, with the Northern Song referring to the early half of the dynasty, when it ruled most of the Chinese core, and the Southern Song referring to the latter half of the dynasty when it was forced to relocate its capital to the Yangtze River valley as a result of Jurchen Jin invasion. Due to the Song Dynasty's inability to achieve decisive military superiority over its Liao or Jin rivals, Chinese people today generally do not consider the Song Dynasty as a particularly successful one, and indeed the most famous stories from the history of the Song Dynasty are all rather tragic and paint the dynasty in a

negative light. One talks of a family of generals of the Yang clan, who bravely served the empire in the wars against the Liao for three generations, with almost every man in the clan giving his life for the empire, until their widows too took to the battlefield. (This is likely to be a much embellished story based on reality). Another story focuses on another brilliant general, Yue Fei, who has since become the personification of Chinese patriotism, who single-mindedly waged war against the Jin Empire in an attempt to reclaim the lost Chinese 'homeland' on the North China Plain and the banks of the Yellow River. He was almost successful, but was then betrayed by treacherous Song ministers, who were jealous of the popularity and power of the general, and had him executed on false charges. The third and most famous story, *The Water Margin*, is one of the Four Great Classics of Chinese Literature, along with 'Romance of the Three Kingdoms', 'Journey to the West' and 'Dreams of the Red Chamber'. It was essentially a story of how decent men were forced to become bandits and rebels due to the corruption and incompetence of the Song government.

Despite the 'bad press', the Song Dynasty was actually quite successful in many ways. Although it was not militarily effective against its nomadic enemies like the Han Dynasty or the Tang Dynasty, its appeasement and peaceful-minded policies gave the people of China relative peace compared to the eras of chaos and disunity. In fact the Song elite developed an oddly pacifist culture, where the entire military profession and warfare itself was considered uncivilised and beneath the noble 'gentleman', scholar and minister. Although this culture was rather dangerous in an increasingly dangerous geopolitical environment, it did keep a tight control on military power, and unlike most Chinese dynasties, the Song never really struggled with attempted military coups and rebellions by the nobility. The Song Dynasty was also responsible for China's most famous inventions, including gunpowder, which the Song were also the first to use in a military capacity, and the compass, the two key technologies that in time would drive Europe's Age of Imperialism.

The Song Dynasty saw massive Chinese migration from the north to the south, which finally made the Yangtze River Valley truly part of the Chinese core, instead of the relatively wild and underdeveloped southern frontier of Chinese civilisation that it was during the Han Dynasty, when only 10% of Chinese people lived along the Yangtze. Thanks to improvements in agricultural technologies, and in particular improvements in rice farming in southern China, China experienced its first significant population boom under the Song Dynasty, when the population surpassed 100 million for the first time after hovering around 40-60 million for most of the Han and Tang golden ages, so it is probably fair to say that actually, peasants might have had an easier life in the Song Dynasty than the supposed golden ages.

### **The Mongols and Genghis Khan**

The story of the Mongols begins with the story of Genghis Khan, one of the most fascinating individuals in history, in my opinion, but it makes sense to understand the story in the context of the world the future Mongol conqueror was born into. After destroying the Khitan-Liao Empire in the early 1100s, the Jurchen-Jin Empire was the dominant force in northern China as well as the northern steppes beyond the Great Wall. The Jurchen people were actually a fairly diverse group, some of whom were hunter gatherers, fishermen and farmers, as well as pastoral nomads like the Mongols and Khitans, and the power of the Jin Dynasty gave opportunity for large numbers of Jurchens to migrate to the richer lands of the North China Plain, and not for the first time or the last,

the Jurchens would adopt Chinese systems of government, philosophy, language and possibly even religion.

As a result, in the time of Genghis Khan, the Jurchen Jin were considered 'barbarian' and foreign by the Han-Chinese Song Dynasty, but also 'Chinese' by the other nomads still left in the steppes, and indeed the Jin did employ large numbers of Han Chinese in their governmental administration, engineering projects and even the army. From the perspective of other nomadic tribes in the steppes, the Jurchens went from leading the attack on the Great Wall to posting soldiers to man it against the tribes in protection of their new Chinese empire.

So it was into this divided world that Temujin, the man who would later be known as Genghis Khan, was born. At the time of Temujin's birth around 1160, the Mongols were one of the major pastoral nomad tribes that lived off the land in modern Mongolia and Inner Mongolia. The Mongols, Tartars, Merkits and others were essentially descendents of the Wu Hu barbarians who remained on the steppes, and maintained their traditional pastoral lifestyle since the days of the Xiongnu. All the tribes were themselves divided into many smaller sub-tribes, who constantly fought and raided each other for scarce resources and women.

Temujin's father was the chieftan of a small tribe of Mongols, and his mother was actually a woman his father abducted and married in a raid on the smaller Olkhunut tribe. This practice was common and, surprisingly for modern sensibilities, not considered morally objectionable in the nomad culture of the time. Despite the origins of their relationship, Temujin's father made his abducted wife his 'Chief Wife', which meant that only her children could inherit leadership of the tribe, and so Temujin and his brothers were the 'legitimate' future rulers of the tribe.

However, when Temujin and his brothers were just boys, their father was poisoned by a rival tribe, which was a disaster for the ruling family, as rival families in the tribe refused to acknowledge leadership by the boy-chiefs, and threw the family out of the tribe, having seized most of their property and livestock, which was close to a death sentence on the harsh unforgiving steppe. Temujin's mother raised her children in the wilderness as best as she could, but they suffered almost constant hunger, forced to rely on hunting game and fishing to survive, until in a particularly arduous period, with the family on the point of starvation, Temujin killed his elder brother for refusing to share food with the family, (or at least that was his justification for what was essentially murder).

It is worth noting that history is always written by the survivors, and had Temujin's elder brother also survived their childhood trials, then by traditional, he would have been the legitimate heir to his father's tribe. In their years in the wilderness, Temujin realised that there were many other tribe-less families wandering the steppe, constantly preyed upon by the aggressive tribes, and in these difficult years, Temujin believed that the nomadic peoples of the tribes should be united as one people, and end the perpetual inter-tribal feuds and wars that raged. At some stage Temujin also came to believe that the conflicts of the tribes were being encouraged and manipulated by the Jin Dynasty across the Great Wall, as a deliberate policy to keep the tribes divided and weak. This may have been true, or it may have just been his later justification for invading the Jin Empire.

Regardless, to keep a very long story short, including his struggle to reclaim the leadership of his old tribe, the rescue of his young wife, who was abducted for 9 months by another tribe, and many battles, alliances and betrayals, Temujin eventually united the tribes of Mongolia around 1205, and

declared himself Genghis Khan, which meant something like 'Emperor', or king of kings. Genghis Khan was well aware that he could not keep a nation of warriors together with no war to fight and no loot to plunder, and so he immediately led his unified Mongol nation south to invade the Xi Xia, a Chinese-style kingdom on the north-western periphery of Chinese civilisation, established by Khitans who fled the onslaught of the Jurchen-Jin.

The Mongol onslaught was essentially a disaster for the settled peoples of the world. They used terror as a deliberate instrument of war, with a famous system involving tents to illustrate their intent. Basically, when a Mongol army rode up to a city, they would erect a white tent. If the city surrendered within the first day, the inhabitants would be spared. If they did not, on the second day the Mongols would erect a red tent, and if the city were to fall, even if it surrendered at this stage, the Mongols would kill all the men in the city, but spare the women and children. If the city still refused to surrender, then the Mongols would erect a black tent, and at this stage, the Mongols would accept no surrender, and when the city fell, they would kill every living thing within and raze the city to the ground. This story is probably a little exaggerated, but the important thing is that people believed it, and the Mongols did indeed carry out acts of immense brutality and violence, so that more often than not, the terrified defenders of cities surrendered immediately when the Mongols arrived, allowing them to sweep across vast territories against much greater numbers of potential enemies unopposed.

The Mongols had forced the Xi Xia to surrender in around 3 years, and in 1211 Genghis Khan led his army of just 50,000 nomads to take on the military superpower of the day, the Jin Dynasty. Again the Mongols repeated the atrocities carried out against the Xi Xia, but on a much greater scale against the Jin, whose capitol, Kaifeng (the old Song Capitol) was burned to the ground after a devastating siege.

The Mongols achieved its victories against the seemingly much stronger Jin Dynasty, whose armies numbered at least 500,000, including 150,000 cavalry, for a number of reasons. Firstly there was the Mongol terror tactics and psychological warfare as already mentioned, which had a powerful effect that won the Mongols many battles before a single shot was fired in anger. Secondly, the Jurchens, having ruled a settled empire for generations, had probably lost a degree of the nomad warrior toughness that once allowed them to defeat the Song Dynasty, and certainly Genghis Khan seemed to consider the Jurchens to be weak and soft because they lived in cities and palaces like the Chinese, and he repeatedly warned his sons that the Mongol tribes should never repeat that mistake themselves and become soft. Thirdly, Genghis Khan was simply a military genius. Many times in his rise to power within Mongolia he faced other stronger nomad powers, with all the same strength and toughness as his own warriors, and he defeated them using superior tactics. The nomads had always been fine warriors, but Genghis Khan taught individual warriors to fight as part of a greater whole, where the individual prowess of warriors was amplified by working with each other. Under Genghis Khan, the Mongols considered going to battle on even terms an act of incompetent leadership, and always sought some sort of tactical advantage in battle. They were able to pull this off because of the fourth factor; Genghis Khan revolutionised Mongol society.

Traditionally leadership was limited to tribal nobility like that which Temujin was born into. However, Genghis Khan abolished the old tribal structure and reorganised men into military units of mixed tribes, and promoted them based on merit and courage in battle. For example his most famous

general, Tsubodai, who brought Eastern Europe to its knees with a relatively small army of 20,000 men, was the son of a blacksmith. This system of meritocracy ensured that the Mongols were always led by exceptional officers, from the lowest squadron level to the 10,000 strong tuman, and Genghis could trust his generals to take the initiative in battles and exploit opportunities as they arose. The fifth and final main factor contributing to the Mongols' victory over the Jurchen-Jin Dynasty was the cooperation of the Song Dynasty.

Just as the Song Dynasty, in the 1100s, had helped the Jurchens to destroy the Khitan-Liao Empire, in the early 1200s, they would help the Mongols destroy the Jin. Despite the rise of the Mongols, the Song and Jin Dynasties were still obsessed with each other. In hindsight it seems ludicrous, but even after the Mongols destroyed their capitol city, the next major Jin military offensive was again aimed at the Song Dynasty, which they still perceived to be a greater threat. This was partly because the Mongols had left China again for a time, when a Mongol diplomatic mission was slaughtered by the Persian Khwarazmian Empire, the Mongols left China, rode west and utterly destroyed the Persian Empire.

Whilst the Mongols were off waging war in Persia, the Xi Xia rebelled against the small Mongol forces left administering their massive empire, and on the way back to his second invasion of Xi-Xia, Genghis Khan fell from his horse and died. There are numerous conspiracies and stories surrounding how and why he died exactly, but it is worth noting that at the time of his death, the Mongol Empire 'only' ruled Persia, Central Asia and its homeland steppes, and although it had ravaged the Xi Xia and Jin Dynasty, Xi Xia were in revolt and the Jin were still very much 'operational'. People have a tendency to simplify history, and so would say things like 'Genghis Khan conquered China, Persia, the Middle East, Russia and Eastern Europe' etc. Those conquests would follow, but really Genghis Khan's achievement was the unification of the Mongol tribes, which set the stage for his sons to really expand the empire.

### **The Mongol Conquest and the Yuan Dynasty**

Returning from victories in Persia, the Mongols destroyed the Xi Xia kingdom for its rebellion with such savagery that it could only be called genocide, before turning on the Jin Dynasty again, and after another bloody campaign, destroyed the Jin Dynasty completely in 1234 AD. Almost immediately the Mongols turned on their allies, the Song Dynasty, and began a series of wars to conquer the Song, which resisted for several decades until falling in 1279 AD. For the first time in Chinese history, the entire country had fallen to a 'foreign' invader. By the time the Mongols were invading the Song Dynasty under the leadership of Genghis Khan's sons and grandsons, Mongol tactics had lost a degree of brutality, but regardless the Mongol invasions were disastrous for all their victims. It is difficult to make accurate estimates of the death toll, but there was a noticeable drop in population from the Song Dynasty to the Mongol Yuan Dynasty, and it is estimated that around 20-30 million people died in China as a result of the Mongol invasion, a similar number to the Japanese invasion in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, except the Chinese population was much smaller in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century.

Given this dark episode of Chinese history, it may surprise you to know that today; Genghis Khan is considered a 'Chinese hero' in modern China, where people boast about how the mighty Yuan Dynasty conquered the entire world from Korea to the northeast to Hungary in the West. This is both factually incorrect and a case of historical revisionism for the sake of modern political control.

Many of the peoples who once threatened or even conquered China, like the Mongols and the Manchu, are today part of the Chinese nation, and so to encourage a sense of national unity, the histories of these peoples are now considered Chinese history, and their empires considered 'Chinese empires'. This is not entirely unjustified, as in all these cases, the 'foreign' invader did indeed adopt an essentially Chinese system of government, and in many cases, culture, language, etc. Despite Genghis Khan's insistence to his children to 'never live in cities and become soft like the Jin', his grandson, Kublai Khan, had begun to build the first great Mongol city, and began to live in palaces and rule China as the Emperor of the Yuan Dynasty, borrowing the Chinese concept of the Mandate of Heaven to legitimise his rule. His rule of China was so Chinese that when the famous Italian explorer, Marco Polo, arrived in China and met Kublai Khan, he arrived in the Mongol dominated Yuan-China, and seemed to have considered the Mongol rulers as Chinese.

The Chinese layman's assertion that the Yuan Dynasty conquered Hungary is incorrect because after the death of Ogedai Khan, Genghis Khan's son, the Mongol Empire was divided into several components called Khanates among his grandsons. The Yuan Dynasty was the Chinese core of the Mongol Empire, considered the richest and most important possession of the empire, and thus the ruler of the Yuan Dynasty held the nominal leadership of all Mongols with the position of Khagan, or Khan of Khans. In practice the different Khanates were more or less independent entities, with Golden Horde ruling Russia, and those in Persia and the Middle East adopting Islam and becoming Islamic powers much like how the Yuan Dynasty became increasingly Chinese. Although it is highly likely that Chinese soldiers participated in Tsubodai's invasion of Europe, as they normally fulfilled the role of siege engineers in Mongol armies, the Mongol Invasion of Europe had little to do with the Chinese Yuan Dynasty.

The Mongols in China were constantly worried about Han Chinese rebellion, for good reason, because most Chinese still considered the Yuan Dynasty to be foreign occupiers, despite their appeal to the Mandate of Heaven, and the fact that although the Mongols limited Han Chinese power in their imperial court, as part of their system of meritocracy, they did provide opportunities for people of all races, Han Chinese, Muslims, Jurchens as well as Mongols, to advance themselves based on their service to the empire. For example the Mongol general whose strategies led to the fall of Baghdad in 1258 AD, the worst disaster in the history of the Islamic world, was in fact a Han Chinese man called Guo Kan, who served as the chief commander of Hulagu Khan, a grandson of Genghis Khan. Perhaps because Mongol religion was tied to their land, they never expected their subjects to adopt their religion or culture, and openly encouraged the practice of other faiths within their empire. Under the Mongol Empire, the first true age of international commerce had arrived because trade was critical to the survival of nomadic cultures, and the Mongols protected trade routes with such unprecedented effectiveness that it was said that a merchant could travel from China to Europe and never worry about being robbed.

Inevitably however, as their living conditions improved, the Mongols did become 'softer', whilst the Yuan bureaucracy proved to be incompetent in civil administration, as China's old infrastructure of canals, irrigation networks and roads began to crumble under neglect, resulting in devastating floods. Soon, Chinese resentment intensified, which cannot have been helped by the Mongols' racist classification in their empire, with Mongols at the top, followed by other nomadic peoples of Central Asia and the Muslims, followed by Northern Chinese, Khitans and Jurchens, and at the very bottom the Southern Chinese. Perhaps not surprisingly then, anti-Yuan forces emerged in southern China,



and by 1368, the Mongol Empire, which had become divided, was no longer strong enough to contain the crisis through military force. Just under 100 years after the founding of the Yuan Dynasty, the Mongols had lost their grip on China as a rebel faction called the Ming, after defeating a rival rebel group called the 'Red Lotus', seized power, and China was once more returned to Han Chinese rule. Many Chinese regimes in history were crippled by peasant revolts, but only on a few occasions did the peasants actually take power for themselves, as their revolutions were more often than not hi-jacked by a different set of powerful nobles or warlords. The rise of Liu Bang and the Han Dynasty was one exception, the rise of Zhu Yuanzhang and the Ming Dynasty was another. The third and last exception was the rise of Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist victory in 1949.

### **The Ming Dynasty**

The Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) is not considered a Chinese golden age probably because of what happened towards the end of the dynasty, but it was, at least in its early years, a period of great growth, construction and invention. It is also notable as the first time in Chinese history that a government was established by conquering the north from the south, which shows how the centre of Chinese power and economy had shifted from the Yellow River and North Plain to the Yangtze River and the coast. Despite this, soon after its establishment, the Ming declared that they would shift their capitol from Nanking to Beijing, where they began construction of the famous Forbidden City, which has become synonymous with Chinese imperial grandeur. The Ming also repaired much of the crumbling infrastructure of the Grand Canal and other irrigation networks, and after a damaging Mongol raid that briefly threatened Beijing, embarked on the greatest engineering project in Chinese, and arguably, world history- The reconstruction of the Great Wall.

When tourist brochures show pictures of the Great Wall and talk of its 2,000 year old history, and how it can be seen from space, they are being rather misleading as well as factually incorrect. The Great Wall is indeed over 2,000 years old, since the Qin Dynasty first started joining up the individual defensive walls of the northern states of the Warring States Period. However, those walls had long crumbled into barely recognisable ruins. Early Chinese 'Great Walls' were built mostly of reinforced earth and materials local to wherever the wall was being built. The epic stone structure that stands today that we call the 'Great Wall' is in fact the Ming Great Wall, built in the 1400s. It was by far the most advanced, labour-consuming and expensive defensive wall ever built, and perhaps reflective of the isolationist and inward-looking culture of the Ming Dynasty.

For me the Ming Dynasty is a bit of an enigma. Its early years appear to have been bold, optimistic and forward-looking. The decision to move the capitol from the safety of Yangtze River Valley to Beijing, at the northern tip of the North China Plain, in an area dominated by nomads for centuries, and on the edge of Manchuria and the Mongolian steppe, seemed to be a bold statement of intent to dominate the north. 'Our capitol is north of the North China Plain, and we will not allow it to fall to you northern barbarians again!' it seemed to cry out. Meanwhile in the early 1400s, the Ming Empire also constructed the greatest navy the world had ever seen, with hundreds of giant ships that could carry 30,000 sailors and soldiers, including boats filled with horses for cavalry. For all intents and purposes, it looked like the Ming Empire would be expansionist on land towards the north, and at sea, where at this stage, no fleet in the world could hope to match the Ming navy.

However, when the Ming fleet sailed to the island kingdoms of Southeast Asia, Thailand, India, Sri Lanka and the east coast of Africa, in seven great expeditions, led by the famous Admiral Zheng He,

they had no intention of conquest, and instead merely exchanged gifts with local rulers and asked for an acknowledgment of the mastery of the Ming Emperor, which perhaps not surprisingly, given the show of force, most of these rulers abided. However, unlike official Chinese tributary states like Korea, these rulers were not expected to pay regular tribute to affirm their service to the Ming Empire. The Chinese left as suddenly as they arrived, and left no permanent impact on the local peoples, until generations later, the visit of the Chinese fleet passed into legend. When the emperor who sanctioned and funded Zheng He's voyages died, his successor, for no apparent reason, put a hold to Chinese maritime exploration, just as it looked like China was on the cusp of becoming the first global superpower, and ordered Zheng He's fleet, and all other ocean-going ships, to be burnt.

Instead of training great cavalry armies to take on the northern nomads like the Han Dynasty, the Ming poured its resources on building the Great Wall, and instead of using its mighty fleet to conquer an overseas empire and secure slaves and resources like the Europeans would begin to do 100 years after Zheng He's voyages, the Ming closed China's borders to the world and entered a period of isolationism and stagnation. The reason behind this remains a mystery. It is difficult to imagine what Zheng He's voyages might have discovered that frightened the Ming Empire into isolationism, or whether Zheng He's trips had convinced the empire that the rest of the world really was less rich and valuable than China, and hence not worth the effort to conquer. Perhaps, as a rarity in human history, the Ming emperors did in fact practice what they preach, and took the teachings of Buddhism and Confucianism to heart. Both of these core principles of Chinese culture strongly promoted living a moral life, criticises materialism and encourages rulers to avoid war, considered a cause of unnecessary suffering in the world.

Perhaps the Ming Emperors were beneficent rulers, and focused on giving their common subjects a good and peaceful life in accordance with Confucian ideals, and indeed under the rule of the Ming Empire, China's population, which began to grow in the Song Dynasty, only to be reversed by the Mongol conquest, boomed again, rising to nearly 200 million by the end of the Ming Dynasty in 1644. However, from a geo-strategic perspective, the Ming Dynasty was a disaster for China, squandering a golden opportunity to secure the next few centuries as an era of Chinese prominence just as the small kingdoms of Europe took their first uncontested steps on the world stage.

Instead, centuries of political, economic and technological stagnation would see China leapfrogged by Europe in wealth and power, until in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; the civilisation that invented gunpowder would be defeated by Europeans with guns.

### **The Japanese and the Imjin War**

The origins of Japan and Japanese people differ; depending on if you are a Chinese historian or Japanese historian, but regardless, it is undeniable that early Japanese history was heavily influenced by China. Japanese language today is a mixture of Chinese characters and newer writing systems, forming something of a hybrid written language. Japanese rulers sent envoys to Chinese imperial courts, and brought back Chinese philosophies and systems of government, as well as culture and religion, with Japan also adopting Buddhism as its national religion and its politics heavily influenced by Confucianism. Japan was especially influenced by the Tang Dynasty, and the old Japanese imperial capital of Kyoto was built on the model of the Tang capital of Chang'an.

Initially the Japanese empires accepted the nominal superiority of the Chinese emperors, although unlike Korea, Japan was too far away for the Chinese emperors to demand official tribute on a regular basis. However as early as the Tang Dynasty, Japanese emperors had begun to think of themselves as equal to the Chinese emperors, with a letter sent to China, apparently not meant to offend, causing exactly that, when the Japanese emperor addressed his Chinese counterpart, "Greetings from the emperor of the land where the sun rises to the emperor of the land where the sun sets."

Beyond these diplomatic missions, Sino-Japanese contact was relatively limited, with a few notable exceptions. In 663 AD, Tang Chinese and Yamato Japanese troops found themselves on the opposite sides of a Korean civil war, where the Tang-Silla alliance scored a decisive victory over the Yamato-Baekje alliance. This would not be the last time China and Japan would clash in Korea. Chinese influence in Japan declined following the collapse of the Tang Dynasty and the emergence of the Khitan, Jurchen and Mongol threats that obsessed the Song Dynasty. The second major contact between China and Japan came in 1274 and 1281, when Kublai Khan launched two massive attempted invasions of Japan.

Given the Mongols' lack of experience in naval warfare, the majority of sailors and marines were actually Chinese and Korean subjects of the Mongol Empire. This was the first time that the long geographically isolated Japanese islands felt mortally threatened by a power on the mainland, and for good reason, because the second invasion force in particular boasted nearly 4,000 ships and 150,000 soldiers, far more than what the Kamakura Shogunate could resist. Luckily for the Japanese, in his eagerness to launch the invasion, Kublai Khan's fleet was largely made up of commandeered civilian river ships that were unsuitable for long sea voyages, and were horribly vulnerable when a typhoon hit the fleet not long after its arrival in Japan, drowning many thousands of men and cutting off supplies from the mainland and trapping the survivors in Japan with no way of returning home. This typhoon would become known as 'Kamikaze', or 'Divine Wind', which is why Japanese suicide pilots in World War Two were called Kamikaze, as the Japanese hoped that they would be a human 'Divine Wind' that would sweep away the American invasion force and rescue their desperate situation against the greater resources and manpower of the United States.

In the Ming Dynasty, Japan had, from 1460s onwards, fallen into a state of anarchy and civil war called the Sengoku Jidai, or 'Age of the Country at War'. The breakdown of central authority in Japan made official Sino-Japanese relations impossible and meaningless, and in the absence of law and order, Japanese pirates began to prey on shipping within the Japanese islands, as well as off the coast of China and Korea. These Wako Pirates were in fact often funded and supported by the Japanese samurai clans, who used the income from piracy to boost their strength in the vicious clan wars that raged all across Japan. The Ming Empire's isolationist policy and total ban against the construction of ocean-going ships greatly constrained the Ming Empire's capability to tackle the Wako pirates militarily, and they responded by imposing a total trade embargo on Japan, to force the Ashikaga Shogunate, nominal rulers of Japan, to put an end to Wako piracy. However, the Ashikaga had long lost their power and control to the powerful samurai clans of Japan, and the Ming trade embargo merely made piracy even more economically profitable, and encouraged Chinese and Koreans traders to engage in piracy themselves as trade was driven 'underground'. Again it is baffling, given how weak and divided Japan was in its Sengoku Jidai period, that Ming China did not

simply reverse its isolationist policy, construct a fleet and launch a punitive expedition to put an end to the rampant piracy.

By the 1590s, after over 100 years of internal chaos, the Japanese clans were finally, mostly, united under the rule of Toyotomi Hideyoshi. Rather like Genghis Khan, Toyotomi Hideyoshi now found himself at the head of a vast army of 500,000, including over 100,000 samurai, who had known only war all their lives, and now had no enemy to fight. Rather than face inevitable rebellion, Toyotomi Hideyoshi declared his intention to conquer the world, or more specifically, the Ming Empire. According to Japanese records, the Joseon Korean Dynasty, a protectorate and vassal state of the Chinese Ming Dynasty, refused to allow Japanese troops to pass through their territory to China, which the Japanese used as justification for an invasion of Korea, to establish a base of operations on the mainland. The Japanese invasion landed in Korea in 1592, and sparked the Imjin War. Initially the Japanese samurai, all veterans of the bloody wars in Japan, and many armed with early European guns, scored a number of victories over the Korean Joseon Dynasty, which had badly underestimated the strength of the Japanese invasion force, and initially assumed it to be simply another Wako pirate raid, annoying and damaging, but not mortally dangerous.

When the situation deteriorated rapidly, the Joseon pleaded for aid from Ming China, which responded by despatching a quick reaction force of 5,000 men to reinforce the Koreans, before this force was swelled to around 40,000 after the Ming court realised how desperate the Korean situation had become. After several twists and turns the two sides fought each other to a stalemate on land, before a Chinese commando raid destroyed the Japanese supplies in Korea, whilst the Korean navy, under the brilliant leadership of a legendary admiral, Admiral Yi, prevented the Japanese from resupplying their troops. This finally forced the Japanese to the negotiating table, where they agreed to withdraw from most of Korea.

However, Ming China and Japan could not agree on a long term peace agreement, with Japan demanding that they be allowed to keep around half of Korea, and share it with China, whilst Ming China was only willing to offer Toyotomi Hideyoshi the title of 'King of Japan'. The Ming Emperor considered this a great honour, but for Toyotomi, accepting the arrangement would probably have made him a traitor to the Japanese, who already had their own emperor, albeit one with no political power, and unless the Ming were willing to enforce their offer with troops, which they certainly were not, then the offer had no value to Toyotomi in practise. In any case, Toyotomi launched a second invasion of Korea in 1597.

This time the Ming Chinese and Joseon Koreans were better prepared, with China despatching a relief force of 75,000 to assist the Koreans as well as a naval force to reinforce the Korean fleet, which was almost totally destroyed by the Japanese after Admiral Yi was relieved of command following a Japanese ruse. The second invasion was a total failure for Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and his forces were forced to retreat from Korea with heavy losses soon after his sudden death in 1598.

The Imjin War was the first major regional war in Asia involving most of the major powers. It demonstrated that China was willing and able to defend its protectorate territories and remained, at that stage, the centre of Asian power. Japan's first adventure in imperialism and attempt to reshape the Asian world order had failed utterly. However, the financial cost of the war, in addition to a number of other border conflicts as well as continuing pressure from the Mongols, significantly weakened the Ming Dynasty, and paved the way for the rise of another nomadic power, the Manchu.

## **The Manchu and the Qing Dynasty (1644- 1991 AD)**

The Manchu were descendents of the Jurchens, who lived in the plains north-east of the Chinese periphery, in an area that would in the future become known as Manchuria. Throughout history the Jurchens raided northern China and Korea, and most notably established the Jurchen-Jin Dynasty in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> Century. They were at times prominent and other times subjugated by other nomad factions. In the late 16<sup>th</sup> century and early 17<sup>th</sup> Century, the Manchu had united the Jurchen people once more, under the leadership of Nurhaci of the Aisin Goro clan, which began to directly challenge the dominance of the Ming Dynasty. After achieving some local victories, the Manchu were stopped at the Battle of Ningyuan, where Nurhaci was mortally wounded by a cannon shot. In the years that followed the Manchu armies were more or less contained beyond the Great Wall, which seemed to serve its purpose well.

However, within the Great Wall, the Ming Empire was bleeding to death by a thousand cuts. It was hit by a series of famines, floods, rebellions and border wars, which individually would not have fatally weakened the empire, but combined together, the pressure gradually increased until central authority more or less collapsed in 1644 and a peasant rebel army seized Beijing and killed the emperor. The Ming army in the north, which had been relatively successful in holding back the Manchu, defected and joined the Manchu against the peasant rebels. They opened the gates of Shanhai Pass, where the combined Manchu and former-Ming armies easily crushed the peasant rebels and declared the establishment of the Qing Dynasty. 'Qing', which means 'calm, fresh or clear', and in Chinese is associated with the element of water, was a clearly a symbolic gesture to mean that the Qing Dynasty had arrived to put out the flame and 'brightness' of the Ming Dynasty. Not for the first time, a peasant rebellion crippled the ruling dynasty of the day, only for their victory to be exploited by another power, in this case the invading Manchu and their Ming collaborators, chief amongst them was the Ming general, Wu Sangui, the general in charge of defending Shanhai Pass, who after the Qing conquest of China, would be granted a large fief to rule as his kingdom within the Qing Empire.

The Qing conquest of mainland China was another extremely bloody and devastating affair, although the exact extent of loss of life and property is disputed, it is certainly in the millions and parts of southern China, where Ming resistance was the fiercest, would not recover until 100 years after the Manchu invasion, due to the atrocities carried out by Qing soldiers, which devastated the local infrastructure and depopulated entire districts. After the Ming Dynasty was defeated on the Chinese mainland, it persisted in Taiwan until 1683, when under the rule of the famous Kangxi Emperor, the Qing navy finally defeated the last bastion of Ming resistance. This would not be the first time that a regime defeated on the mainland would attempt to hold onto power in relative isolation in Taiwan. For the second time in Chinese history, China was ruled by a foreign invader. The Qing Dynasty, like all the nomad conquerors who came before them, invoked the Chinese Mandate of Heaven and adopted Chinese language, systems of government, Confucianism and Buddhism.

The legacy of the Qing Dynasty is mixed to say the least. It obviously respected Chinese culture and history, and Qing Emperors became famous Chinese poets and philosophers, and continued to maintain Chinese temples and observe Chinese religious customs. They also employed Han-Chinese in important positions of government, and maintained Chinese infrastructure better than the Yuan Dynasty. The Qing Dynasty saw the continuation of the population growth under the Ming Dynasty,

briefly curtailed by the chaos of the Manchu invasion, and by the time the Qing Empire fell in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, China's population had reached 400 million.

The Qing Dynasty was also a militarily successful one, at least under the reign of earlier emperors. Unlike the inwardly focused and passive Ming and Song Empires, the Qing aggressively expanded the borders of China, bringing Mongolia and the Western Regions (now called Xinjiang) under central authority for the first time since the Tang, or perhaps even Han times. Previous Chinese dynasties had established tributary relationships with Tibet, but the Qing were the first to despatch an army to occupy and administer Tibet as a Chinese province, and of course, Manchuria itself, only briefly held by various Chinese dynasties at the height of their power, was now part of the Manchu-Chinese Empire. Ironically, if the Manchu never invaded China, China would not have legitimate claim over as much territory as it does today and probably hold significant less than it does, with Manchuria and Mongolia as entirely independent countries. Far more Mongols today live in Inner Mongolia, in China, than the Republic of Mongolia, a legacy of the Manchu conquest of the Mongol tribes under Kangxi Emperor.

On the other hand, the Qing Dynasty has been criticised by many scholars as a disaster for China. For a start, the Manchu conquest caused catastrophic destruction that set back Chinese development for decades. Qing society was also extremely repressive, with strict rules and guidelines, and severe censorship of thoughts and ideas, with extreme punishment for those who crossed the lines. For example poets could have themselves and their entire families executed for writing a poem which supposedly, may have, insulted the emperor. Chinese people were also forbidden to wear traditional Chinese clothing, 'Hanfu', which as a result, as been completely lost to Chinese culture unless there is some sort of revival in the future, and Chinese men were forced to wear their hair in a queue (long single pony-tail), in the Manchu style. Some have argued that strict Manchu regulations and suppression of freedoms extinguished the first sparks of what might have developed as a Chinese industrial revolution around the same time as the European one. It is notable that the Chinese people, with a long traditional of technological innovation that kept it ahead of most of the world throughout history, were technologically stagnant in over 250 years of Manchu rule. As always there are often many sides to a story, and it is possible to argue that the gap that emerged between China and Europe was more due to European exceptionalism than Chinese stagnation, or that Chinese stagnation was caused by Confucianism, and had begun in the Ming Dynasty, before the arrival of the Manchu.

What cannot be denied however was that the Qing Dynasty was plagued by exceptional levels of corruption, with examples of extraordinary wealth accumulated by corrupt officials, such as the infamous He Shen, whose family wealth was greater than the national treasury! Some have blamed the Qing Dynasty for the growth of a culture of corruption in the Chinese bureaucracy, although certainly corruption has featured in Chinese history before the Qing Dynasty, and perhaps we simply do not know more about specific cases because detail has been lost to the erosion of time. Regardless, after a brief golden age of sorts in the late 1600s and early 1700s, the Qing Dynasty began to stagnate and decline.

As with the Yuan Dynasty, the Han Chinese population never entirely accepted the legitimacy of a 'foreign' emperor, and whilst the going was good, they seem to have tolerated it, but as soon as life got harder, resentment quickly grew and rebellions erupted on a regular basis. In addition to minor

disturbances, there was the White Lotus Rebellion in 1796, the Panthay Rebellion (1856-1873), the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864) and the Dungan Revolt (1895-1896). The Taiping Rebellion in particular was damaging in the extreme, with around 30 million deaths as a result of a war that swept much of China.

The Qing Dynasty also faced the growing threat of Western Imperialism, with the British Empire as its flag bearer and chief nemesis. From the 1700s onwards, opium addiction was becoming an increasingly dangerous problem for China, and by the 1800s, around one in four Chinese men were opium addicts, with a crippling effect on Chinese society and economy, which saw vast amounts of wealth flow overseas for the import of opium. It would be wrong to blame the British for starting the Chinese opium habit, since opium dens have existed in China since the Ming Dynasty, but once the Chinese government realised the harm opium was causing to society and the empire, and attempted to prohibit opium import, which was essentially state organised drug trafficking, the British Empire went to war to protect its vast opium trade profits.

The British Empire had already invested huge amounts into the production of opium, including acquiring agricultural land in India for opium production, which contributed to the Bengal Famine of 1770 that claimed 10 million lives. In 1839, the Qing government finally acted to enforce imperial decrees banning trade and use of opium, and officials seized and destroyed huge quantities of British opium in Canton. In response the British Empire launched a punitive war, mostly fought at sea, where the Chinese fleet of wooden sail ships, little changed since the Ming-era, were easily smashed by Britain's Iron-hulled steam warships, which proceeded to steam up the Yangtze, attacking strategic targets at will. On land the British expeditionary force, better trained and equipped with modern rifles and artillery, easily defeated the numerically larger Chinese armies, which had no experience of the European way of war.

The First Opium War (1839-1842) was a humiliating defeat for the Qing Dynasty and the Chinese, and marked the beginning of what would become known as the 'century of humiliation'. The assumption of Chinese superiority, both in a moral sense and a civilisation sense, had been shattered by Britain's superior technology. In the first of many 'Unequal Treaties' with western imperialist powers, China ceded Hong Kong to the British Empire on a 150 year lease, and allowed the opium trade to continue well into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Continuing tension between the Qing Empire and western powers resulted in the Second Opium War (1856-1860), in which a joint army of British, French and American troops marched on Beijing, destroying the elite of the Manchu army in battle, and burning the Summer Palace, before enforcing another set of humiliating concessions on the Qing government.

In 1894, the recently industrialised Japanese empire had begun to test the limits of its new power, in particular attempting once more to subjugate Korea, which brought it into conflict with Qing China just as it did with Ming China. This time however, although China had bought some newer European warships that on paper made it appear stronger than Japan, the Chinese armed forces were plagued by corruption, opium addiction and poor leadership, compared to the motivated and organised Japanese. The First-Sino Japanese War (1894-1895) ended in total defeat and piled further humiliation onto the Qing Dynasty, which was forced to cede Taiwan to Japan and turned Korea into a Japanese puppet state, which the Japanese empire would eventually annex entirely in 1910.

### **The End of Empire and the Painful Birth of the Republic**

Qing defeat at the hands of Japan had all but eroded any legitimacy the Qing Dynasty still retained, and various national movements emerged, offering different solutions to China's profound and severe crisis. The Boxer Rebellion (1898-1901) began as an anti-imperialist movement, which attacked western targets and Chinese Christians, who were considered collaborators of western imperialism. They essentially said, 'if the government will not stand up to the foreigners, then we the people will.' And for a while the Boxers were tolerated, and even tacitly supported by elements in the Qing court, which was also resentful of the western powers and Japan. However, once an allied army of eight imperial powers landed in China and threatened the Qing Dynasty, sacking the Forbidden City and forcing the emperor to flee his capitol, the Qing government attacked the Boxers themselves and executed a significant number of them in order to appease the west. This ended the Boxer rebellion, but turned the anger of the people from the west to the government.

In 1911, as popular unrest grew, an imperial general, Yuan Shikai, forced the boy-emperor, Puyi, of the Qing Dynasty, to abdicate, thus ending the Qing Dynasty and over 2,000 years of Chinese imperial history that began with the First Emperor in 221 BC. The Chinese revolution was nominally led by Dr Sun Yat-Sen, a western-educated intellectual who advocated a republican form of government based on a western model. However he lacked the military muscle to enforce his ideals and Yuan Shikai essentially hi-jacked the new republic, nominally serving as its first elected president, but in practice ruling as a military dictator. He even tried to declare himself emperor in 1915, which led many provinces to declare independence, and although he reversed his declaration before dying suddenly in 1916, the nation was already broken. With no one man in control, China descended into chaos and warlordism, as governors, generals and any strongman with an army ruled their locality like kings and fought each other for power and influence.

In 1925, shortly before his death, Dr Sun Yat-Sen co-founded the KMT, or Nationalist Party, which formed a central government of sorts that lacked much control beyond the immediate vicinity of Guangzhou. The Chinese Communist Party, founded in 1919, also joined the Nationalist movement, becoming a left-wing branch of the Nationalists. In 1925, after the death of Sun Yat-Sen, leadership of the KMT passed to Chiang Kai-shek, who in 1927, initiated the Northern Expedition, which nominally succeeded in reunifying core Chinese territories and establishing the Republic of China, with the KMT as the governing party. In truth although several warlords were defeated in battle, the KMT was not strong enough to directly administer the entire country through an effective bureaucracy, and many warlords simply continued their rule with tacit KMT acceptance and an official KMT governmental position.

Having 'dealt' with the warlords, Chiang Kai-shek turned on his ideological enemies, the communists, and began a purge of the KMT of communist members, with thousands arrested, imprisoned and executed. This shattered KMT-CPC (Communist Party of China) cooperation and drove the communist movement underground, and began the first stage of the Chinese Civil War.

### **Civil War and Japanese Invasion**

The first stage of the Chinese Civil War saw communist bases in southern China crushed by the superior military power of the Nationalists, forcing the communists into a famous retreat to the barren regions of the north called the Long March, which for all intents and purposes, was a military disaster, but was later changed into something of a heroic epic by propaganda. The communists were saved by the fact that the armies of the KMT were still mostly warlord armies, whose leaders



did not want to expend their own resources and men to fight the communists, whilst the KMT central armies were too thinly stretched to focus and destroy all the communists. Internal divisions within the Nationalist government persisted, and erupted into war in the Central Plains War of 1930, which divided KMT attentions.

To make matters worse for the new republic, in 1931, Japan, having already annexed Korea, invaded Manchuria on vague justifications and established a puppet government of Manchukuo, ruled by the former Qing boy-emperor, Puyi. Determined to unify China before taking on the Japanese, the Chiang government chose strategic tolerance of Japan whilst intensifying efforts to destroy the communists. He famously claimed that 'Japan is a disease of the skin, communism is a disease of the heart', and thus China must eradicate communism first, and then deal with Japanese imperialism. However, the Chinese people were increasingly fed up with the KMT government's inaction over foreign aggression, and increasingly demanded a response to the latest Japanese provocation. In December 1936, near the city of Xi'an, Chiang Kai-shek was abducted by one of his own senior generals, Zhang Xueliang, who, at gunpoint, forced him to sign a truce with the communists so that they could form a united front against the Japanese. The Xi'an Incident remains a great mystery of Chinese history. Zhang Xueliang was not a communist, as far as we know, and indeed refused to visit mainland China after the Civil War, claiming his loyalty to the Nationalist cause, but his apparently selfless act of rebellion saved the communists from destruction, and earned himself 50 years of house imprisonment until his death. Regardless, the united front would be shortly tested as the Japanese launched an all-out invasion of China in 1937.

The Japanese invasion began with a simultaneous assault from Manchuria in the northeast and Shanghai in the southeast. The Japanese were confident of a quick victory, declaring that Shanghai would fall in three days and China in three months, as they assumed that Chinese resistance would crumble like it did in the First Sino-Japanese War, especially given that Japanese improvements in technology, doctrine and modern combat experience had grown significantly in the decades since the first war, which included a surprise victory over Tsarist Russia in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905. However, the difference was that the first war was fought at sea and in Korea, where Chinese soldiers were reluctant to die for a dying empire and incompetent dynasty. In the Second Sino-Japanese War, Chinese soldiers felt that they were defending their homeland, fighting for the very survival of the country, and motivated by decades of anti-imperialist resentment and anger.

Keen to demonstrate the spirit of Chinese resistance in view of the many foreign missions and embassies established in Shanghai following the Boxer Rebellion, Chiang threw his finest Central Army units into the Battle of Shanghai, which raged for three months before the city finally fell, making a mockery of the Japanese claim that they would have taken all of China by then. Chiang's strategy was to win the hearts and minds of the western powers, and encourage France, the United States and Britain to restrain Japanese aggression. Unfortunately, besides making statements condemning Japanese aggression, the west did nothing, and Chiang lost over half of the officer corps he recruited and meticulously trained in the Whampoa Military Academy in just the first battle of the Second Sino-Japanese War. This would have serious implications for the future Chinese conduct of the war and the future resumption of the Chinese Civil War.

Frustrated by unexpected resistance, the Japanese increased their level of brutality, whether as part of an official strategy or the simple instinct of frustrated soldiers who had endured harrowing

battles... As the victorious Japanese army marched from Shanghai to Nanking, they looted, burnt and raped their way to the new Chinese capitol, which fell after a brief resistance, the Chinese army having exhausted itself in the fight for Shanghai. When the Japanese took Nanking, they carried out one of the worst atrocities of human history, which was better documented and recorded than many other Japanese atrocities simply because there were westerners in Nanking to witness what happened, as around 300,000 Chinese civilians were rounded up and killed, many thousands of women raped or forced into service as 'comfort women', or sex slaves, for the Japanese army.

The Chinese capitol had fallen, and the Japanese achieved a string of victories in the north, dominating the North China Plain, and pushing Chinese forces westwards until they reached the eastern edges of the old Guanzhong region. Although Guanzhong had long lost its name or political importance, its naturally defensive terrain, coupled with stretched Japanese supply lines, which came under increasing attack by Chinese guerrillas and partisans, checked the Japanese advance in the north. In the south the mountains and rivers made defence slightly easier, but here too the Japanese used its naval and air superiority to dominate the Chinese coast and advance up the Yangtze River Valley, until around half of China, and more than half of Chinese people, lived under Japanese occupation.

Whilst the Nationalists took on the Japanese in dozens of large frontal engagements that would result in millions of military casualties, the communists largely avoided open battle, and engaged in guerrilla attacks on Japanese supply lines, logistics and communication infrastructure. Critics of the communists have accused them of deliberately refusing to fight Japan to conserve strength for the inevitable war against the KMT once the Japanese were defeated. However, supporters of the communists, and the communists themselves, have argued that their guerrilla tactics were more effective than the KMT's frontal engagements.

The biggest victims of the war, as always, were ordinary civilians, who suffered untold hardship in the fighting, which resulted in 20-30 million civilian deaths. As communist insurgency caused ever greater damage to the Japanese war effort, which became increasingly bogged down in China, unable to make decisive breakthroughs against stubborn Chinese resistance, the Japanese officially began the policy of 'Three Alls', in December 1940, which stood for 'Kill All, Loot All, Burn All', in retaliation against any village suspected of collaborating with Chinese insurgents. In addition, Japanese forces routinely used chemical and biological weapons against Chinese military and civilian targets, and established the infamous biological weapons research facility called Unit 731 to experiment on Chinese prisoners.

Chiang Kai-shek's tactics also caused significant suffering for the Chinese people. Determined to delay the Japanese advance at all costs, he ordered a scorched earth policy as his armies retreated, burning crops and destroying dams, which caused massive flooding and famine, but did significantly slow Japanese progress. Chiang correctly determined that as long as China could hold on, Japan could not triumph in the long run, as it was running out of war materials, especially once the United States began imposing economic sanctions, in particular an oil embargo on the Japanese Empire. Realising that Japan was doomed to defeat unless it knocked the United States and Britain out of Asia, at least for a while, the Japanese launched the surprise attack on Pearl Harbour against the United States, which really should not have been a surprise, given that US policy essentially ensured that Japan would either attack the United States, or accept defeat in China, which was unthinkable.

China held on against Japan alone from 1937 to December 1941, when the United States finally joined the war. The grim battle of attrition continued until the United States dropped two Atom Bombs in 1945, forcing Japan's surrender, with Nationalist China recognised as one of the victorious nations.

Peace returned briefly, but tensions between the communists and Nationalists boiled over soon after the Japanese withdrew from China, starting with a battle for Manchuria, which then spread to the rest of China. The long years of war against Japan had exhausted the Nationalist armies, but gave the communists time to build partisan networks and grow their influence throughout China, particularly in Japanese-occupied territories, where the communists became the de-facto representatives of Chinese resistance. Despite this, at the start of the second phase of the Chinese Civil War, the Nationalists appeared to hold a decisive advantage in manpower, war material and military experience, but within four years, they would be driven from power on the mainland and forced to flee to the island of Taiwan, just as the Ming fled to Taiwan with the rise of the Qing Dynasty.

In hindsight, the communist victory in China should not be that surprising. In 1945, most Chinese people were poor peasants fed up with hunger, hardship and the chaos of the past century. The communists offered them the dream of a better life, with their own land, living as equals, and not the virtual slaves of landlords. In contrast the Nationalist government had become increasingly corrupt, with soldiers often underfed or unpaid because their officers had siphoned away their budget into private accounts. Whilst many volunteered for service in the Nationalist Revolutionary Army in 1927 to unite China and end warlordism, and in 1937 to resist Japanese aggression, by 1945, these men, tired of eight years or more of a brutal war against Japan, were eager to return home to their families, and unwilling to fight another war against other Chinese people. Mass desertions hit the Nationalist Army, which began to aggressively recruit troops by conscription, but these conscripts were woefully unmotivated to fight and die for the cause, and in many battles between supposedly equal forces, or even when the KMT held strong defensive positions with greater forces, the motivated communists only needed to march towards the nationalist lines to accept the surrender of entire KMT regiments and divisions, who often defected and joined the communists with their equipment and supplies.

And thus, on 1<sup>st</sup> of October, 1949, with most of mainland China under his control, Mao Zedong, leader of the Communist Party of China since the Long March, declared the founding of the People's Republic of China, ending a century of chaos and decades of disunity.

