

The Grand Middle Kingdom

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Whether one settlement, or many, is classed as a great civilization has more to do with the influence it exerts beyond its borders than within them. In the case of China we have both at once: today the third largest territory on the planet, the second largest population, and the imminent assumption, in the coming decades, of the position of first economy in the world. But for all that to be possible, many centuries of experience were required.

The first Chinese dynasty was the Xia. Many consider it more mythological than historical, without archaeological traces to prove it, given that its extinction would have occurred around the third millennium BC. After its disappearance comes the height of the Shang dynasty, whose material proof is the bronze metallurgy then in existence. There occurred the first of all China's technological leaps.

With the end of the Shang began what would be the longest of all the ruling lines of the Middle Kingdom: the Zhou. On that occasion the "Mandate of Heaven" had its beginning, its existence serving as the moral instinct that justified political power, including that of all future emperors — a framework supported by philosophers such as Laozi and Confucius, though the latter rarely discoursed on metaphysical questions.

During this dynasty the military classic *The Art of War*, by Sun Tzu, was also written. It may indeed be no coincidence that *The Art of War* appeared under the Zhou, whose rulers successfully defended themselves against the neighboring warring states, until the rise of the Qin.

With the Qin, the first Chinese emperor, Qin Shi Huang, ascended the throne; the terracotta armies were made, and the Great Wall was begun, its function being to hold back the Mongol invasions from the north. Writing was unified as well. Completing this glorification, the Qin were succeeded by the Han, who established the Silk Road, essential to the development of an empire that already had Confucianism as its official state doctrine.

With the deposition of the Han began the age of the Three Kingdoms, of rivalry and civil war among the claimants to the throne, which culminated in the next occupant of the throne being a member of the Jin dynasty, the unifier after those decades of discord. Notwithstanding that virtue, the Jin were violently swept aside by the Northern and Southern Dynasties, the cause of further disorder — which ceased only with the Sui, who directed the general reunification and prepared the era of prosperity that reached its height with the Tang: a golden age political, artistic, military, and scientific.

But the Tang, for all their administrative wisdom, were not able, over so long a span, to pacify rival political spirits. So much so that they were deposed by the civil war of the Five Dynasties, after which came the Song, under whom the country was reunified once more and the arts, commerce, and invention flourished. They were followed in turn by the Yuan rulers, of Mongol descent and competent enough to establish a new golden period, with several scientific inventions and in an atmosphere of political and religious tolerance.

Finally, the penultimate dynasty to hold power was the Ming, who continued the building of the Great Wall and were the original builders of the Forbidden City — until the last Qing emperor was overthrown, in 1912, by the Xinhai Revolution, whose aim was to impose the republican form of

government, in the wake of the recent First Sino-Japanese War and of the Boxer Rebellion that followed it.

The grandeur of China's history is proportional to its present position. And if we have descendants at the twilight of great humanity, they will certainly find in the Middle Kingdom a reference to follow, so as to raise our civilization again.

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