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PATTERNS *of* EAST  
ASIAN HISTORY

— *Charles A. Desnoyers* —

OXFORD  
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# About the Cover Image

## **Plate with a Vase of Flowers**

The eighteenth century saw the rapid rise and development of the export porcelain industry in East Asia for a European market fascinated by chinoiserie. The object depicted here is a wonderful example of East Asian cross-cultural influences: enameled porcelain (originating in China), crafted in the Japanese *Hizen* regional style of Imari ware by a colony of Korean potters working in secluded Japan. The European connection is notable as the piece was part of the collection of Augustus II, elector of Saxony and king of Poland, obtained through Dutch merchants in their role as the sole Europeans allowed to trade in Japan at this time.



# Patterns of East Asian History





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## PREFACE



*Patterns of East Asian History* marks the third volume in Oxford University Press's highly successful *Patterns* series, which currently includes *Patterns of World History* in its third edition and *Patterns of Modern Chinese History*. These offerings are college-level introductory texts whose purpose is to provide beginning students with an entree into complex fields of history with which American students have generally had little or no exposure. The approach of all the volumes revolves around the idea of using recognizable and widely accepted patterns of historical development as a loose framework around which to structure the material both as an organizational aid to the instructor and as a tool to make complex material more comprehensible to the student. As we have stressed in previous volumes in the series, this approach is *not* intended to be reductionist or deterministic, or to privilege a particular ideological perspective, but rather to enhance pedagogical flexibility while providing a subtly recursive format that allows abundant opportunities for contrast and comparison among and within the societies under consideration. As with the other volumes in the series, the overall aim is to simplify the immense complexities of history for the beginning student without making them simplistic.

All the historical fields covered in these volumes (world history, Chinese history, East Asian history) now face lively internal debates concerning various topics, and one of the goals of the series is to introduce students to these discussions in order to stress the idea that historians are not monolithic in their ideas or approaches, but more often than not disagree with each other, sometimes vigorously. Thus, all the books employ certain pedagogical features designed to enhance the sense that “the past,” as William Faulkner put it so memorably, “is not dead; it isn’t even past.” Chapters begin with a vignette designed to crystallize a particular situation or idea emphasized within that chapter or section and include a feature, “Patterns Up-Close,” designed to examine a particular concept or event at a deeper level to enhance the material in question. Because chapters 9 and 10 constitute essentially one long chapter on China from 1895 to the present, the vignette for both chapters opens chapter 9 and the Patterns Up-Close feature for both is in chapter 10.

In the case of East Asia, one problem that immediately presents itself is how to define the area as a specific region. Geography offers some clues but nothing hard and fast and instantly identifiable, such as the Indian subcontinent. China, of course, is at the heart of East Asia geographically, but how far should one define the region beyond its historical borders? Should Mongolia be considered part of East Asia? Should Southeast Asia? In many respects, the cultural connections offer more coherent boundaries, but even these are contested. Some would include what is often called the “Sinitic Frontier” that includes the states and societies on the Chinese periphery that have been touched by Chinese culture in one form or another. This is fairly safe ground for the three states most commonly included in regional histories and sourcebooks: China, Korea, and Japan. But even these are not always taken together: for example, the Association for Asian Studies organizes its regional councils on the model of “China and Inner Asia,” “Northeast Asia” (including Japan and Korea), and “Southeast Asia” (including Vietnam). The United Nations Statistics Division includes Mongolia along with China, Japan, and Korea, although Mongolia shares much less culturally with these three nations than Vietnam, which is listed separately in Southeast Asia. Some regional political spokespeople from countries generally designated as “Southeast Asian” have advocated including the members of their regional Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) along with China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, as comprising a greater “East Asia.”

One can also find ready opposition to what might be called the “Chinese impact-indigenous response” model. Certainly, much of the history of Vietnam and Korea consists of attempts to break free of Chinese political influence; Mongolians and Manchus have long struggled—even when their empires included China—to not be assimilated culturally by China, and Tibetans and various Central Asian peoples today, as in the past, resist the tide of what they term “cultural genocide” emanating from the People’s Republic.

Yet in the case of all these places, contact with China marked vital turning points in their societies. Korean and Vietnamese states for short periods held territory within what ultimately constituted China. More generally, however, both places underwent long periods of invasion and occupation by various Chinese dynasties that left their written language, systems of government, and cultural, philosophical, and religious traditions as their legacies. Japan actively borrowed Chinese systems to make the clan-based central kingdom of Yamato into a self-designated empire. Mongolia existed only as part of a large territorial expanse inhabited by a multitude of nomadic groups who periodically raided and clashed with the Chinese states to the south until the time of Genghis Khan. While remaining culturally distinct from China—even devising their own written language and adopting a variety of religious beliefs—the high point of their imperial ambitions came with the conquest of Song Dynasty China and the creation of their own Chinese regime: the Yuan Dynasty (1280–1368). Tibet, whose language springs from the same family (Sino-Tibetan) as the Chinese dialects, maintained its cultural distinctiveness even when incorporated into the Qing Empire by Manchu rulers—themselves struggling to maintain their own cultural distinctiveness—whose vision was a universal multicultural state.

The often fraught relationship of these states with China raises another conceptual problem in studying the area: the question of modernity. How should we define it, and when can we say it began for the region as a whole? Can we even designate a period for the majority of these states when we might say that their modern periods were under way? In the case of China, scholars have over the years suggested beginning the modern era as late as 1840 and as early as the Song Dynasty (960–1279). For Japan, key dates include the wholesale adoption of Chinese political and cultural systems during the *Taika* (Great Reform) of 645; the beginnings of imperial Heian Japan (after 794); the creation of the shogunate (1185); the Tokugawa period (1603–1867); the “opening” of Japan by Perry in 1853; and the Meiji Restoration (1868–1912). In the case of Korea, the coming of Buddhism and Chinese culture (fourth and fifth centuries); the creation of the *han'gul* writing system (fifteenth century); and the first treaty with Meiji Japan (1876) might all plausibly be used. Similar problems surface with Vietnam. The creation of the Mongol super-empire in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries seems a fairly logical and convenient place to situate the start of that country's modern period.

The Mongol interval, although brief, does provide a kind of jumping off point for the organization of this volume. Recent scholarship has suggested that in controlling such a vast area, encouraging trade, setting up a number of proto-capitalist institutions such as the widespread use of checks, paper money, even insurance, and practicing a considerable degree of religious toleration, the Mongols played a direct role in ushering in the early modern period throughout Eurasia. Moreover, their rule touched every region with which we are concerned, except for Japan—though they made two attempts to invade the island empire. Thus, this volume, like *Patterns of Modern Chinese History*, begins with chapters that provide a prologue to what we have designated as the modern period, whereas the greater part of the book covers material after the Mongol Empire acquired China in 1280.

As noted above, the central approach to this book, as with the others in the series, is that of *patterns*. Within this overall rubric, a considerable amount of attention is given to three elements: *origins*, *interactions*, and *adaptations*. For example, one noticeable pattern, given the widespread effects of the monsoon, is the dominance of rice production throughout much of the area. This is *not* to adopt a Marxian “Asiatic mode of production” approach or to point to Karl A. Wittfogel's insistence on the determinism of “hydraulic society,” but to note that the techniques of wet and dry rice production were widely diffused, widely practiced, and allowed for and demanded substantial populations for production. The exact origins of wet rice cultivation are unknown, but interactions among innumerable persons and groups over the centuries spread and continually revitalized its techniques and plant strains, with local and regional adaptations over the course of millennia.

More directly traceable are the patterns of cultural diffusion and incorporation—involving origins, interactions, and adaptations from core to periphery—that have continually played out across the region. China's Shang

Dynasty, for example, diffused its culture widely across the Yellow River basin. When the former Shang client state of Zhou conquered the Shang, they spread much of the Shang culture they had adopted over most of North China. We have noted above the profound cultural exchanges that marked China's relations with Vietnam and Korea, and from Korea to Japan. Sometimes the periphery becomes the new core: Japan, transformed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries into an aggressively expansive industrial power through contact with the West, became for a time a model for Chinese and other East Asian reformers to emulate. Indeed, it provided an important model for China's present economic power. Moreover, Japan's colonial occupation of Korea, Manchuria, and Taiwan for half a century left a considerable cultural and industrial legacy in those regions—although one sown with pain and bitterness. As the world's second-largest economy, China has emerged as the dominant Asian core—with Japan and India close behind—and is daily accelerating its cultural and economic influence on the world stage.

A related pattern is one rather like the relationship between ancient Greece and Rome: the latter, it was said, conquered militarily, but the former conquered the conquerors culturally. From the time of the Shang and Zhou down to the present, China's immense cultural gravity has pulled those outsiders who have militarily subdued it or sought to subdue it into a graduated process of *Sinification*. Some, like the nomadic groups of the northern tier, sensing opportunity during dynastic upheavals, have conquered regions, settled down, and intermarried with the locals. For example, the Toba of the Northern Wei kingdom ultimately begat the Sui and China's most cosmopolitan dynasty, the Tang. Although they conquered the world's largest empire, the Mongol Yuan Dynasty in China found itself forced to adapt in many ways to Chinese norms of government, and constantly strove to maintain its own culture in the face of immense pressures to assimilate. This was even more pronounced in the case of China's last imperial dynasty, the Manchu Qing. Having already adapted to Confucian norms before their conquest of China, the Manchus struggled to keep from being ethnically, physically, and culturally subsumed by their subjects until the dynasty toppled in 1912.

This book is organized into thirteen chapters plus a brief epilogue, a number that allows instructors to move at a comfortable pace within a standard semester. The chapters are relatively short, enabling instructors at institutions using a trimester or quarter system to utilize the book as well. This volume is laid out in two parts: Part I, "Creating East Asia," includes Chapters 1 through 4, from Neolithic times through the Mongol interval. Part II, "Recasting East Asia to the Present," follows the histories of individual countries from the fifteenth century onward. As in the other *Patterns* volumes, chapters generally follow a format of political history, followed by economic, social, cultural, and scientific/technological issues, as well as the opening vignette and "Patterns Up-Close" feature mentioned above. Thus, courses employing this book can also use it thematically in terms of the internal structure of the chapters and the recurrent emphasis on various historical patterns.

Charles A. Desnoyers,  
November 24, 2018

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As was the case with the other books of the Patterns series—*Patterns of World History* and *Patterns of Modern Chinese History*—the conception and creation of this volume have been an exciting and wonderfully collegial enterprise. In all three books, I have had the singular good fortune to have benefited from the guidance, insight, and inspired eyes and hands of the talented and dedicated people at Oxford University Press. Hence, I wish to thank them all collectively for their continual enthusiasm and hard work in bringing this volume to publication. Of particular note is editorial assistant Katie Tunkavige, who took what had been all too many vague directions regarding illustrations and turned them into vibrant and often stunning embodiments of the material described in the text. I would like to thank Claudia Dukeshire, who handled the editorial production, and Patti Brecht, who copyedited the text.

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Finally, I wish to thank my wife Jacki for her immense patience, fortitude, and support—to say nothing of her faith, hope, and love—throughout all these projects. None of this would have been possible without you.

## NOTES ON DATES AND SPELLING



The dating system used in this book is the current standard for historians, in which Before Common Era (BCE) and Common Era (CE) have supplanted the older and more Western-centered BC and AD. Events in the remote past are sometimes given as “years ago” (YA) or “before present” (BP). The spellings of names, places, objects, etc., that have long remained standard have been retained for the convenience of the reader. In most cases, these will also include current academic romanizations. Thus, the city of Guangzhou will also be referenced as Canton, and Jiang Jieshi will be identified by the more widely recognized spelling of his name as Chiang Kai-shek.

The system used in rendering the sounds of Mandarin Chinese—the northern dialect that has become, in effect, the national spoken language in the People’s Republic of China and in the Republic of China on Taiwan—into English in this book is *hanyu pinyin*, usually given as simply pinyin. Most syllables are pronounced as they would be in English, with the exception of the letter *q*, which has an aspirated “ch” sound. *Zh* carries a hard “j,” while *j* itself has the familiar soft English sound. Some syllables are also pronounced (particularly in the region around Beijing) with a retroflex “r.” Thus, the word *shi* in some instances sounds more like “shir.” Finally, the letter *r* in the pinyin system has no direct English equivalent, but may be approximated by the combining the sounds of “r” and “j.”

Japanese terms have been romanized according to a modification of the Hepburn system. The letter *g* is always hard; vowels are handled as they are in Italian—*e*, for example, carries a sound like “ay.” Diacritical marks to indicate long vowel sounds, however, have been omitted.

For Korean words, this book uses a variation of the McCune–Reischauer system, which remains the standard used in English-language academic writing, again eliminating diacritical marks. Here again, the vowel sounds are pronounced more or less like those in Italian.

For Vietnamese, the standard renditions are based on the modern Quoc Ngu (“national language”) system in current use in Vietnam. The system was

developed in part by Jesuit missionaries and based on the Portuguese alphabet. As in the other romanizations of East Asian languages, the diacritical marks have been omitted.

Because of the several competing systems of romanizing Mongolian terms, such as Mongolian Cyrillic (BGN/PCGN), the closest Latin equivalents have been used in this book. Famous names, such as Genghis Khan (more properly transliterated as “Chinggis), have been given according to standard, widely recognized spellings.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Charles A. Desnoyers** is professor of history and former director of Asian Studies at La Salle University in Philadelphia. He has previously taught at Temple University, Villanova University, and Pennsylvania State University. In addition to serving as History Department chair from 1999 to 2007, he was a founder and long-time director of the Greater Philadelphia Asian Studies Consortium, and president (2011–2012) of the Mid-Atlantic Region Association for Asian Studies. He is a lifetime member of the World History Association and served as co-editor of the organization's *Bulletin* from 1995 to 2001. In addition to numerous articles in peer-reviewed and general publications, his work includes *A Journey to the East: Li Gui's "A New Account of a Trip Around the Globe"* (2004, University of Michigan Press), *Patterns of World History* (with Peter Von Sivers and George B. Stow; 2011, 2013, and 2017, Oxford University Press), and *Patterns of Modern Chinese History* (2017, Oxford University Press).



# Patterns of East Asian History





*An Open Empire. Music played an important role in Tang China and was enjoyed privately as well as on public occasions. This glazed earthenware sculpture, dated to 723 ce, shows three musicians riding a Bactrian (two humped) camel. Their long coats, facial hair, and hats indicate that they are from Central Asia. Indeed, the lute held by one of the riders is a type of musical instrument that was introduced to China from Central Asia in the second century ce.*

PART I



# Creating East Asia

# Timeline

ca. 780,000 BCE	“Peking Man”
ca. 50,000–20,000 BCE	Modern <i>Homo sapiens</i> foraging groups established in eastern Eurasia
10,000–8000 BCE	First Neolithic settlements in Yellow River Valley; beginning of Jomon Period in Japan
ca. 7000 BCE	First evidence of rice cultivation in Yangzi Valley
5000–1500 BCE	Yangshao culture develops along Yellow River
4500 BCE	Dongsan cultures, Vietnam
2205–1766 BCE	Traditional dates for Xia Dynasty, China
1766–1122 BCE	Traditional dates for Shang Dynasty, China
ca. 1400 BCE	Earliest “oracle bone” caches with archaic Chinese writing
ca. 1300 BCE	Introduction of chariot to northern China
1122–771 BCE	Western Zhou Dynasty, China
770–256 BCE	Eastern Zhou Dynasty, China
403–221 BCE	Warring States Period, China
604 BCE	Traditional date for birth of Laozi
551–479 BCE	Traditional dates for life of Confucius
300 BCE–300 CE	Yayoi Period, Japan
221–206 BCE	First Chinese Empire under Qin; first iteration of Great Wall begun
202 BCE–8 CE	Former Han Dynasty, China
37 BCE–935 CE	“Three Kingdoms” of Korea: Koguryo (37 BCE–668 CE), Paekche (18 BCE–660 CE), and Silla (57 BCE–935 CE).

24–220 CE	Later Han Dynasty
ca. 300 CE	Iron stirrups in use in north and central China
ca. 250–600 CE	Rapid spread of Buddhism throughout East Asia
589–618 CE	Reunification of Chinese Empire under the Sui; Grand Canal constructed
618–960	Tang Dynasty, China
645	Taika, or Great Reform, Japan
ca. 750	Printing with movable block type developed
794–1192	Heian Period, Japan
960–1127	Northern Song Dynasty, China
1010–1225	Dai Viet Empire, Vietnam
1127–1279	Southern Song Dynasty
1206	Genghis Khan unites Mongol groups into one confederation
1225–1400	Tran Dynasty, Vietnam
1231–1281	Repeated Mongol invasions of Korea, Vietnam, and Japan
1280–1368	Yuan Dynasty, China; briefly part of a vast Mongol Empire
1368–1644	Ming Dynasty, China
1382	The Grand Secretariat is formed
1405–1433	Zheng He's naval expeditions
1405–1433	Voyages of Zheng He to Southeast Asia, India, Arabia, and Africa
1577	Matteo Ricci, first Jesuit missionary in China
1644	Qing Dynasty proclaimed

## CHAPTER 1



# The Region and People

**A**s we noted in the preface, the geographical or topographical borders outlining a distinct “East Asia” are nebulous, even contested enough for some to argue that they are essentially nonexistent. As we also noted, even the cultural borders of the most common yardstick, the influence of Chinese culture, although easier to detect than geographical ones, are still subject to debate. The approach taken here, therefore, is necessarily subjective, though, hopefully, not without foundation.

Although several different approaches to what constitutes East Asia emerge in various texts and scholarly works, the one we utilize in this volume tends toward the expansive side. That is, many texts concentrate exclusively on China, Korea, and Japan both because of their proximity to each other and their cultural connections. We will extend our scope somewhat further by including Vietnam—more commonly studied as part of Southeast Asia—but discussed here because of the long-term Chinese presence and cultural influence. We will also include Mongolia, often placed in the category of “Inner Asia” or Central Asia. Although both places remain culturally distinct, they are included here because of their long relationship with China and many other parts of the region, with Mongolia having included China, Korea, and Tibet as part of its own empire from 1280 to 1368.

Like the influence of the Hellenistic and Roman worlds, that of imperial China became widespread throughout East, Northeast, and Southeast Asia. Chinese writing, literature, law, government, and philosophy, as well as imported systems such as Buddhism, came to overlay local social, cultural, and religious customs and practices. Because these practices were often imposed from the top down, however, they met frequent resistance at the village and clan level. Thus, tensions between elites and locals continually played out in the assorted Korean kingdoms and Vietnamese states against a backdrop of invasion and collaboration, while in Japan similar tensions arose after the Yamato government remade itself along Chinese lines. From the beginning, all these societies asserted their political independence from the Chinese. Their position on or near the Chinese border, their role as havens for refugees, and the continual pressures of possible

invasion, however, provided a conduit for Chinese cultural diffusion—in the case of Korea, through the peninsula to the islands of Japan. One could generalize and say that for the peoples on the Chinese periphery, shifting relations with the Middle Kingdom provided both unity and disarray in the struggles of different states for local dominance.

## VARIED GEOGRAPHIES

Taken as a whole, Eurasia encompasses virtually every kind of geographical feature and form of climate that is found on Earth: vast mountain ranges, huge deserts, polar ice, rain forests, alluvial plains, savanna and steppe land, and some of the largest rivers in the world. Within the areas we define as East Asia, nearly all these features may be found, with the exception of polar ice, though to be sure, the northern reaches of Manchuria extend considerably above 50 degrees north latitude, approximately the same as the Aleutians and extreme southern Alaska. Some of the East Asian states are marked by a predominant geographic or topographic feature: Mongolia, for example, is largely grassy steppe land with some mountains and desert and is landlocked. Vietnam is largely subtropical forest and cleared farmland. China, Korea, and Japan offer the most varied topography. All contain mountains, plains, watercourses, and coastlines, thus allowing for a wider range of subsistence, both in Paleo- and Neolithic times, and after the establishment of agriculture and (except for Mongolia and the northern Chinese borderlands) more or less sedentary living.

Although fixed borders have marked the formal boundaries of the states in modern times, not all of them have prominent geographical features that may be said to delineate “natural” dividing lines: as an island nation, Japan through much of its history has had the sea as its protective barrier, but its empire and territorial claims have at times extended far beyond the home islands, reaching their greatest point during the early years of the Pacific War (World War II). The Korean Peninsula is conveniently marked off from the rest of Northeast Asia by the Yalu (Amnokkang) River, but its kingdoms have at times extended beyond it, whereas Chinese empires have frequently pushed to the south of it. The borders of China with the northern plains and Gobi Desert that ultimately constituted Mongolia were historically porous enough to require the building and maintenance of the Great Wall, though its ability to deter invaders was rather limited. A similar fluidity marked the frontiers with Vietnam.

As for the area as a whole, although there are some spectacular geographical features along its borders, not all of them are suitable as delineations in setting the region off from the rest of Asia. Of the dramatic natural borders, the Himalayas, and their related mountain ranges—Karakoram, Pamir, and Tian Shan—that separate the Tibetan and Chinese borders from India, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyztan, and Kazakhstan are the most distinct. The western deserts, the Takla Makan, Gurbantungut, also made for formidable barriers, though the region’s main conduit to the outside, the Silk Route[s], passed above and below them. The Mongolian border with Russia is marked in

part by the Tannu-Ola Mountains, whereas farther to the east, the Ussuri and Heilongjiang (Amur River) mark important frontiers between China's northeast (the former Manchuria) and Russia—the dispute over which resulted in a short border conflict between the former Soviet Union and People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1969.

It is the interior features, however, that show the greatest variation, although the core of the region, China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan, also share some important features that have allowed them to pursue parallel subsistence strategies, especially those related to rice cultivation. Although this is somewhat less true in Japan, which has only a small percentage of arable flat land and no real rivers to speak of, all these regions have cultivated rolling, flat landscapes—in many cases, river bottom land; in some cases, terraced hills and mountains—all of which are well watered, to intensively cultivate wet rice and in higher, less watered regions, dry rice. The heart of this cultivation lies in the area historically part of China.

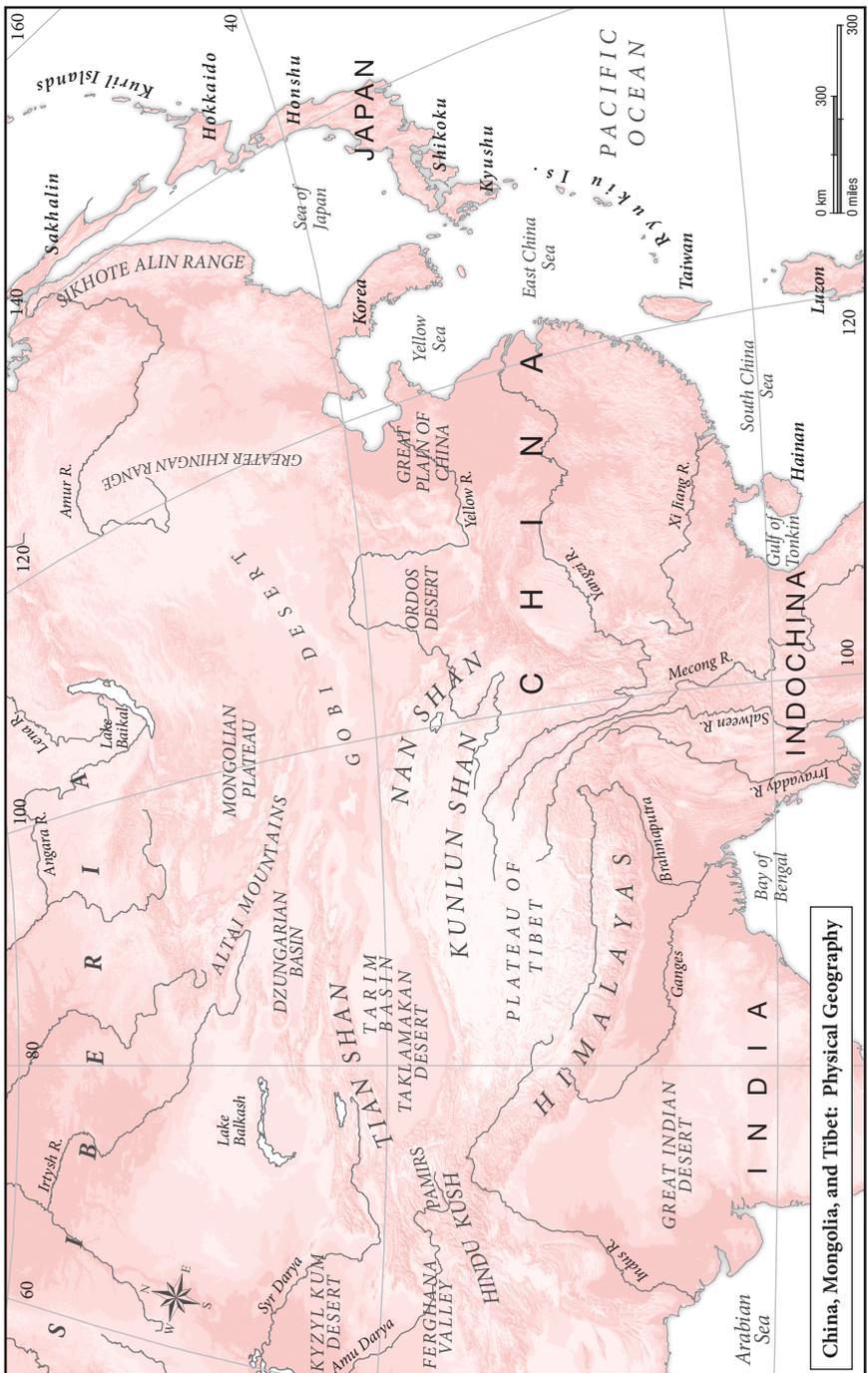
### The Chinese Landscape

Unlike India, with its dramatic natural boundaries, China is only partially defined by geography. In addition to river systems such as the Amur and Ussuri in the north, the Salween in the southwest and the Red in Vietnam have also represented past borders, although not impermeable ones. The northern and western deserts—the Gobi, Ordos, and Takla Makan—have also served as historic boundaries that frequently passed in and out of the hands of successive Chinese dynasties as their emperors sought to curb the incursions of nomads, or control Central Asian trade routes (see Map 1.1).

China's population has historically been concentrated in the major river valleys and along the coast. The rivers, generally flowing west to east, and having their sources in the glaciers and lakes of the greater Himalayan system, are separated by plateaus and uplands in the western regions and by flatlands such as the North China Plain as the watercourses approach the sea. Three main river systems have remained the principal avenues of agriculture and commerce: the Pearl River in the south; the Yangzi River—at 3,988 miles, the third longest in the world; and the Yellow River, where the most influential early Chinese societies developed.

Rising in the highlands of Gansu and flowing north to the Ordos Desert, the Yellow River then turns south and east out of Inner Mongolia for 500 miles before making a final bend to the east and the sea, a total distance of 3,000 miles. The river gets its name as a result of the **loess**—a light, dry, mineral rich soil deposited by centuries of strong winds—it picks up as it flows, giving it a reddish-yellow tint. The rich soil carried by the river has brought abundant agriculture to northern China, but the constant buildup of silt also causes the river to overflow its banks, resulting in devastation of fields and villages in its path.

This building up and bursting of natural levees, along with earthquakes and occasional human actions—such as the dynamiting of dikes during World War II to slow Japanese invaders—have caused the Yellow River to change course 26 times during the last 3,000 years. Its mouth has shifted several times above



**China, Mongolia, and Tibet: Physical Geography**

Map 1.1 China, Mongolia, and Tibet: Physical Geography

and below the Shandong Peninsula, assuming its present course to the north following massive floods in 1854–1855. Not surprisingly, efforts to control the river have occupied a prominent place in the mythology, history, and social organization of the region from earliest times. Throughout China’s early period of fragmented kingdoms, the Yellow River states all had water conservancy ministries aimed at safeguarding the land and people from the river’s excesses. This was intensified during the imperial era, and local officials and village headmen alike took active roles in flood prevention and relief.

The degree to which geography is destiny is still a vital issue in the social sciences, particularly for the earliest civilizations. The question of how the search for agricultural stability has influenced the patterns of history of the peoples along China’s most turbulent watercourse is one from which no student of the region can ultimately escape. Little wonder, then, that the Yellow River’s gift of fertility but unpredictable nature has prompted outsiders to call it “China’s Sorrow.”



**Yellow River.** The *Huanghe*, or Yellow River has been the site of a host of China’s cultures for many thousands of years. In this photo, one can see the flatlands that have benefited so much—and often suffered so extensively—from the massive buildup of the reddish-yellow loess soils it carries.

The Chang Jiang or Yangzi River has for most of China’s history been its most important highway and its accompanying alluvial plains, lakes, and connected watercourses have made its watershed some of the most productive agricultural land in the world. Indeed, China’s center of demographic gravity moved steadily southward as a result of the region’s productivity throughout the imperial period. As early as the sixth century CE, work began on the Grand Canal system to link

the Yangzi to the Yellow River in order to carry tribute grain and other supplies to northern capitals like Chang'an (modern Xi'an), Kaifeng, and, with the canal extended north to the Beihe (Northern River), to the modern capital of Beijing. The canal is still a vital supply line today. The completion of the massive Three Gorges Dam complex in 2012 has now made the river the world's largest generator of hydroelectric power, edging out the Itaipu Dam on the Brazil-Paraguay border, the previous record holder.

The Pearl River, which flows east to the city of Guangzhou (more widely known as Canton), is fed by innumerable small streams in the uplands of Guangdong, Guangxi, and Yun'nan provinces. As it nears its delta, it also spawns numerous small channels and streams, many of which flow into the Pearl River Estuary. This network of waterways provided shelter for centuries for smugglers, pirates, and rebels, and was a prime area for the transactions of the opium trade in the early nineteenth century. Like the Yangzi basin, it is extraordinarily productive, and its position below the Tropic of Cancer allows for a virtually uninterrupted growing season and three rice crops per year.

### The Great Regulator: The Monsoon

Like India, Bangladesh, and Southeast Asia, most of the region we are studying as East Asia is governed climatically by one of the most extensive—and regular—weather systems in the world: the **monsoon system**. The region's exceptions are Tibet, where the barrier of the Himalayas stops most of the moist warm air from the system and directs it toward the Ganges Plain in India and Bangladesh, and Mongolia, where the effects of the northern sweep of the system have dissipated and been largely cancelled by the continental pattern of the deep Asian interior. The effects of the monsoon are among the world's most regular and intense, and it is difficult to overstate the impact the monsoon has had on the world's agricultural patterns, crops, and techniques since Neolithic times.

The term derives from the Arabic word *mausim*, for “season,” although the pattern itself was well known for millennia. As with the heat that moves in the opposite direction and spawns hurricanes in the Atlantic, the warm air comes from the vast African interior, picking up moisture over the Indian Ocean. In India and Bangladesh, it collides with the cold air and continuous mountain barrier of the Himalayas and dumps vast amounts of rain on the region. It sweeps through Indonesia and Southeast Asia, moving up through the eastern Chinese warm regions with its effects felt as far north as southern Korea, Japan, and Taiwan. The winds carry moisture from southwest to northeast from June through October and create substantial—sometimes catastrophic—rainfall amounts throughout the region. In the winter months, the winds reverse direction and pull dry air down from Central Asia. During this dry season, rainfall is scant or nonexistent over large areas. It is also an important reason for the desertification of so much of the deep Asian interior.

Because even minor variations in the timing of the cycle or the volume of rain may spell potential flood or famine, the arrival of the spring monsoon is even today greeted with nervous anticipation from India to Shanghai. China's

climate, though conditioned by the monsoon like the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia, however, is far more varied. The area south of the Qin Ling Mountains marks the northern boundary regulated by the monsoon, with warm temperatures and abundant summer rainfall. During the summer monsoon season, rainfall amounts can range from about 40 inches per year in the eastern coastal city of Hangzhou (Hangchow) to over 70 inches in the subtropical south. North of the monsoon line, however, temperatures and rainfall amounts are influenced more by the continental weather systems of the Eurasian interior. Thus, northern China is subject to blistering summers and frigid winters with sparse and unreliable rainfall.

One of the long-term effects of this climatic split has been that although the Yellow River valley was the home of China's first recorded civilizations, the population centers, as we have seen, steadily moved south to the monsoon areas. This has posed some difficulties since, as noted above, the political center of the state has tended to remain in the north and over time became increasingly dependent on food shipments from the south, a situation that frequently tempted rebels and invaders to interdict them.

### Mountains and Deserts

While China continues to be, as it has been for millennia, the world's most populous state, a quick look at its population distribution shows that the greatest percentage of its people live almost exclusively along the coast or in river valleys. Although population pressures and political crises have periodically pushed, and government incentives have sometimes pulled, people into mountainous regions and, over the last century and a half, into the arid far western regions, vast areas still remain sparsely inhabited, even uninhabited. In many cases, the people living in these regions are members of one or more of China's 55 recognized minority groups, many of whom have lived more or less in isolation until recently. Some are the descendants of groups forced to flee during times of rebellion, famine, or dynastic change, the best known of which are the **Hakkas** (*kejiaren*) of South China.

As one moves away from the river valleys of South China into the forested uplands and stark limestone *karst* formations—for centuries a source of inspiration for Chinese landscape painters—the population density dissipates rapidly. As one approaches Qinghai and the Tibetan regions, the land takes on an alpine character: foothills, plateaus, and ultimately some of the world's highest mountains. Tibet's capital, Lhasa, is the world's highest capital city at 12,087 feet above sea level, and its climate is designated as "mid-latitude semi-arid." Yearly temperatures average 45 degrees Fahrenheit, whereas average annual precipitation is only 16 inches. Tibet's remoteness served to largely isolate it from the effects of Indian and Chinese politics, although Tibetan and Chinese forces battled each other periodically from the mid-600s. As far back as the eighteenth century, Chinese regimes have claimed suzerainty and sovereignty over it. A briefly independent Tibet fought a war (Sino-Tibetan War) against the Nationalist Republic of China and its affiliated warlords from 1930 to 1933 over disputed territory in

Qinghai. Events in the mid-twentieth century further eroded that isolation when forces of the People's Republic occupied Tibet in 1950 and quashed a rebellion there in 1959, forcing the Dalai Lama to flee to India. More recently, under the rationale of speeding "development" in Tibet, Chinese migration there has been encouraged, aided by the opening of the Qinghai-Lhasa railway. Tibet's subsistence economy of herding and small farming has been steadily subsumed into the rapidly expanding Chinese GDP, and the Tibetans themselves have complained bitterly and demonstrated against being economically, demographically, and culturally swamped by the Chinese government and its migration efforts.

North of Tibet in China's extreme west lies some of the driest, lowest, and most remote territory in the world: the Tarim Basin and Takla Makan Desert. The Turpan (Turfan) Depression, near Urumqi, at 508 feet below sea level is the third lowest dry land spot on earth. The region is so hot and dry that it is often referred to as "The Furnace of China." The surrounding desert itself, part of a belt running from the Gobi along the Chinese-Mongolia border, is one of the largest shifting sand deserts in the world. Its character comes in part from its location, which is among the world's furthest from any sea or ocean, and also from the Kunlun, Pamir, and Tian Shan mountains that nearly surround it. There are some remote villages along the Hotan River that runs part of the year through it, but life of any sort is a rare sight with average rainfall amounts below .4 inches. Small wonder that the famous Silk Route divides into two branches on coming to the region, one of which winds to the north and one to the south of it.

### **Eurasia's Eastern Branch: Korea**

The terrain of the Korean Peninsula resembles in many ways that of the adjacent region of Manchuria. The north is mountainous, marked by the Nangnim and Hamyong ranges running northeast to southwest, with the Taebaek chain running north and south along the coast facing the Sea of Japan. The Amnokkang (Yalu River) and Kangnam Mountains form the present dividing line with Manchuria, but as noted above, Korean kingdoms have at times extended far beyond them into modern China's northeast. The areas south of the modern city of Seoul are somewhat flatter, but the entire peninsula is generally hilly and agriculture has historically been concentrated in the river floodplains and coastal alluvial flats.

The climate is continental in the north but influenced by the northern reaches of the monsoon system in the south. As in northern China, summer and winter temperatures tend to be extreme with distinct rainy (summer) and dry (winter) seasons. Because of the configuration of the mountains and the peninsula's position along the northern perimeter of the monsoon, rainfall amounts differ widely: from average lows of 30 inches in the northeast to 60–70 in the southwest. Like the western side of the Japanese islands, however, it is largely blocked by Japanese mountain ranges from the moderating weather effects of the Japan Current.

The difficulties of the terrain and the ever-present possibility of drought have rendered the challenges of the region similar to those facing agriculturalists in northern China, with crops such as millet and wheat dominating, and rice farming catching on only much later in the south where rainfall and the terracing

of hillsides made it feasible. Scholars have noted similarities to archaic Greece, where geography fostered the development of isolated, independent communities, although early on a degree of cultural unity appears to have prevailed.

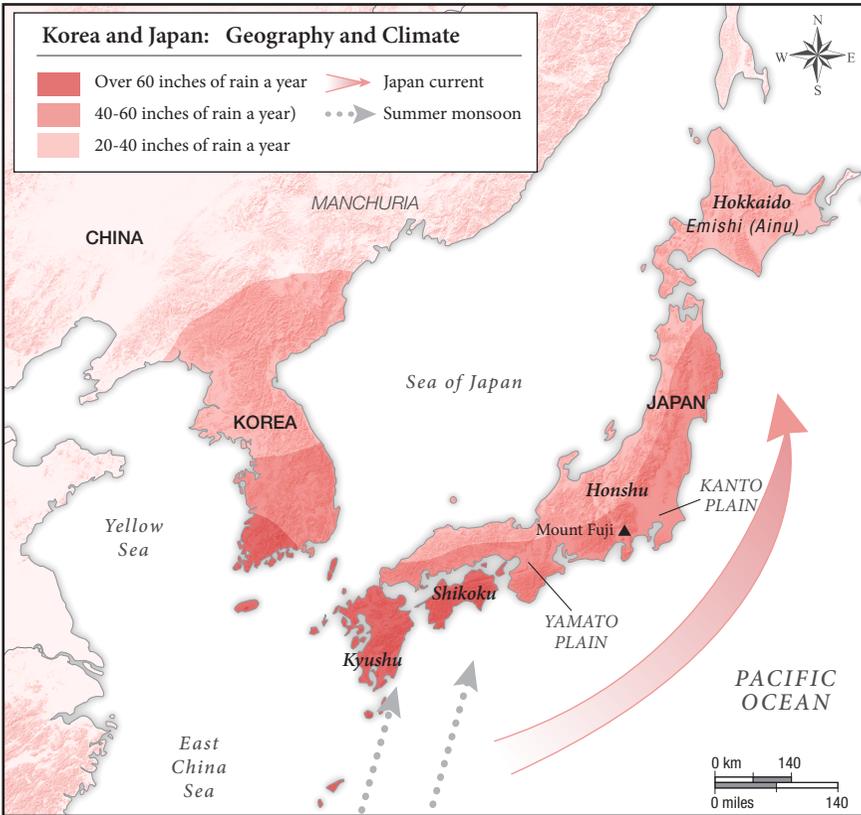
### **The Island Perimeter: Japan**

The four main islands that for most of its history constituted Japan, *Honshu*, *Hokkaido*, *Kyushu*, and *Shikoku*, contain a varied set of climatic conditions, although more than any other place in East Asia they are influenced by the surrounding sea. The northernmost island of Hokkaido has cold, snowy winters and relatively cool summers, a quality that made its city of Sapporo the site of the 1972 Winter Olympics (in 1998 the city of Nagano on Honshu was Japan's other Winter Games venue). The central island of Honshu, bisected roughly north to south by substantial mountain ranges, has a temperate to subtropical climate on the eastern side—where it is moderated by the Japan Current—and a colder, more continental climate to the west of the mountains on the side facing Korea and northeastern China. The small southern island of Shikoku and the southernmost island of Kyushu have an abundance of warm, moist weather and are largely governed by the monsoon system.

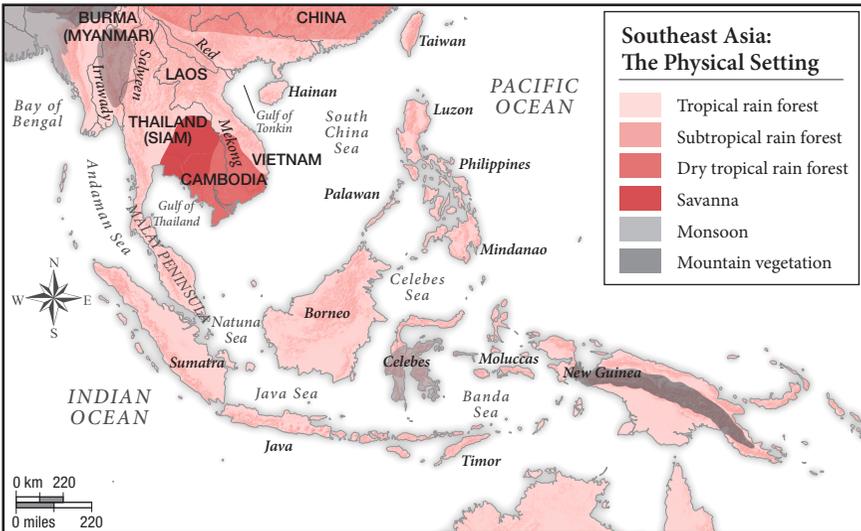
The formation of Japan's islands from volcanic activity means that only about one fifth of their territory has historically been arable. Moreover, unlike China, Korea, and Vietnam, Japan has no large river systems that have provided in other regions the irrigation and floodplain silt from which civilization sprang. In the narrow plains and valleys, however, the majority of which are on the temperate Pacific side of the mountains, the soil is mineral rich and the rainfall abundant. Nonetheless, the islanders from early on have also had to face the limitations of the land in supporting a steadily growing population. This was particularly true after the introduction of rice culture to the islands, which supplanted the mode of settled and migratory fishing villages that dominated the subsistence economy until the third century BCE. Like the Korean Peninsula, the ruggedness of the land tended to force its people to live in politically isolated, culturally united communities. Thus, communication by water was often the most convenient method, both among the Japanese home islands and across the hundred-mile strait to southern Korea (see map 1.2).

### **The Southern Branch: Vietnam**

The topography of Southeast Asia as a whole is similar from the borders of Assam in India to the Mekong Delta in the south of what is now Vietnam. Divided by several major river systems—the Irawaddy, Salween, and Mekong—running roughly north to south, and by the Red River, running northwest to southeast through Hanoi and meeting the Gulf of Tonkin at Haiphong, their watersheds are separated by low to medium mountain ranges running generally parallel to them. Even today, much of the region is heavily forested with abundant rainfall supplied by the summer monsoon, which acts as the region's principal climatic regulator. The river valleys and coastal plains are believed to have supplied the wild ancestors of the first rice plants, as well as some of the world's first domesticated fowl, sometime after 8000 BCE (see map 1.3).



Map 1.2 Korea and Japan: Geography and Climate



Map 1.3 Southeast Asia: The Physical Setting

## EAST ASIAN ETHNICITIES AND LANGUAGES

East Asia encompasses an enormously varied set of peoples and languages. Among the largest ethnic groups are the Han (China), Yamato (Japan), and Korean, with the Han by far the largest. Other groups include ethnicities that overlap to some degree with groups in Central Asia and North Asia, such as Tibetan, Uyghur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Manchu, and Mongol. In Vietnam, peoples include Vietnamese, Khmers, and Lao-Mon.

In addition to these major ethnic groups, there are numerous subgroups within and along the borders of historical states. The northern tier of various Chinese states and empires contained a bewildering variety of local nomadic ethnicities, a situation complicated further by differing and unsystematic names given to them by the Chinese over the centuries, and by their constant movement. The ancient *Xiongnu*, for example, who maintained a powerful state before being driven west by the Chinese Han Dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) may have been distantly related to the Huns—although this is by no means clear—who also migrated west. A widespread but very loosely organized congeries of nomadic tribes known by a variety of different names was not brought together until the time of Genghis Khan to form the Mongols. Similarly, loose federations of peoples like the Jurchens were later brought together to form a self-proclaimed new group calling themselves “Manchus.”

### China and Taiwan

Within the East Asian states, there were dozens of minority groups, many of which were isolated or nomadic, some of different ethnicities, some related to the majority populations but linguistically, and in some cases, religiously, distinct. China has by far the largest number of such minorities and officially recognizes 55 separate groups, with 19 “undistinguished” groups lacking official recognition. According to 2016 figures, the Han majority makes up 91.57 percent of the PRC’s 1.375 billion people. Of the next five largest groups, the Zhuang (of South China) number 17 million; the Hui—Chinese Muslims who are mostly ethnically Han—number 11 million; Manchus come in at 10.4 million; the Muslim Turkic Uyghurs of western autonomous region of Xinjiang number 10 million; and the southern Miao people come to 9.5 million. Tibetans and Mongols come in at ninth and tenth, respectively, numbering 7.5 and 5.9 million. The smallest of the recognized groups is the Tatars, with a mere 3,556 people. The “undistinguished” number is cumulatively 640,000. The Hakkas, mentioned above, are treated as a subgroup of the Han and number approximately 34 million.

Although politically distinct, Taiwan (Republic of China, ROC) recognizes a number of minority groups as well, some also recognized by the PRC, like the Mulao, others unique to the island. Historically, Taiwan was peopled by speakers of the Austronesian language family, perhaps distantly related to the Polynesians of Oceania. Most lived as foragers, particularly on the forested, mountainous eastern side of the island. As Chinese refugees and settlers began to arrive, particularly after the Manchu Qing Dynasty overthrew the Ming in 1644, tensions

and open warfare between the indigenous peoples and the outsiders remained common. Taiwan's colonization by Japan from 1895 to 1945, and the massive influx of mainlanders accompanying the Communist victory over the Nationalist ROC in 1949, continued to keep tensions on a low boil. Thus, Taiwan's present government officially recognizes 12 indigenous minority groups, whereas the government of the PRC, which claims Taiwan as an unrecovered province of Greater China, lumps all such groups under the title of *Gaoshan*.

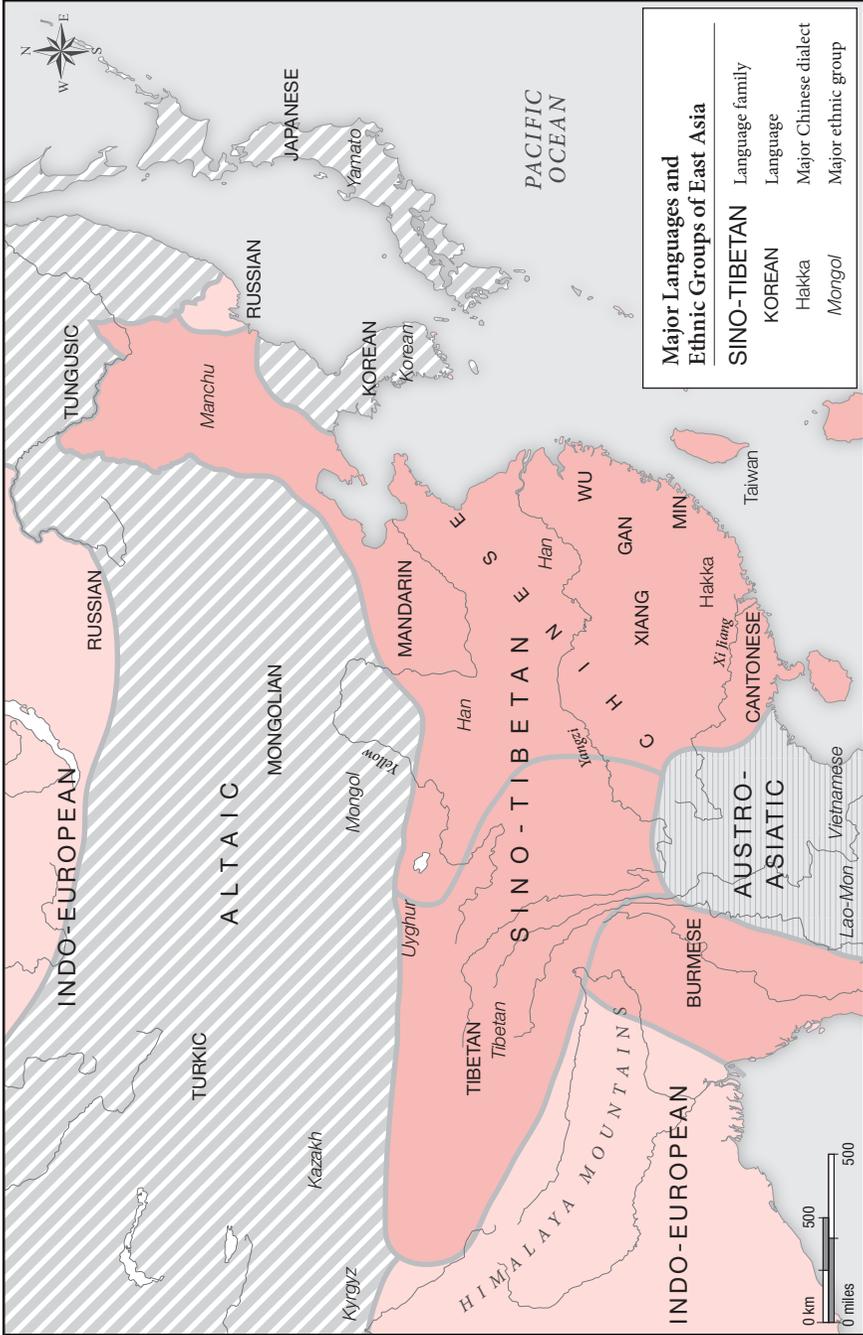
## Tibet

Recent genetic research indicates that in terms of ethnicity, Tibetans are most closely related to a number of Central Asian populations as well as Han Chinese. A current theory holds that sometime between 9,000 and 15,000 years ago, the genetic group that would become the inhabitants of the Tibetan plateau and its adjacent regions in China split from the Han, shortly afterward separating themselves from the Sherpas. As a population long adapted to a mountain environment, Tibetans have developed a relatively high level of nitric oxide in their blood, allowing greater dilation of blood vessels and better utilization of oxygen at altitudes above 14,000 feet. Currently, the majority of Tibetans (7.5 million according to the PRC) live in the People's Republic of China's Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and in autonomous prefectures in the nearby provinces of Gansu, Sichuan, and Qinghai. The surrounding Himalayan nations of India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Sikkim also have Tibetan populations, with India's being by far the largest, at just under 190,000. Many Tibetans have fled to India since the repression of 1959, most of them clustering around the Himalayan Indian state of Dharamshala, the site of the Tibetan Government in Exile and where the Dalai Lama resides.

The language family from which the *Tibetic* languages—a group of related but mutually unintelligible languages—spring is *Sino-Tibetan*, within which one also finds the Chinese dialects. The subfamily in which the Tibetic languages reside is called *Tibeto-Burman* as distinct from the Sinitic or Chinese languages. It thus bears some resemblance and shares some basic vocabulary with the languages spoken to the south along the western perimeter of Southeast Asia. Related dialects are also spoken by peoples in Assam and India's northeastern provinces. Because of the isolation of so many mountain-dwelling peoples, a number of these languages developed their own writing systems distinct from Chinese. Classical Tibetan, for example, is a literary language widely used in Buddhist works since the eighth century. (See Map 1.4.)

## Mongolia

The Mongols are defined today as an ethnic group inhabiting the area of the modern state of Mongolia as well as the Chinese Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, Xinjiang, and the Russian regions of Buryatia and Kalmykia. Their origins are somewhat murky, like those of many nomadic peoples along China's northern and northeaster tier, because of the many names by which other peoples have identified them. The ancestors of some of the Mongol groups may have been



Map 1.4 Major Language and Ethnic Groups of East Asia

members of the *Zhukaigou* culture of the Ordos Desert, which lasted from perhaps 2250 to 1500 BCE. One group of their descendants, the Xianbei, ranged widely through the western part of the northern tier. In western Eurasia, they were associated with the Scythians. The Chinese *Shiji* (*Records of the Grand Historian*) mentions a people called *Donghu* (Eastern Barbarians) in their relations with the Xiongnu. Fourth-century CE histories record a border people called *Shiwei*, a term that was used to cover a number of the Tungusic-speaking peoples from modern Mongolia to Manchuria. One also finds isolated references to “Mongols” in records from the Tang Dynasty (618–907) to the time of Genghis Khan (1162–1227). It was Genghis Khan who united the various loosely-related tribes under the Mongol umbrella and established them as a distinct ethnic group. Today, the term “Mongolian” encompasses the Khalkha (“proper”) Mongols, Buryats, Oirats, Kalmyks, and a number of loosely affiliated groups under the heading of “Southern Mongols.” Currently, there are about 2.8 million Mongols in the independent state of Mongolia and about 5.9 million Mongols in China’s Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region and other areas of the PRC.

Linguistically, as we have noted, the various Mongolic languages are from the large, although contested, Altaic language family, named for the people originally inhabiting the region around the Altai Mountains of southern Mongolia. Included in this family are the Turkic and Tungusic language groups, as well as (according to some scholars) Koreanic, Japonic, and sometimes **Ainu** groups. The debate concerning the Altaic languages revolves around the question of whether all these languages indeed have a common origin or if they are related by contact and diffusion (called *aereal interaction*) within a particular region.

### Korea

The ethnic origins of the Koreans are still obscure, although the slim archeological and linguistic evidence seems to point to a Central Asian homeland with links to the Altaic-speaking peoples. In this sense, the modern Korean language may be distantly related to such languages as Mongolian and Manchu, and possibly the Turkic languages such as Uyghur. A linguistic and ethnic tie with Japan is possible as well due to the proximity of the islands. East and Northeast Asia was home to some of the world’s first pottery, though the potter’s wheel did not arrive in the area for millennia. In the case of the Korean Peninsula, potsherds dating from 4000 BCE have been uncovered in striated styles not unlike the *Jomon* wares of Japan.

### Japan

Like the first peoples to inhabit the Korean Peninsula, the origins of the Japanese are obscure. Two distinct groups appear to have migrated to the islands from the Asian mainland via Ice Age land bridges, perhaps 10,000 to 20,000 years ago. Their descendants, the *Utari*, are today regarded as Japan’s aboriginal peoples and referred to by the Japanese as *Ainu*, the “hairy ones,” or in early imperial times as *Emishi*. Their physical features, tribal hunting society, and language mark them



**Some Modern East Asian Ethnicities.** East Asia encompasses an enormous area and is home to many diverse ethnic groups. Among those pictured here are a Mongolian woman dressed for life on the steppes (A); an elderly man from the Republic of Korea (South Korea) (B); a woman dressed in the traditional costume of the Miao, one of more than 50 recognized minority groups in the People's Republic of China (C); and a contemporary group of Japanese schoolboys (D).

as distinct from the later arrivals. Details of their religious practices have led some anthropologists to link them to the peoples of Central Asia and Siberia.

The later inhabitants may have originally come from the peoples who migrated to Southeast Asia, Indonesia, and eventually the Central Pacific. They may also have been descended from later Polynesian travelers and migrants from the Asian mainland. The linguistic evidence suggests a very tenuous connection to Korean and even to the Altaic language family. Japan's long linguistic isolation, however, renders its ultimate origins obscure for the present.

## CONCLUSION

Although they encompass many different ethnicities, at least two major language families, and inhabit a wide diversity of environments, the region and the peoples we define in this volume as "East Asia" share some important commonalities. The region itself, though containing few "natural" borders marking it apart from other regions, is contiguous among its modern member states, as it has been historically. Biologically, the majority of the inhabitants share similar physical characteristics. In terms of culture, the region as a whole at one time or another has been influenced by China. In the case of the "Sinitic core" of Korea and Vietnam, Chinese culture was planted by invasion and diffusion; for Mongolia and Tibet, long-time contact, Mongolian empire building, and Chinese hegemony and incorporation (Tibet) have resulted in various degrees of cultural accommodation; as for Japan, its adoption of Chinese culture was voluntary. Even with insistent efforts to forge national identities of their own in all these cases, the region itself remains distinct from the surrounding Russian and Indian cultural spheres.

## CHAPTER 2



# The Middle Kingdom: China to 1280

Whatever else one could say about Li Si, he was ambitious. According to the not overly sympathetic Han Dynasty chronicle, *Shiji* (*The Records of the Grand Historian*), by perhaps China's most famous historian, Sima Qian, Li "knew how to elucidate his schemes":

The king of Qin wants to swallow up the world, to call himself emperor, and rule it. This is the moment for commoners like myself, the harvest season for those with ideas to expound. . . . Therefore I plan to go west and speak to the king of Qin! (Watson, 1989, pp. 179–180)

And indeed he did. Li and his colleague Han Fei had been students of the Confucian thinker Xunzi. Unlike Confucius himself and his chief expositor, Mencius, however, Xunzi, living at the height of China's Warring States Period (403–221 BCE), could not bring himself to see human nature as inherently leaning toward good. Li and Han Fei had taken this fundamental assumption and expanded it into a nearly totalitarian vision of a political system in which the ruler was the sole arbiter of what was good, and the only good was what would benefit the state. The people must be governed by strict, impartial, universally applied laws with severe punishments for even the smallest infractions. Armed with these ideas, later known as "Legalism," Li traveled to Qin.

He had picked his benefactor well. The state of Qin for over a century had been moving in precisely the direction outlined by the Legalists. Moreover it had been quietly expanding its western borders and carefully steering its relations with the other Chinese states within the vestigial Zhou dynastic system to maximum advantage. And so Li made his pitch to the Qin king, Ying Zheng:

Now the feudal lords are so submissive to Qin that they are like so many provinces and districts. . . . This is an opportunity that comes once in 10,000 ages. If one is lazy and fails to act quickly, the feudal lords will recover their strength and join in an alliance against Qin. (Ibid., p. 180)

The king followed Li's advice. Within a decade he had prevailed against all opponents and created China's first empire in 221 BCE. Ying Zheng now took the title

Qin Shi Huangdi: First Emperor of the Qin. As for Li, he achieved the pinnacle of his ambition and was made chancellor.

The first emperor moved swiftly in fulfilling his vision of state building. His draconian law codes were enacted. Weights, measures, even the writing system were standardized. All the feudal positions were eliminated in favor of a central bureaucracy; all the old states were eliminated in favor of a system of provinces and military districts. Work on what ultimately became China's two most popular modern tourist sites, the Great Wall and the terracotta warriors guarding the First Emperor's tomb complex, was begun. The price, however, was far too many unacceptably high in monetary and human terms. For Li, therefore, the physical transformation of the new empire was not enough; it must also exist under strict ideological control. Dissenters, particularly the Confucians, were to be ruthlessly eliminated, as were all books except for those expressly approved by the state.

The death of the first emperor, however, a few years later in 210 BCE spelled disaster for Li, although it would be another two years before he met his fate. Having concealed the First Emperor's death and now caught in a power struggle at court, with rebellion breaking out in the empire, he was condemned to a particularly brutal death with his son and relatives. After suffering tattooing and mutilation, he was cut in two.

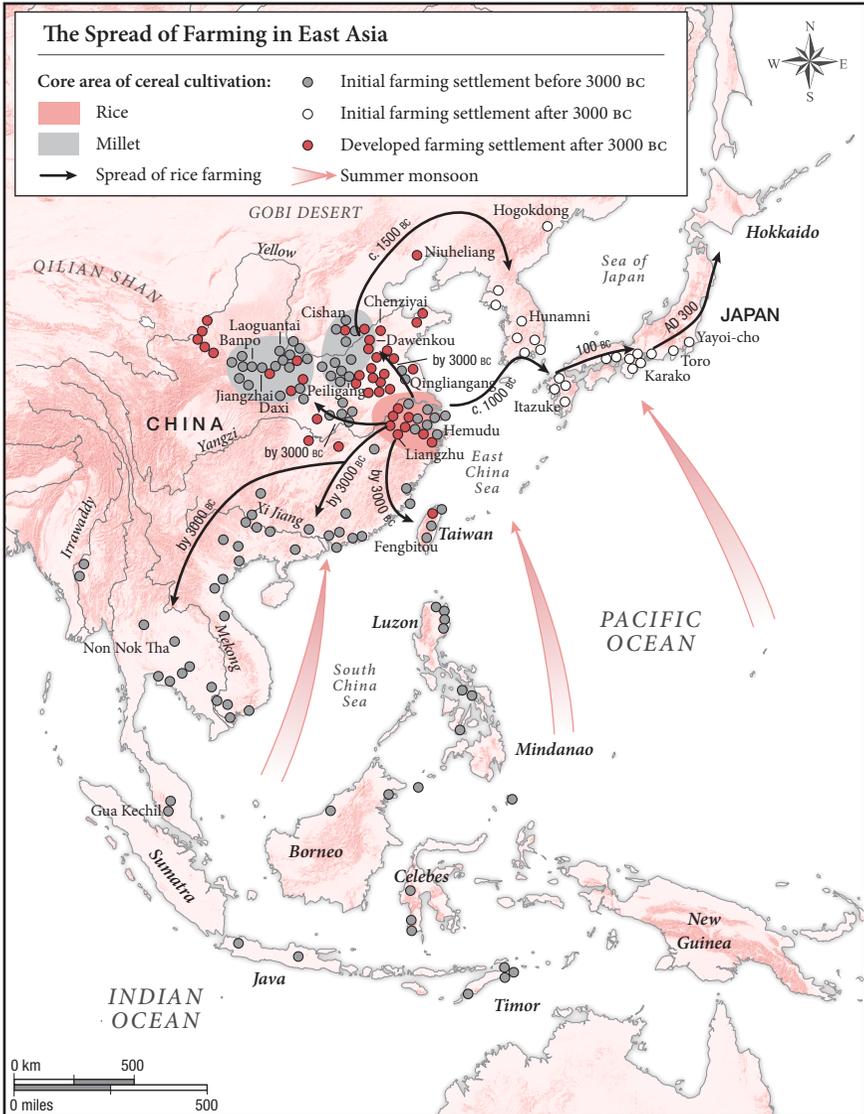
Although neither Li Si nor the Qin Dynasty survived the First Emperor by very much, their legacy had a definitive impact on East Asia for more than 2,000 years. From this time until the second decade of the twentieth century, China would remain, with one long and several short interruptions, an empire. The long-lived Han Dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), which succeeded the Qin, adopted its administrative structures and divisions, and softened its centralized bureaucracy by making its own version of Confucianism the state ideology. It would be this package of Chinese high culture—with the later addition of Buddhism—that would become the high culture of Korea, Vietnam, and Japan, with elements of it affecting even Mongolia and Tibet. Amidst this enormous diffusion of ideas and institutions, the writing of history on the Chinese model would have a central place—and the rise and fall of Li Si would be one of its most arresting morality tales.

In this chapter, we shall examine Chinese and, by extension, East Asian *origins*, *interactions*, and *adaptations* up to the coming of the Mongols and their incorporation of imperial China into a super-empire. We will also deal with Chinese and foreign conceptions of *patterns* of the Chinese past available through archaeological and literary records. We will explore the development and maturation of various Chinese states. Finally, we will look at China's influence on people and groups in East Asia as a result of those interactions, particularly the often debated idea of **sinification**: the making over of peoples and cultures along Chinese models.

## CHINA AND THE NEOLITHIC REVOLUTION

It has often been noted that the first civilizations—people living in agriculturally supported cities—sprang up along river valleys. In this respect, China formed the eastern, and chronologically the last, of a belt of agrarian–urban cultures that included the Tigris and Euphrates-centered civilizations of Mesopotamia, the early

kingdoms along the Nile in Egypt, and perhaps the largest of all, that of the Harappans, along the Indus in India. All these areas receive relatively little rain and rely on their river systems to replenish and irrigate the soil. All of them, too, were the product of a period of incubation during which people began the extensive domestication of plants and animals, developed trade, and established religious sites. All these factors allowed the first agricultural villages to ultimately grow into recognizable form as cities (see Map 2.1).



Map 2.1 The Spread of Farming in East Asia

## Neolithic Origins

The last glacial retreat around 12,000–13,000 years ago brought with it perhaps the most important revolution in human history: the transition from foraging to food *production* in settled communities. Over the next 5,000–7,000 years, settlements based on agricultural surpluses began to appear throughout East Asia. This **Neolithic Revolution** of agriculture developed very quickly in a number of places in China. It appears that in both China and Southeast Asia the domestication of rice first took place, perhaps as early as 7000 BCE. *Millet*—a hardy cereal domesticated from several strains of Eurasian grasses—was already being grown in the north. Early strains of wheat and barley, perhaps originating from the Middle East, may also have been grown. Chickens, pigs, sheep, cattle, and dogs were also widely raised, although current debate questions whether they were domesticated independently or arrived as part of interactions with other areas.

The best known and most thoroughly studied of the thousands of Neolithic sites across China is Banpo Village on the outskirts of modern Xi'an. Banpo is a carefully excavated and reconstructed exemplar of **Yangshao culture**, which



**Banpo Village.** Banpo Village, near the modern city of Xi'an, remains a popular tourist stop as well as a rich Neolithic archaeological site. Photo (A) shows the entry and an interior view of a typical circular dwelling in the village. The photo (B) displays foundations, post holes, and storage pits.

flourished from 5000 to 3500 BCE. Pottery was a signal Neolithic development and Yangshao communities had kilns capable of generating temperatures high enough to fire a wide variety of brightly painted storage pots, vases, etc. decorated with animal and geometric designs. The villagers also fashioned a wide array of stone implements to support the hunting, gathering, and fishing with which they supplemented their subsistence agriculture.

Yangshao villages yielded artifacts and structures that were to have long-standing significance in the everyday lives of villagers throughout northern East Asia. Some of the dwellings at Banpo contain raised clay beds with flues laid through them—an early version of the *kang*, the fuel-efficient combination stove and heated bed still found in older farming homes. Also, silkworm cocoons and bone needles suggest the earliest occurrence of *sericulture*— silk weaving. Perhaps more exciting—and controversial—are pottery fragments bearing abstract pictures of animals and geometric figures bearing some resemblance to later Chinese characters.

Another Neolithic system of communities along the Yellow River was the *Longshan*, or “black pottery,” culture. Located to the east of the Yangshao areas, although with considerable overlap, Longshan artifacts date as far back as 4500 BCE. **Longshan culture** was the last widespread Neolithic set of communities along the North China Plain, and branches of it survived until they were absorbed by the Shang state around 1500 BCE.

The most outstanding product of Longshan artisans was a distinctive, highly refined black pottery, following designs and functional forms still popular in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam today. Some of the pieces are so delicate



**Longshan Pottery.** Stem cups and goblet, dating to about 2000 BCE. The graceful, even elegant lines of Longshan, or black, pottery wares are not only distinctive but also established patterns for ceramic and bronze designs that are still imitated today.

and nearly transparent that they resemble the famous “eggshell porcelain” of later periods. This advance in ceramic sophistication came in part through introduction of the potter’s wheel from western Eurasia, perhaps in the mid-third millennium BCE, which permitted unprecedented precision in molding round and curved figures. In addition, improved kilns—reaching firing temperatures in excess of 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit—and initial experimentation with kaolin clays began a long process of development that reached its high point with the matchless porcelain of the Song and Ming periods. These techniques and designs would later be diffused throughout East, Central, and Southeast Asia (see Map 2.2).

## THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE DYNASTIC SYSTEM

Although the oldest fragmentary written records in East Asia are the **oracle bones** used by diviners in the Shang Dynasty (tr. 1766–1122/1040 BCE), the first real historical accounts in China arrive much later with the *Shujing* (known variously as “the Book of History” or “the Classic of Documents”) in the seventh century BCE. Scholars have debated its reliability for millennia because its texts were written down centuries after the events it covers allegedly occurred. Nonetheless,



Map 2.2 Neolithic China

along with the oracle bones, it remains a vitally important source on China's first three dynasties: the Xia, Shang, and Zhou.

The *Shujing* claims that a series of mythical "culture heroes" and "sage kings" reigned from 2852 to 2205 BCE. These figures were said to have introduced many of China's basic elements and institutions: medicine, divination, writing, agriculture, fire, sericulture (silk production), the calendar, and astronomical cycles. Following the culture heroes were three celebrated sage kings: Yao, Shun, and Yu. Yao and Shun set the pattern for ethical rule and chose their successors from among the most worthy men, not their own family members. Yu was said to have labored for decades to control the rivers and watercourses of the region, so Shun chose him as his successor. Departing from precedent, however, Yu created China's first dynasty, the Xia.

### The Three Dynasties: The Xia

Due at least in part to the legacy of history writing in China, East Asian countries have all developed strong historical traditions. In China, the habit of recasting history through the experiences and biases of succeeding dynasties makes it at times slippery source material for historians. The problem is especially acute with regard to the Xia. Were they simply an invention of Zhou chroniclers to establish a narrative thread to their own dynasty? Was their alleged state, in fact, a kind of Shang mythology absorbed into the Zhou tradition?

Excavations at *Erlitou* in southern Shaanxi Province from the 1950s on have revealed a city dating from roughly 2000 to 1600 BCE that at its height may have had as many as 30,000 inhabitants. The enclosure includes what is perhaps China's earliest palace. In addition, the plan of the structures within the city's various walled compounds resembles that of later official residences: post and beam construction, sloped roofs with upturned ends anticipating the famous "rising phoenix" motif, and non-load-bearing curtain walls of plastered brick or masonry. Most of the larger buildings are also built along north-south axes with their courtyards and entrances facing south, a direction considered propitious even today.

Like the Shang, literary evidence suggests that Xia leaders exercised a family- or clan-based rule, and the archaeological evidence at *Erlitou* seems to support this to a considerable degree. Evidence indicating the role of the elites as mediators with the spirit world, and particularly with the ancestors of rulers, is also found in abundance at *Erlitou*. China's first bronze ritual vessels—wine beakers on tripod stands—as well as jade figurines, turquoise jewelry, the world's earliest lacquered wood items, and cowry shells—used as a medium of exchange—all testify to the leaders' religious and social roles. For scholar Sarah Allen, "*Erlitou* culture was not only an ancient civilization in China, it was an early form of 'Chinese civilization'" (Sarah Allen, "*Erlitou* and the Formation of Chinese Civilization," *Journal of Asian Studies* 66, no. 2 (May 2007): 490).

### The Three Dynasties: The Shang

The Shang represent a mature expression of Chinese Bronze Age civilization. Here, we find all the elements of agrarian-urban society: a highly original method of bronze casting, a substantial and diverse agricultural base, an increasingly

centralized politico-religious system, a sophisticated class structure, an independently developed written language, and, of course, cities.

The system of dynastic rule said to have been instituted by the Xia continued under the Shang. Shang social and political organization was kinship-based, with an emphasis on military power. Members of the king's extended family controlled politics and religion, with more distant relatives acting as court officials. Unlike other Bronze Age societies, there was no distinct class of priests. Rather, spirit mediums and diviners were widely used by Shang rulers and exercised considerable influence at court. The rulers themselves, as the highest living link to the ancestors and other beings occupying a spirit realm, were the embodiment of both religious and secular power.

The Shang fielded both defensive armies and expeditionary forces aimed at expanding their territories and forcing neighboring states to pay tribute. For the most part, these forces consisted of infantry armed with spears, and pikes with axe heads, and were organized into companies of 100 men. Perhaps as early as the fourteenth century BCE, evidence begins to appear in Shang tombs of two of the great innovations of ancient warfare: the horse and the chariot. Moreover, like the potter's wheel, these were among the items that we can authoritatively say were introduced from the outside. In this case, the evidence points to Indo-European migrants who ranged far and wide across Eurasia and spoke a language that became the parent tongue of a linguistic family that includes nearly all the European languages as well as Sanskrit, the sacred language of Hinduism. It was the Tocharian speakers in this language family who played such an important role in spreading a host of ancient technologies throughout the eastern part of Eurasia. In the history museum of the modern city of Urumqi in China's far western province of Xinjiang, one can see today several extraordinarily well-preserved mummies of these migrants discovered in the Tarim Basin—as well as what may be the world's oldest pair of trousers.

The use of chariots in China seems to have been shortly preceded by the widespread introduction of the horse, an innovation that had already revolutionized transport and warfare throughout much of Eurasia. Interestingly, however, the use of horses as mounts for



**Tarim Basin Mummy.** Central Asia's Tarim Basin, one of the lowest points on Earth, is also one of the driest, making it a perfect environment for preservation. It was also a place where some of the earliest interchanges took place between the peoples in China and the earliest Indo-European migrants. Remains up to 4,000 years old have been recovered. Here, the remains of a much more recent figure, "Yingpan Man" complete with mask, shows remarkably little deterioration and his clothes, though nearly 2,000 years old, look almost new.

cavalry or archers did not really become important in the Chinese states until centuries later. Nonetheless, the relative scarcity of horses and suitable breeding grounds for them in China ultimately made trade with Central Asia extremely important as a source for the animals. Ultimately, it would be China that refined and popularized two inventions that are said by many scholars to have “created” the medieval Eurasian world: the stirrup and the horse collar.

Because of the system of kinship-based rule, the personal well-being of the elite and the prestige of the regime as a whole depended in large part on military power and harmony with their ancestors. Hence, Shang rulers constantly mounted campaigns for tribute and labor service from vulnerable states. Among the settled peoples to the west, the most prominent were the Zhou, based around modern Xi’an, and enlisted as allies and clients. For their part, the Shang circulated local and foreign items such as bronze vessels, weapons, and jade throughout the region and beyond.

### The Three Dynasties: The Zhou

Unlike the Xia and Shang dynasties, the nearly nine centuries of Zhou rule are extensively documented. In addition to the *Shujing*, literary works like the *Chunqiu* (Spring and Autumn Chronicles), *Zuo Zhuan* (The Commentaries of Mr. Zuo),

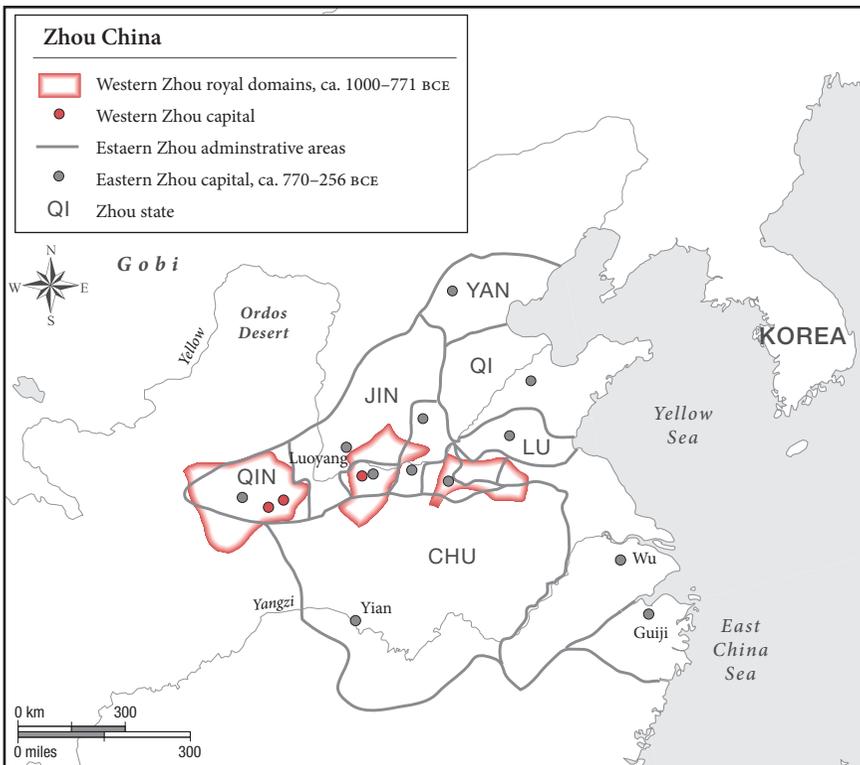


Map 2.3a Shang China

and later compilations such as the *Shiji* (Records of the Grand Historian) by the second-century BCE historian Sima Qian considerably amplify our source material. They also begin to elaborate a wholesale questioning of existing values in a society that was increasingly undergoing the stresses of growth, wealth, and political competition.

One of the revelations of the oracle bones has been to flesh out aspects of the literary record. An important example of this appears to be that by the twelfth century BCE, the Shang state had been considerably eroded by an assortment of nomadic and settled peoples to the north and west. The literary record of their successors, the Zhou, implies that Shang attempts to strengthen the control of the ruler coincided with increasing dissolution and corruption, thus letting the **Mandate of Heaven** slip from their grasp. Therefore, it appears the Zhou kings Wen, Wu, and Cheng and Cheng's regent, the duke of Zhou, pushed their holdings eastward at the expense of the Shang from 1122 BCE. Sometime around 1045 BCE, Zhou forces captured and burned the last Shang capital and stronghold near Anyang (see Map 2.3). As the *Shujing* put it:

Heaven has rejected and ended the Mandate of this great state of Yin [the Shang]. . . . It was because they did not reverently care for their virtue that they early let their Mandate fall. . . .



Map 2.3b Zhou China

(from William Theodore De Bary and Irene Bloom, compilers, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, vol. 1, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 36–37)

Thus, we have an expression, repeated throughout nearly all Chinese historical literature, of the universe, expressed as “heaven” (*tian*), acting as a moral force in human affairs. The ruler, as the mediating element in humanity’s triangular relationship with Heaven and Earth, must hold all three elements together in harmony by just rule. If rulers become unjust, they lose Heaven’s Mandate and rebellion is justified. It is expected as well that the patterns of history include a **dynastic cycle** in which families of rulers initially govern justly but over time stagnate. This is followed by decline, loss of mandate, and ejection by newcomers who found the next dynasty.

By the end of the eleventh century BCE, a network of over 100 smaller territories was organized under Zhou control. Zhou rulers placed family, distinguished subjects, allies, and even some defeated Shang notables in leadership positions of these territories under a graded system of hereditary ranks. By the eighth century BCE, however, the more powerful of these territories had begun to consolidate their holdings into states of their own. Although these states would continue to pledge their loyalty to the Zhou court, they increasingly worked toward promoting their own interests, which resulted in a weakening of Zhou political power. A half-century of war among court factions, border struggles with nomadic peoples, and a devastating earthquake further weakened Zhou power, resulting in the court being driven from its capital at Xi’an in 771 BCE and relocating to the east in Luoyang. This forced move marks the end of the Western Zhou period and the beginning of the Eastern Zhou era (770–256 BCE).

The Zhou system of decentralized government called *fengjian*, usually rendered as “feudalism,” gave considerable autonomy to its local rulers and was thus an important reason for the weakening of the central government. As these rulers grew in power and their economies flourished, they became less loyal to the Zhou leadership and some even went as far as naming themselves “king” (*wang*) of their own domains. The prestige of the Zhou court also suffered after its flight to Luoyang in 770. The court’s new isolation was especially important since its dependencies were in a period of tremendous economic expansion. Within a few generations of the relocation to Luoyang, Zhou control and power had significantly weakened in absolute as well as relative terms.

By the latter part of the sixth century, a rough balance of power among the four leading states of Jin, Chu (the premier state of the southern periphery), Qi, and Qin (a rising force in the old Zhou homeland near Xi’an) held sway. Although this system functioned for several decades, new powers on the periphery, expansion into non-Zhou lands, and civil war in Jin ultimately precipitated the partition of that state in 403 BCE, marking the formal opening of the Warring States period. By its close, Zhou itself had been absorbed by the combatants (in 256 BCE), and as we saw in the opening vignette of this chapter, Qin had emerged as not just the dominant state but the creator of a unified empire in 221 BCE.

## Economy and Society

The large size of the territory claimed by the Zhou Dynasty, and the enhanced trade that this expansion entailed, added to the wealth and power of all the rulers of its increasingly autonomous dependencies. The expansion of these dependencies to the Yangzi River basin brought much of East Asia's most productive farmland under some form of Zhou control and stimulated increased interaction with the inhabitants of the region.

In the north, the introduction of the soybean from Manchuria, with its high protein content and ability to fix nitrogen in the soil, boosted crop yields and pushed growers to cultivate more marginal lands. The rotation of wheat and different varieties of millet allowed for more intensive farming. The use of more efficient ox-drawn plows and increasingly elaborate irrigation and water-conservancy efforts pushed yields even further. In the south, the Zhou dependencies developed rapidly as rice cultivation facilitated population growth. By the mid-sixth century BCE, the Zhou kingdoms taken together constituted the world's most populous, and perhaps richest, agriculturally based urban society.

In an attempt to untangle the more confusing aspects of *fengjian* land arrangement, the Zhou were the first among many dynasties to attempt to impose a uniform system of land tenure in China. Later writers, most notably the philosopher Mencius, would look back nostalgically on the **well-field system**—a method of land division said to have been devised by the duke of Zhou. In this arrangement, each square *li* (one *li* is about one-third of a mile), consisting of 900 *mou* (each *mou* is approximately one-sixth of an acre), was divided into a grid of nine plots. Individual families would each work one of the eight outside plots, while the middle one would be farmed in common for the taxes and rents owed the landowner or local officials. The term “well-field” comes from the Chinese character for “[water] well” (井, *jing*) that resembles a grid. Whether the system as idealized by Mencius was ever widely practiced is still a matter of debate among scholars. It did, however, remain the benchmark against which all subsequent attempts at land reform were measured, even into the twentieth century. By the late 500s BCE, the needs of individual governments to use the wealth of their states to support their militaries and developing bureaucracies prompted them to institute land taxes based on crop yields. Depending on the state and the productivity of the land, these tended to vary from 10 to 20 percent of a family holding's yield.

## New Classes: Merchants and Shi

Also contributing to the decline of Zhou rural-based feudal society was the rise of new classes. For the first time, the literary record now includes references to merchants. The growing power of this new class began a long-term struggle with various governments for control of such vital commodities as salt and iron. It also marked the beginning of the perception of merchants as a parasitic class whose drive for profit from trafficking in the goods of others endangered the stability of Zhou social institutions. Accompanying the rise of a merchant class was the steady advance of a cash economy. The coining of money was becoming

widespread by the late Zhou, including the round copper “cash” with the square middle hole—symbolically depicting Heaven and Earth—which remained almost unchanged for over 2,000 years.

Although often viewed with distaste by the landed aristocracy, merchants were nonetheless seen as resources to be tapped. Their independence and mobility, along with the steady growth of cities as centers of trade, helped spur political and economic centralization as the rulers of Zhou territories attempted to create more inclusive systems of administration. Direct taxation by the state, uniform law codes, and administrative restructuring were increasingly altering the old arrangement of mutual obligation between aristocratic landowners and dependent peasant farmers. Here, members of the new *shi* class—drawn from the lower aristocracy and wealthier commoners—who, like merchants, were divorced somewhat from the older structures of rural life, took on the role of bureaucrats and advisors. From the ranks of the *shi* would rise many of China’s most famous thinkers, starting with Confucius.



**Bronze Owl from Fu Hao Tomb.** Shang Dynasty bronzes are unique in form and in their fabrication. Unlike the “lost wax” method of casting in other Eurasian cultures, the Chinese model utilized two separate molds. Shang and early Zhou bronzes are also notable for their stylized *taotie* designs and decoration of real and mythological creatures. This bronze owl is from the tomb of Fu Hao, the consort of Shang king Wu Ding, and is part of one of that dynasty’s richest troves of funeral artifacts.

### Family and Gender in Ancient China

In marked contrast to later Chinese court life, in which the seclusion of women was a central aspect, elite women of the Shang often participated in political—and even military—affairs. We can catch a glimpse of this reflected in the objects found at the burial site of Fu Hao, discovered in 1975. The most prominent of the 64 wives of Wu Ding, Fu Hao’s burial artifacts—hundreds of bronzes, jade, and bone ornaments, as well as the sacrificial skeletons of 16 people and 6 dogs—help bring to life a woman whose existence, although well established in written records, has otherwise been elusive.

For example, inscriptions on oracle bones in Fu Hao’s tomb indicate that she wielded considerable power and influence even before becoming Wu Ding’s principal wife. Prior to coming to court at the Shang capital of Yin sometime in the late thirteenth century BCE, she owned and managed a family estate nearby and was

apparently well educated in a number of areas that would serve her well in palace life. She both supervised and conducted religious rituals at court and during military expeditions. As Wu Ding's chief confidant, she advised him on political and military strategy and diplomacy. She even conducted her own military campaigns against Shang adversaries. The king apparently considered her so wise and beloved that after her death he frequently appealed to her for guidance through divination with oracle bones.

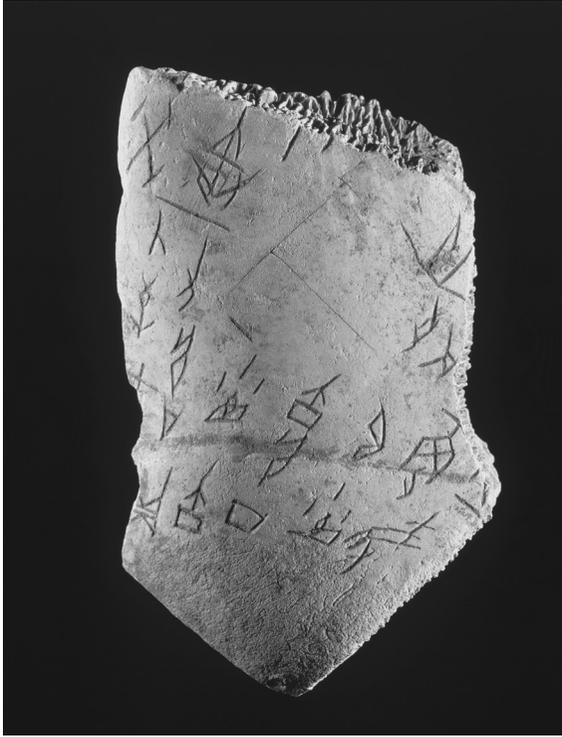
Although elite Shang women like Fu Hao appear to have shared a comparatively egalitarian role with male rulers, the Zhou era marks a period of transition in their status. To the extent that such literature as the *Book of History* and the *Poetry Classic* of the early Zhou era address issues of women and power, women were still depicted as occupying important positions as mentors and advisors. The wives and concubines of rulers in many instances had their own sets of records and genealogies, an important asset among the powerful in this family-conscious society.

However well-educated and capable, though, late Zhou women seldom ruled in their own right. In fact, the treaties during this period in many cases specifically barred women from involvement in state affairs. The same general trend may be glimpsed at other levels of society as well. The enormously complex web of family, clan, village, and class associations of the Zhou era reflects considerable respect for the wisdom and work of women, but these skills were increasingly seen as best exercised in the home instead of in the public sphere. The later development of state-sponsored Confucianism, with its preponderant emphasis on filial piety, ushered in a markedly secondary role for women as governing the "inner domain" of the home, whereas men ruled the "outer domain" of public life and power.

### Religion, Culture, and Intellectual Life

In many respects, the evolution of Chinese religion follows a similar pattern to that of other agrarian–urban societies. The first Chinese gods were local deities that inhabited a spirit world presided over by a ruling god. Unlike other religions of remote antiquity, in China the rulers' ancestors occupied the highest rungs of the spirit world and worship largely consisted of communication with them by various means.

Two aspects that mark Shang religious, intellectual, and political life as distinctive and original are oracle bones and the writing system. The king seeking guidance would either himself or with a diviner ask a question of the ancestors. The bones, usually the shoulder blades of oxen or the undershells of tortoises, were then heated and tapped with a bronze rod, and the resulting cracks were interpreted as answers. The queries and responses were generally added later as a record of the procedure. Such matters as propitious times for battle, justifications for invasion, and the worthiness of officials are heavily represented among the oracle bones, as are matters related to royal births, deaths, marriages, and pregnancies.



**Oracle Bones.** Shang “oracle bones” used extensively for divination were first identified at Anyang a little more than a century ago and contain the earliest confirmed examples of Chinese writing. Kings or their diviners would ask questions of ancestors or gods, heat the bones, and interpret the cracks to find the answers to their inquiries. The questions and answers were then inscribed on the bones, usually the plastrons (undershells) or tortoises or (here) the shoulder blades of oxen.

### Chinese Writing

Several thousand distinct symbols have been identified on the oracle bones, and many are clearly ancient versions of modern Chinese characters. Even in their ancient form, Chinese characters contained two basic elements: the “radical” that conveys the category of meaning to which the character belongs; and the phonetic part that usually both makes the meaning more specific and offers a guide to its pronunciation. Many radicals are stylized pictures representing concrete objects: In its earliest form, for example, the Chinese character for the sun was a circle with a dot in the center. In its modern form, it is still recognizable as 日. As a radical, it forms a component of many characters related to light. For example, the radical for sun (日) placed with the character for moon (月) means “bright,” 明.

Characters combining concrete objects, such as the sun and moon here, are often used to depict abstract ideas, in this case, “brightness” or “brilliance.”

Perhaps more than any other factor, the Chinese written language had a tremendous influence on the course of East Asian history. Although it requires extensive memorization compared to the phonetic languages of other cultures, it is remarkably adaptable as a writing system because the meaning of the characters is independent of their pronunciation. Thus, speakers of non-Chinese languages could attach their own pronunciations to the characters and, as long as they understood their structure and grammar, could use them to communicate. This versatility enabled Chinese to serve as the first written language not only for speakers of the Chinese family of dialects but also Vietnamese, Korean, and Japanese. Even today, despite the development of written vernacular languages in all these countries, the ability to read classical Chinese is still considered to be a mark of superior education. Moreover, the cultural heritage transmitted by Chinese characters continues to inform the worldviews of these societies.

### Ritual and Religion

Although scholars are more or less agreed that China’s earliest bronze artifacts were brought in through trade with Western Asia, the first bronze casting techniques in China likely arrived via Southeast Asia. Shang and early Zhou ritual bronzes, with their richly stylized *taotie* motifs—fanciful abstract reliefs of real and mythical animals incorporated into the design—are utterly unlike anything outside of East Asia.

The use of bronze vessels constituted a central part of Shang religious ceremonies among the elites. Indeed, a number of Shang and Zhou ceremonial vessels passed through the hands of subsequent dynasties and came to be seen as the tangible marks of the Mandate of Heaven. Offerings of meats and grains (wheat, millet, and occasionally rice), as well as wine, were a regular part of Shang ritual.

Scholars are still unresolved as to whether *Di*, sometimes given as *Shangdi*, was the chief Shang deity, or referred to a larger group or council in the spirit realm. In any case, *Di* presided over the spirit world and governed both natural and human affairs. *Di* was joined by the major ancestors of the dynastic line, deities believed to influence or control natural phenomena, and local gods appropriated from various Shang territories. The religious function of the Shang ruler was to act as the intermediary between the world of the spirits and that of humanity. Hence, rituals appear to have consisted largely of sacrifices to ancestors to assure their benevolence toward the living. As the Shang state grew more powerful and commanded more and more resources, the size and scope of the sacrifices also increased. The Shang also practiced human sacrifice. The evidence suggests that the death of a ruler was the occasion to slaughter hundreds of slaves, servants, and war captives, perhaps to serve the deceased in the spirit world.

The Zhou, like other conquerors after them, sought to give legitimacy to their reign by adopting many of the forms of art and ritual practiced by the defeated Shang. As before, the ruler maintained his place as mediator between the



**Shang Bronze.** Shang bronze-making techniques and motifs resulted in highly original designs and vessels that were often imitated by their successors. The ritual food vessel pictured here, called a *li ding*, is decorated with a distinctive *taotie* motif containing prominent eyes and scrolling horns. It was found at Anyang and dates to ca. 1200–1050 BCE.

human and divine worlds. The Zhou era, however, marked a turn toward a more abstract, impersonal, and universal concept of religion. Di, the chief Shang deity or group of deities, began to give way to the more distant Zhou idea of “Heaven” (*tian*) as the animating force of the universe. By the late Zhou era, this concept had become central to nearly every major Chinese religious and philosophical tradition. It was this more abstract heaven whose mandate gave the right to rule to all subsequent Chinese dynasties.

### **THE HUNDRED SCHOOLS: CONFUCIANISM AND DAOISM**

Of the philosophical or religious systems that have been most influential in China’s history, two, Confucianism and Daoism, are indigenous. The third, Buddhism, arrived somewhat later from India via Central Asian trade routes during the first century CE. All three, especially Confucianism and Buddhism,

would go far to shape the cultures of East Asia down to the present. The seedbed of the first two, however, may be found amid the increasingly turbulent Eastern Zhou era. Indeed, by the third century BCE, there were so many competing ideas in play that the era is customarily referred to as the time of the Hundred Schools of Thought.

### Self-Cultivation and Ritual: Confucius

As with so many religious and philosophical figures from antiquity, the historical Confucius remains a somewhat shadowy figure. He is said to have been born in 551 BCE to a family named Kong, whose members still maintain genealogies tracing their ancestors back to him. In Confucian texts, he is referred to as “the Master” (*zi* or *fuzi*) or “the Master Kong” (***Kong fuzi***). European missionaries in the seventeenth century rendered *Kong fuzi* into Latin, where it became “Confucius.” He was a man of that new class, the *shi*, and is said to have spent much of his early career seeking a position as a political advisor to the courts of several of the Zhou states in northern China, although his search for employment was largely unsuccessful. He did, however, attract a group of followers as he made the rounds as an itinerant teacher. Although the writings attributed to him and his immediate disciples do not outline a systematic philosophical scheme as such, the core ideas of his vision represent a consistent view of a universal ideal of a moral order to which the dedicated may aspire regardless of their social position.

Confucius drew heavily from his understanding of Yao and Shun, and the Zhou dynastic founders Wu, Wen, and the duke of Zhou. As presented in the *Lunyu*, or *Analects*, the Master’s ideas represent a view



**Kong Family Compound in Qufu.** Though scholars still debate the authenticity of claims of authorship and descent from Confucius, the Kong family has insisted on their lineage and maintained this compound in Qufu in Shandong Province. Emperors have bestowed the title of “Duke Yansheng” on the eldest male of the line since 1055 CE. The most recent holder of the title Kung Te-cheng (Pinyin, Kong Dezheng) died in 2008 in Taiwan at the age of 89. He claimed to be the 77th main-line descendant of the Sage.

of human beings as inclined toward ethical behavior. One of the key concepts shared by Confucius with many other Chinese philosophical schools is the idea of a transcendent *dao* (Tao). As we will see with the Daoists below, there are certain fundamental patterns that are manifestations of the *dao* (“the Way”) of the universal order. For Confucius, one of these patterns is that of human society as a kind of extended family from the ruler down to the peasant. In fact, it extends beyond human society in the sense that, through the mechanism of Heaven’s Mandate, the ruler is responsible to Heaven for the state of human society. Although this view is avowedly hierarchical rather than egalitarian, the mutual obligations present at every level serve as checks for Confucius on the arbitrary exercise of power. When asked to sum up his philosophy in one word, Confucius answered “reciprocity”: “Do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you.”

Confucius believed that individuals should practice the qualities of *ren* (benevolence, or humaneness toward others) and *li* (the observance of ritual, or rules of decorum) as guides to appropriate behavior. The practice of *li* throughout society—formally through ritual, informally through the behavior of role models such as parents, elders, teachers, and officials—would at a minimum allow people to police themselves and encourage individuals to aspire to *ren*. Thus, people who demonstrated these qualities would not only perfect their own character, but also set an example for the rest of society.

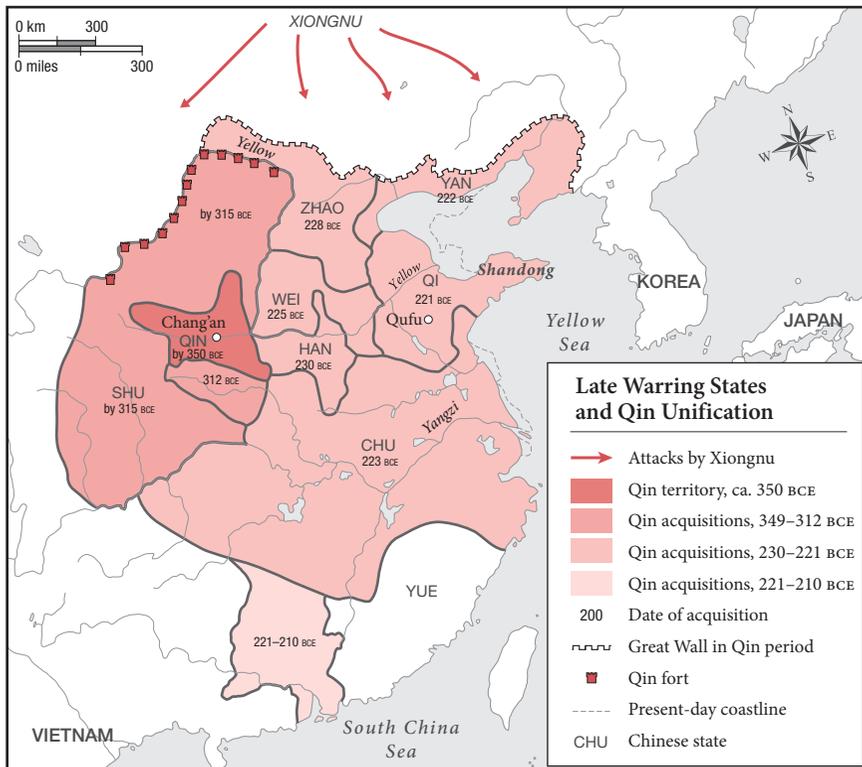
Living during a time of great social and political turmoil, Confucius not surprisingly directed much of his thought toward ways of improving government and society. Unlike systems that seek to do this by improving institutions, however, Confucian doctrine places great emphasis on personal transformation and responsibility. In this schema, good government begins with educated leaders and officials of strong ethical character. In this sense, those who would rule should be the *junzi*—“gentlemen” or “superior men” whose virtues include a humane temperament, courtesy, kindness, and diligence. Since the goal of society is to create a moral order among human beings to hold the cosmos in balance, rulers and officials who embody these attributes would set the correct example for their subjects to follow. Thus, the Confucian emphasis on government and society as a kind of school of moral development created an approach that aspired to go *beyond* simply obeying laws. The *Analects* sums this up succinctly: “Lead them [the people] by rules of decorum [*li*] and they will develop a sense of shame [i.e., a collective sense of proper behavior], and moreover, will become good.”

By the time Confucius died, traditionally said to be in 479 BCE, he had attracted a loyal following of adherents to his teachings. Two later students of Confucian doctrine—Mencius and Xunzi—continued to spread the teachings of the Master, with their own distinctive contributions. Both men, however, ended up moving in very different directions. In the long run, it would be Mencius who would be seen as the inheritor of the “authentic” Confucian tradition. Xunzi’s chief disciples, whom we met in the opening vignette, Han Fei and Li Si, would become the architects of China’s unification under the short-lived and draconian philosophy of **Legalism**.

## Mencius and the Politics of Human Nature

By Mencius's time, the intensity of the competition and continual warfare among the Zhou states had spawned most of the Hundred Schools of Thought as thinkers questioned fundamental assumptions about private and social good (see Map 2.4). Not surprisingly, given the chaotic times, their answers varied from the radical individualism of Yang Zhu (ca. 440–360 BCE) to the arguments for universal love and altruism of Mo Di (ca. 470–391 BCE). Some, like Sun Zi (fl. fifth century BCE), turned to what they considered to be remorselessly practical matters such as examining the nature of armed struggle in his famous *Art of War*.

For Mencius (*Mengzi* or “Master Meng”) (372–289? BCE), people were fundamentally oriented toward ethical behavior, but must continually work to understand and refine their natural inclinations in order to avoid being led astray by negative influences. Mencius traveled throughout China spreading Confucian ideals, especially as a basis for government practice. The *Mengzi*, or Book of Mencius, is written in more of a narrative form than the *Analects*, and fleshed out by stories, parables, and debates with advocates of other schools, particularly those of Yang and Mo.



Map 2.4 Late Warring States and Qin Unification

As the center of both power and moral authority, the ruler had a primary duty to maintain *min sheng* (the people's livelihood) and uphold the social order. The ruler should not seek to pursue profit but rather set the example of "righteousness" (*yi*), appropriate behavior toward all according to social rank; and *ren* (benevolence, or humaneness) as espoused by Confucius. Mencius revived the old "well-field" system as a model of just land tenure in order to support this idea. A ruler who abused or neglected his subjects, however, upset not just the social order but the cosmic order. In such a case, the people had not only the right but the obligation to invoke the Mandate of Heaven and depose him.

### Paradox and Transcendence: Laozi and Daoism

Although most Chinese philosophical schools accepted the concept of the *dao* as the governing principle of the universe, they varied as to the best means of achieving harmony with it. For Confucians, study and self-cultivation to the point of intuitive understanding put the individual in tune with the *dao*. For followers of the Daoist tradition attributed to Laozi (Lao Tzu, tr. b. 604 BCE), the Confucian path *prevented* harmony with the *dao*. Daoists rejected the Confucian emphasis on personal responsibility and ethical social behavior because it implied following a specific course of *good* behavior. The *dao*, however, encompasses the *entire* universe—including good and evil and *all* opposites and paradoxes. Hence, no single path of action would lead an individual to union with it. Instead, the Daoists taught that only through a life of quiet self-reflection and contemplation of opposites and paradoxes might an individual come to know the *dao*. Daoists used water to illustrate how the "weak" will overcome the "strong": water flows around rocks in a stream but eventually erodes them down to nothing.

Daoist political theory held that the best government is one that governs least. Here, the key idea is from the most famous Daoist work, the *Daode Jing* (The Classic of the Way and Its Power): "By non-action there is nothing that is not done." This is not to say that the ruler literally does nothing, but rather that his role is to create the conditions that *naturally* lead to a society in which everyone spontaneously acts in accordance with the *dao*. The ruler should not push specific policies but let all things take their natural courses. For Daoists, the ruler is thus like the field that provides the essential conditions for flowers and plants to grow according to their own natures.

## THE STRUCTURES OF EMPIRE

As the struggles of the Warring States Period settled into their final phase, Confucianism, with its emphasis on the essential goodness of people, seemed less and less appealing to many rulers struggling to survive. The collateral branches of the Confucian philosophical tree now began to produce ideas that seemed radically at odds with those of the earlier sages. The most influential of these was Xunzi (tr. 298–219? BCE). People have the capacity to understand what is good, he asserted, but are able to regulate themselves only through immense and constant effort. Moreover, government must take an active role in regulating them.

Although the immediate development of Legalism as incorporated by the state of Qin came from Xunzi's students Han Fei (d. 233 BCE) and Li Si (d. 208), its roots may perhaps be traced back much further.

Most directly connected to the Legalist school was *The Book of Lord Shang*, detailing the ideas of Gongsun Yang (Shang Yang, d. 338 BCE) the architect of Qin's rise to prominence during the late fourth century BCE. Here, one sees most of the elements that would be refined and completed during the creation of China's first empire: strict impartial law; severe punishments for small infractions; an emphasis on only "practical" subjects in education; and the sanctioning of war as an instrument of state policy.

As we saw in the opening vignette, such policies were powerfully attractive to Han Fei and Li Si. In the system they created, all old *fengjian* privileges of rank were leveled in favor of uniform laws and practices based on the will of the ruler in a highly centralized state. Order would prevail in the state only through the institution of strict, detailed, and explicit laws diligently and impartially enforced. In keeping with the idea that obedience on small matters led to compliance on larger ones, they imposed harsh punishments—forced labor, mutilation, in some cases, death—for even the tiniest infractions.

It followed that all subjects be required to serve the state through productive activities. As the *Book of Lord Shang* had insisted, agriculture and military service were central to the well-being of the state. Individuals were encouraged to take up either or both of these as their livelihood; any other occupation was discouraged or prohibited, and work was compulsory for all. In order to suppress dissent and encourage approved thinking, only government-sanctioned history and literature were tolerated. In short, says Han Fei, the government must be like a mother lancing a boil on her infant: although the baby screams from the immediate pain, he or she is better for it in the end. The price exacted during the Qin's short duration, however, was considered by many contemporaries and nearly all succeeding generations of Chinese commentators to have been far too high. Yet its ruthless concentration of power and resources finally made possible the forced march to empire that no preceding regime had been able to effect.

### **The First Empire, 221 to 206 BCE**

Qin's position as a small, poor, far western frontier state made it in many ways an unlikely candidate for empire. Its position and relative poverty, however, provided what at the time were unrecognized advantages over its opponents to the east. As a frontier society, encouraged by its emphasis on agriculture, it promised land to peasant cultivators as the state seized territory from nomadic peoples to the west. Qin's relative isolation also kept it out of many of the internecine fights that plagued the interior Zhou dependencies and eroded their resources; at the same time, policing its expanding territories encouraged military preparedness. By 350 BCE, Qin rulers began reorganizing the state along the lines envisioned in Lord Shang's treatise. In less than a century, they had eliminated the rump state of Zhou itself in 256 BCE and began the final subjugation of the dynasty's remaining states.

They then drove south and eliminated the opposition of the many tribal peoples below the state of Yue. From there, they drove into *yuenan* (south of Yue)—the northern part of modern Vietnam—thus beginning a long and often bitterly contested relationship with Southeast Asia. In the north and west, Qin armies fought a series of campaigns to drive nomadic peoples, especially the *Xiongnu*, from newly established borders and secure the trade routes into Central Asia.

### **Qin Shi Huangdi**

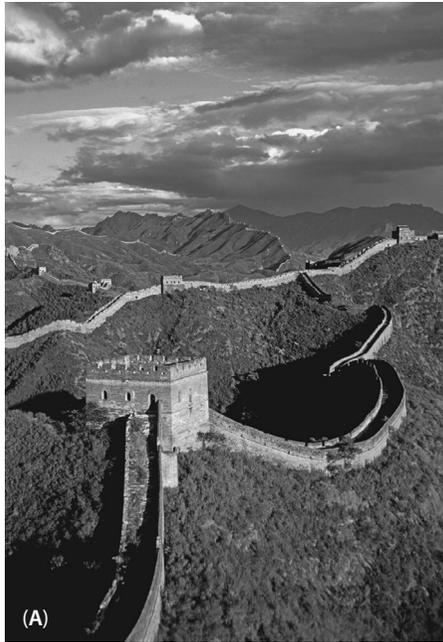
The year 221 BCE saw the ascension of the Qin king Ying Zheng (r. 246–210 BCE), who now proclaimed himself *Qin Shi Huangdi*, the First Emperor of the Qin. With Li Si as his chancellor, he instituted the Legalist system throughout his newly won empire. With virtually unlimited resources and the ruthless drive of the First Emperor, the new regime began a series of projects during the next dozen years that are still astonishing today in their scope and ambition. The Chinese writing system was standardized, as were all weights, measures, and coinage. The people were organized into a system of mutual responsibility. Hundreds of thousands of laborers worked on roads, canals, and a multitude of irrigation and water conservancy projects. As a safeguard against attacks by northern nomadic peoples, tens of thousands of laborers were conscripted to cobble together the numerous defensive walls of the old Zhou states along the new empire's northern tier. Stretching over 1,400 miles, this massive project under the direction of Meng Tian (d. 210 BCE) would become the first iteration of the Great Wall of China.

What most people remember the First Emperor for, however, is the massive tomb complex he ordered built for himself, which, according to the *Records of the Grand Historian*, would signify “a rule that would be enjoyed by his sons and grandsons for 10,000 generations.” A part of the tomb was discovered in 1974 by a peasant digging a well outside the modern city of Xi'an. Excavation of the complex unearthed an army of thousands of life-sized terracotta warriors with removable heads and individualized features marching in close-order drill to protect Qin Shi Huangdi after his death.

After a reign of a dozen years as emperor, Shi Huangdi died. Soon after his death, the empire erupted in rebellion. Ironically, the government's severe laws and punishments now worked against it as officials attempted to conceal the revolt's extent for fear of torture and execution. At the same time, Li Si provoked additional discontent by conspiring to keep the First Emperor's death a secret in order to rule as regent for the monarch's son. He was captured attempting to flee the rebellion and, as we saw in the opening vignette, executed in particularly grim fashion in 208 BCE. After a brief civil war and an attempt to revive a version of the old Zhou system of decentralized government, a general named Liu Bang put an end to the fighting and restored order to the region. He proclaimed himself emperor in 202 BCE and called his new dynasty the Han.

### **The Imperial Model: The Han Dynasty, 202 BCE to 220 CE**

It is often said that the Qin forced the structure of empire on China, whereas the Han continued this practice behind a more benign ideology. The Han retained the centralized political system of Qin ministries and *commanderies*—districts



**Qin Projects.** (A) The Great Wall at Jinshanling Pass, northeast of Beijing. Though these sections of the wall were rebuilt in the early fifteenth century CE, this prospect shows some of the detail and intricacy of its fortification and also gives us an idea of the immensity of its structure. (B) One of the most important archaeological finds of the twentieth century was the tomb of the First Emperor on the outskirts of modern X'ian in 1974. Theories abound as to the reasons behind the individualized faces on the removable heads: One holds that they were taken from real soldiers; another is that they were symbolic of the emperor's universal rule over China's many peoples. The immense museum complex now at the site is one of China's most popular tourist attractions.

under military command—but combined these with more moderate Confucian ideals of government as a moral agent. Though its books were banned and many of its scholars buried alive under the Qin, Confucianism survived and, although there were key differences in the evolving model of its government-sponsored version from the ideas of Confucius and Mencius, it endured with some interruptions and modifications for over 2,000 years. It still retains considerable cultural power in East Asia even today.

In this sense, Liu Bang, who had taken the reign name of Gaozu (r. 202–195 BCE), represented a new kind of ruler. He had been a peasant and so had little stake or interest in bringing back the old feudal system of the Zhou. Having received from the Qin an administrative structure more or less intact, he retained it for ease of pacification and control. Within that structure, however, he enacted a number of reforms: token distributions of land were made to some members of the upper ranks; taxes and labor obligations widely reduced; and the most severe punishments under the Qin rescinded.

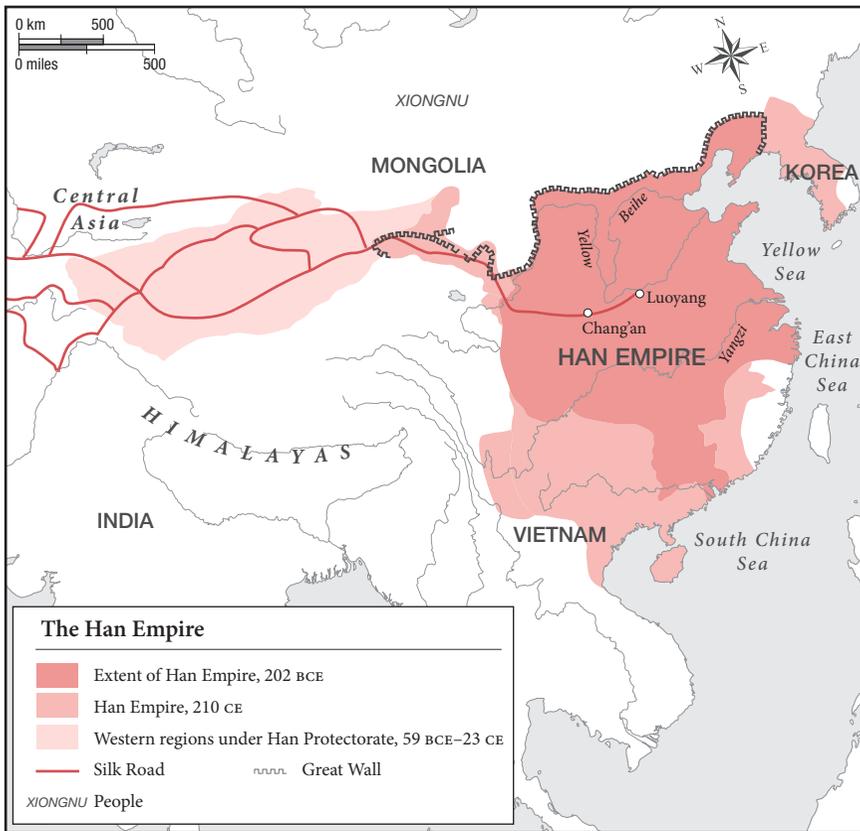
As the Han empire expanded—reaching a population in 2 CE comparable to that of Rome, with just under 60 million—so did its bureaucracy. Setting a pattern for the administration throughout much of the history of imperial China, officials were divided into graded ranks, ranging from the heads of imperial ministries to district magistrates. Below these officials were clan leaders and village headmen. Landowners were responsible for collecting taxes for themselves and their tenants, whereas the lower officials recorded the rates and amounts, kept track of the labor obligations of the district, and mobilized the people during emergencies (see Map 2.5).

Although Confucianism served as the foundation for the Han educational curriculum, Confucian doctrine had changed in some significant ways from the early teachings of Confucius and his disciples. Thus, the Confucianism that finally received state approval included elements reflecting the new realities of Han rule. A number of Confucian ideals—humane, righteous, filial behavior by the powerful—were linked with Daoist ideas of the ruler as divorced from day-to-day administration, and Legalist notions on centralization and the role of officials. The pre-dynastic ideal of passing rulership on to the country's most able men was again set aside: for stability and continuity's sake, it was decided that a dynasty had to be hereditary. The ideas of Heaven's Mandate and the dynastic cycle, however, were retained and strengthened.

### Expanding the Empire

Like the idealized interpretation of the dynastic cycle favored by Chinese historians, the initial part of the Han era was marked by expansion and consolidation. A significant part of that expansion came during the reign of the emperor Wudi (141–87 BCE). In addition to once again driving into the Korean Peninsula and south into Vietnam, Wudi moved deep into the interior of Asia.

As had the Qin, and like many of his successors, Wudi faced the difficulty of defending the empire's long, sparsely populated northern and western boundaries from diverse groups of nomadic peoples, especially the Xiongnu. Hoping



**Map 2.5** The Han Empire

that a strong Chinese presence would discourage potential invasion, he encouraged the emigration of settlers to the region—a practice many of his successors, including present-day ones, would follow. He also extended and fortified the Great Wall. Because the Han had also expanded into the narrow corridor in the west adjacent to the Central Asian trade routes marking the developing Silk Road, Wudi and his successors mounted repeated expeditions into the area, built numerous guardhouses, and stationed garrisons along the way. In 89 CE after a lengthy conflict, the Han finally succeeded in destroying the Xiongnu state.

Wudi employed strategies that later became famous as the “loose rein” and “using barbarians to check barbarians”: he tried diplomatic efforts, offering the Xiongnu food and other necessary supplies, but when those efforts failed, he mounted military campaigns against them. As did the Romans with the Germanic peoples on their periphery, he also doled out favors to some groups as a way to cement their loyalties in order to use them to guard the frontiers against other, less pliable groups. The Han also adopted the practice of culturally assimilating nomadic peoples. Along with the imposition of Han rule came the Chinese writing system and the infusion of Confucian ideology and practices.

## Downturn of the Dynastic Cycle

The Han era has traditionally been divided into the Former or Western Han (202 BCE–8 CE), and the Later or Eastern Han (24 CE–220). During a brief interval between 8 and 24 CE, the dynasty was temporarily interrupted when a relative of the royal family, Wang Mang (45 BCE–23 CE), seized power. Wang attempted to nationalize the land and redistribute it according to the old “well-field system” in order to reduce the abuses that had crept into the land tenure system and the growing gap between rich landowners and peasants. This precipitated a rebellion by a secret society called the Red Eyebrows. The rebels killed Wang Mang and sacked the capital of Chang’an. Although an imperial relative restored the dynasty, the capital was moved to a safer location in Luoyang, but the empire, now reduced in size and resources, never fully recovered.



**Han Guardhouse.** Han expansion into Central Asia and expanded trade along the routes of the Silk Road required garrisons and fortifications at key points beyond the Great Wall to protect travelers and settlers from attacks by nomadic peoples like the Xiongnu. The ceramic model illustrated here is typical of such outposts. The upper stories have protected balconies for archers and spearmen, whereas the lowest story provides a place for domestic animals such as the ducks depicted in the photo. Note the crossbowman barely discernible in the left rear of the upper story.

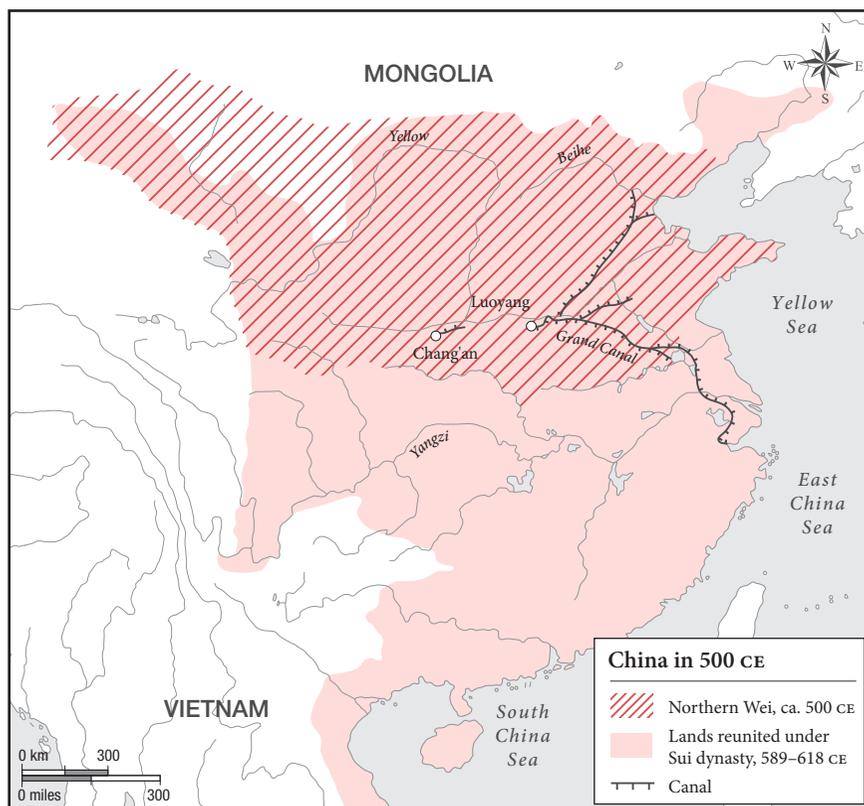
For a time, however, the general prosperity of the regime continued to mask its weaknesses and Chinese historians would label the Later Han as one of China’s four great “Restorations”—periods during which dynasties in decline were able to temporarily recover their dynamism. By the late second century CE, however, the restored dynasty was showing signs of strain. In a pattern that would be repeated a number of times in future dynasties, ambitious internal improvements ordered by Han emperors were increasingly carried out by *corvée* labor. Like Rome during its “crisis of the third century,” the increased costs of defense, growing labor obligations for peasant cultivators, and loss of arable land led to an accelerating decline. As if to underscore the rhythms of the dynastic cycle, internal battles within the imperial family, aggravated by the increasing regional power of Han generals, and the rise of the Daoist Yellow Turbans after 184 CE, finally brought the Han Dynasty to an end in 220 CE.

## The Centuries of Fragmentation, 220 to 589 CE

The long period of turmoil and fragmentation between the end of the Han era and reunification under the Sui Dynasty (589–618) is traditionally divided into the era of the Three Kingdoms (220–280), the overlapping Six Dynasties Period (222–589), and the also overlapping period of the North and South Dynasties (317–589). As had been the pattern with the Zhou and the Qin,

it would be a people on the periphery of the Chinese world that would ultimately create the next dynasty and recreate the empire (see Map 2.6).

In this case, it was the eastern Mongolian people known as the Toba, part of a larger group the Chinese called *Xianbei*, who established the state of Northern Wei (386–585) along the old northern Chinese heartland of the Yellow River basin. We noted earlier how the Han pursued policies of sinification toward outside peoples. For the Toba, the power of Chinese civilization was even greater in attracting and ultimately assimilating those moving into Chinese territory. By the beginning of the sixth century, the descendants of the Toba and nomadic groups ranging across the borders of Northern Wei and neighboring states had formed a kind of ethnically hybrid society—taking Chinese names, marrying into the leading families, reviving old imperial rites, and tackling the perennial problem of land reform. In organizing a program of land redistribution to the peasants, they helped pave the way for the return of centralized administration, military service, and tax collection. In this respect, Northern Wei provided a prototype for a renewed bid for empire. In 589, a general named Yang Jian succeeded in uniting most of the old Han territories and called the reunified dynasty the Sui.



**Map 2.6** China in 500 CE

Like the Qin and Han before them, the Sui pushed into Korea in their zeal to rebuild the empire, once again opening a conduit for a flow of Chinese influence that would soon spread in a thoroughgoing way to Japan. Like the Qin as well, the forcefulness with which they pursued empire building prompted unrest among the people. Moreover, their use of forced labor for monumental building projects, including huge palaces, roads, and perhaps most ambitious of all, the **Grand Canal**, created unrest as well.

Linking the Yangzi River with the Yellow River, the Grand Canal actually consists of several canals and accompanying natural water systems stretching for 1,550 miles, and is still in use today. Through the remainder of the imperial period, it facilitated the shipment of large quantities of tax rice and other food crops from the south directly to the capital at Chang'an. The canal would ultimately be extended even further to the Beihe in order to service the later capital at Beijing.

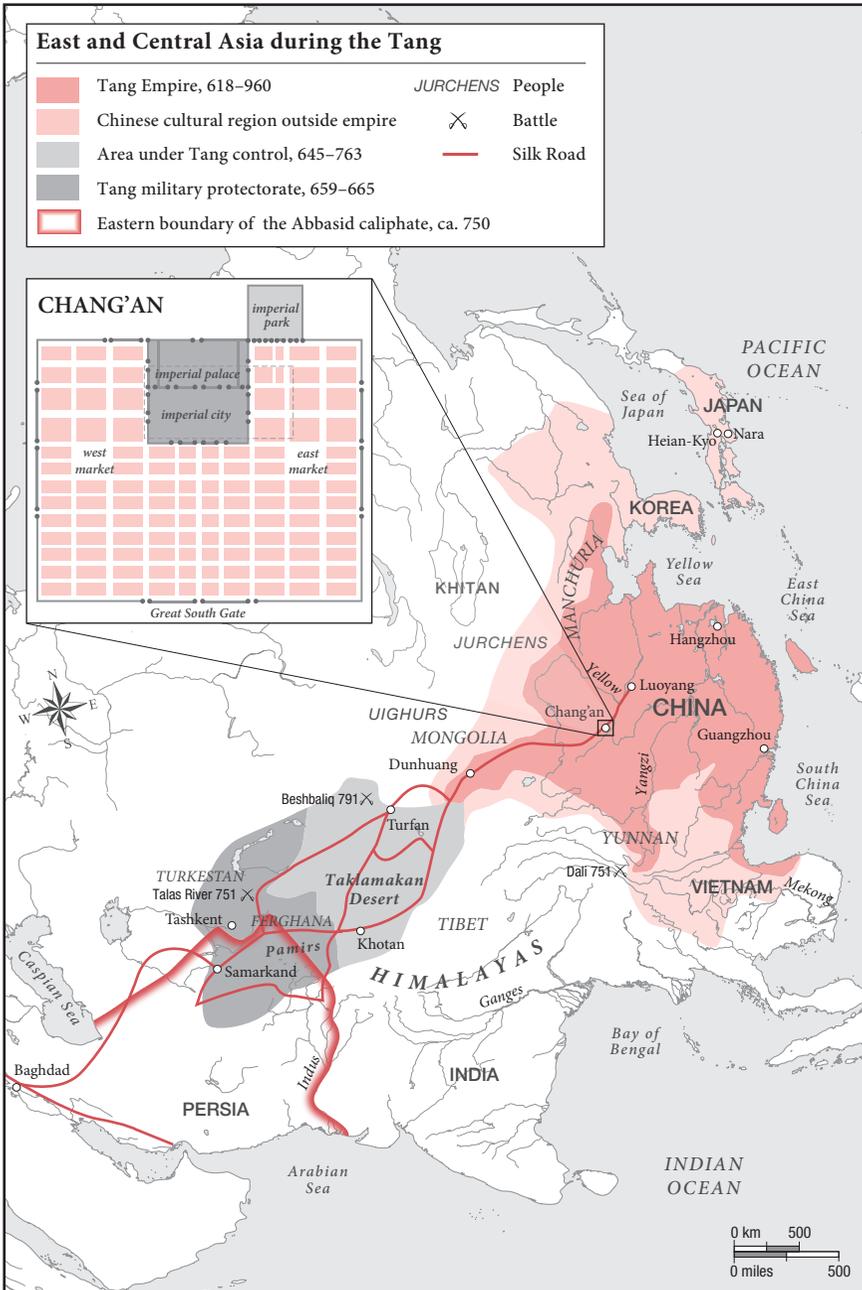
A rebellion following the death of the second Sui emperor, Yangdi, brought the precocious 16-year-old Li Shimin to power. Li encouraged his father, Li Yuan, the duke of Tang, to rebel and with him had the new Sui emperor killed. Supporting his father's bid for the throne, he cofounded the Tang Dynasty in 618. After a few years, he forced his father, who had taken the reign name of Gaozu, to abdicate, and Li assumed power in his own right in 627 as the emperor Taizong.

### China's Cosmopolitan Age: The Tang Dynasty, 618 to 907

The position of Tang China, and especially its capital at Chang'an, made it a pivot in the fortunes of not only trade but also in the circulation of ideas and beliefs around Eurasia. The lucrative Silk Road trade now grew richer and more diverse with the traffic of Buddhist travelers, pilgrims, and missionaries, as the Tang pushed deep into Central Asia. Indeed, the shape of their empire ultimately resembled a dumbbell, with a large Central Asian bulge at one end, a narrow strip of territory around the Silk Road, and the traditional territories of earlier Chinese states as the other bulge. By the end of the seventh century, they had expelled many of the major nomadic groups from the empire's western borderlands, pushing them west to Anatolia, Eastern Europe, and the Mediterranean. They invaded Korea yet again, and opened diplomatic relations with Yamato Japan that, through its 645 Taika (Great Reform), remade itself along the lines of the Tang (see Chapter 3).

Chang'an's position as a center of the Buddhist cultural sphere and the eastern terminus of the Silk Road, and Tang China's enhanced maritime trade with India, Japan, Southeast Asia, and even Africa, now led to China's first direct encounters with the expanding societies to the west. During the seventh and eighth centuries, Arab conquests in Southwest Asia and expeditionary forces driving into Central Asia brought China into direct contact with the world of Islam. Even before this, in 674, members of the Sassanid Persian royal house fled advancing Arab armies and arrived in Chang'an. In their wake came merchants who established a taste among the Tang elites for Arab, Persian, and Central Asian musical forms, dance, silver and glass artwork, and a host of other items (see Map 2.7).

China's major cities now had quarters set aside for foreign traders, which by the end of the Tang era included Jews, Nestorian Christians, Zoroastrians,



**Map 2.7** East and Central Asia during the Tang

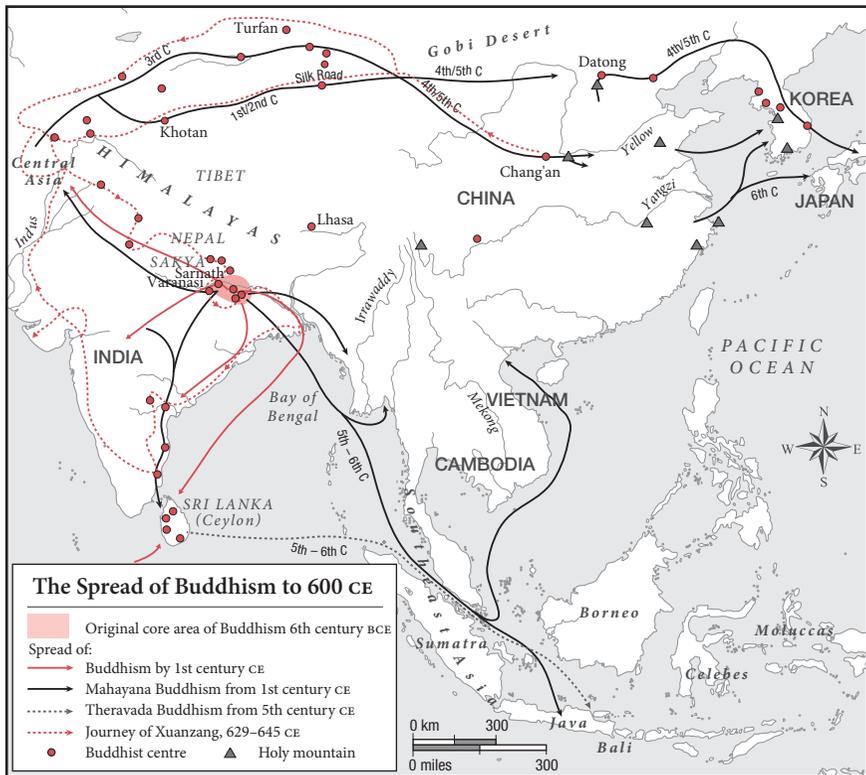
members of the major Indian traditions, and the beginnings of what would one day be a substantial Muslim minority. Arab and Indian intermediaries extended trade from China all the way to the East African coast and past the Mediterranean to the developing lands of Europe. With the expanding empire, flourishing

trade, and large bureaucracy, the capital of Chang'an grew into perhaps the world's largest city, comparable in size to Baghdad and Constantinople, with as many as 2 million people living in its metropolitan area.

### Buddhism in China

The growth of Buddhism in China is to some extent a surprising phenomenon. It is the first and, with the exception of Islam in some areas, the only foreign religion to strike deep roots in China. In addition to the occasional stigmatizing of its foreign origins, many of its practices—monasticism, egalitarianism, celibacy, the missionary impulse—have been regarded as going against the grain of traditional family life and Confucian virtue. Why then has it retained its attraction in not just China but East Asia as a whole over two millennia (see Map 2.8)?

Part of the answer may perhaps be found in its character as a universal missionary religion. The Buddha (“Enlightened One”) preached the **Four Noble Truths**: that all life is suffering; that suffering comes from craving; that one can eliminate suffering by eliminating this craving; and that one can eliminate this craving by following the Noble Eightfold Path. The Path consists of a middle course between the ordinary pursuits of civilized life and extreme asceticism,



**Map 2.8** The Spread of Buddhism to 600 CE

and calls for nonviolence toward sentient beings, kindness, right conduct, and “mindfulness,” in order to reach a state of calm nonattachment to the things of this world. One may then transcend the state of constant death and rebirth as one apprehends universal truth and the karmic soul “blows out” like a candle—the origin of the term *nirvana*.

Though born of the Indian religious traditions that developed into Hinduism, followers of the new belief insisted from the beginning that it was applicable to all. Thus, Buddhism was actively propagated by its adherents. By the mid-first century CE, when it is initially mentioned in Chinese accounts, Buddhism had already split into the major divisions of Theravada (Hinayana), which had established itself in southern India and Sri Lanka, and was moving into Southeast Asia; and Mahayana, which would be established in China, Tibet, Mongolia, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan.

## PATTERNS UP-CLOSE

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### Creating an East Asian Buddhist Culture

The incompatibility of the Chinese written language with the Sanskrit and Pali Buddhist scriptures meant that missionaries had to rely heavily on transliterations, borrow extensively from Daoist terminology, and invent a new and diverse vocabulary of Chinese terms. Over the next several centuries, this eclecticism resulted in a proliferation of sects and a growing need on the part of Chinese, and later, Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese, converts to travel to India for study and guidance.

The travel account of the Chinese monk and early pilgrim Fa Xian, who journeyed throughout Central Asia and India from 399 to 414 in search of Buddhist works, contributed greatly toward understanding the growing Buddhist world. It was the more famous pilgrim Xuanzang (596–664), however, who was destined to have the larger impact. Xuanzang journeyed through Central Asia and Afghanistan to India in 623 and remained for sixteen years. His travels took him nearly 10,000 miles, and he brought back an extensive collection of scriptures written in Pali on palm leaves, many of which are still housed in the Great Wild Goose Pagoda he had built just outside Xi’an. His travels were later immortalized in the popular sixteenth-century collection of fabulous tales called *A Journey to the West*. Xuanzang founded an imperially sponsored translation bureau at the Great Wild Goose Pagoda and the *Faxiang* “Consciousness Only” school he popularized was influential not only in China but in Korea, Japan, and Vietnam as well. It arrived separately from India in Tibet, and later found adherents among the Mongols. Some of Xuanzang’s translations are still used today.

*(continued)*

The four centuries between the collapse of the Han and the ascendancy of the Tang were marked by the founding of several of the most important schools of East Asian Buddhism. By the fifth century, a school of popular devotion to *Amida*, the **Buddha of the Pure Land**, was spreading rapidly in China. For Pure Land adherents, no immersion in the texts is necessary for enlightenment: merely invoking Amida's name is sufficient for salvation. Even today, it remains the most popular Buddhist sect in East Asia. Amida is often pictured with the bodhisattva *Guanyin*—Kannon in Japan—the Goddess of Mercy who, like the Virgin Mary in Catholicism, is frequently invoked during times of peril. Another influential Buddhist school, *Tiantai*, centered on contemplation of a scripture called the Lotus Sutra as a vehicle to enlightenment. These schools exercised considerable influence over both the Tang and the Japanese court at Heian during the eighth and ninth centuries, and are widely practiced in Korea and Vietnam as well.

Finally, one rather demanding Buddhist school that later achieved fame, if not widespread popularity, was *Chan*—more widely known by its Japanese name: Zen. Chan departs from both the devotional and scriptural



**Amida Buddha.** Originally incorporating aspects of both male and female, Guanyin (also spelled Kuan-yin) came to be depicted as female as Buddhism became firmly established in China. For Pure Land adherents, she was the bodhisattva invoked in times of extreme peril, and “the miracles of Guanyin” was a favorite theme of Chinese and Japanese artists.

paths of Pure Land and Tiantai in that enlightenment comes through a tightly supervised program of carefully regulated activities under the guidance of a master. The intense give and take between master and pupil, the discipline involved in performing humble tasks, the contemplation of paradoxical questions, and, in some cases, meditation are all meant to generate an intuitive flash of enlightenment. Although limited in its influence in China, the emphasis on discipline and obedience made Zen the preferred Buddhist school of Japan's warrior aristocracy after the twelfth century. Like the other schools mentioned here, it too was practiced in Vietnam and Korea. The prevalence of all these Buddhist sects, and the classical Chinese texts used to propagate them, thus helped to create a common high culture throughout East Asia and, in the case of popular cults like Pure Land, among ordinary people as well.

### The Period of Expansion: Emperor Taizong

Having killed his two brothers and forced his father to abdicate, Li Shimin acceded to the throne as Taizong in 627 and began a reign of more than two decades. He led expeditions into Central Asia, where he defeated both eastern and western branches of the Turks and forced them to recognize him as their *khan* or leader. Tibet had created a powerful kingdom under King Srong-btsan-sgam-po that stretched from modern Kashmir to Qinghai. Taizong led the first Chinese forays into the kingdom and sent his daughter Wencheng to marry the king in 641. During Taizong's reign, Tang China was arguably the world's most powerful and prosperous empire.

Taizong was also central to the development of China's long-standing law code, the *Tanglu*. The code's 502 articles, each with commentaries, subcommentaries, and model questions, tied together the large but less systematic corpus of edicts and customary law accumulated over the years and inherited from the Han and Sui, and became a model for similar codes throughout East Asia.

Although the later Song examination system is often cited as the model for that of the imperial system as a whole, the Tang routinized the process and laid out its basic curriculum and format. The tests was open to all males whose fathers were not artisans or merchants. The curriculum for the first test was based on the Five Confucian Classics, whereas that of the second exam was oriented more toward practical elements of administration as well as such aesthetic skills as essay and poetry writing.

### "Emperor" Wu

Following Taizong's death in 649, his son acceded the throne as Gaozong. Historians generally view him as consumed with court intrigues and not terribly effective. However, his wife, Wu Zetian (r. 684–705), was one of the most powerful and intriguing figures of East Asian history. She is the most notable exemplar of