

BOOK CLUB SYNOPSIS

*The Shortest History of China: From the Ancient Dynasties to
a Modern Superpower—A Retelling for Our Times*

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CHAPTER ONE

ORIGINS: AN EGG HATCHES AND A CIVILIZATION IS BORN

What is today China originated around 780,000 years ago when two tribes settled near the Yellow River. Most Han Chinese descend from these two tribes. By the Neolithic—or New Stone—Age, farming began, and people had more time for leisure activities. Then, around 3630 BCE, production of silk began. There is strong historical evidence of written script in China dating back 3,500 years, which would make it one of the oldest writing systems in the world.

The Yellow Emperor, a semi-mythical cult figure, is said to have fought his rivals and unified the tribes north of the Yellow River. “Han Chinese consider the Yellow Emperor and his successor, Yǎn Dì, the Fiery Emperor, their oldest ancestors.” The Xia, another “semi-mythical dynasty,” started around 2100 BCE. It wasn’t until the Bronze Age, which coincided with the Shang dynasty, that historical records became much clearer.

“The rulers of the Shang dynasty were warlike and highly superstitious, worshipping a number of gods and conducting human sacrifices to them.” Records show that they kept slaves and that rulers kept concubines, a trend that continued for much of Chinese history.

As early as this period, the Shang had a calendar and a system of timekeeping. Some of the earliest versions of Chinese characters appeared during this time, as part of oracle bone script, as well as one of the world’s oldest collections of poetry, known as the *Book of Odes*.

But writing didn't just provide opportunities for recordkeeping and easier governing of a large realm; communication and weaponry made the Shang a strong military power. Author Linda Jaivin notes that this established a pattern that would be repeated many times throughout Chinese history: the rulers grow corrupt and cruel, and they are met with rebellion by the people. It is precisely this kind of rebellion that led to the fall of the Shang at the hands of the Zhou around 1122 BCE.

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CHAPTER TWO

THE ZHOU: FROM IDEAL RULE TO WARRING STATES

The Zhou dynasty is divided into two eras. The first era, known as the Western Zhou, became “China’s first golden age” and lasted until around 770 BCE. The second era—the Eastern Zhou—was marked by violence and further divided into two periods; called the Spring and Autumn (771-476 BCE), and the Warring States (475-221 BCE) periods. During this time, formerly loyal vassal states engaged in violent conflict with each other and with the rulers of the Zhou.

While it was marked by strife, the Zhou produced a number of seminal works, including the famous military strategy book *The Art of War* by Sunzi, and major philosophical figures, including Confucius.

Confucius was born in 551 BCE. He promoted education, loyalty, filial piety and “moderation in all things.” Following his death in 479 BCE, his disciples compiled many of his texts into *The Analects*. Jaivin quotes scholar-translator Pierre Ryckmans, who wrote, “No book in the entire history of the world has exerted, over a longer period of time, a greater influence on a larger number of people than this slim little volume.”

Confucius wasn’t the only major philosopher to emerge during the Zhou. Mencius (or Mengzi), a follower of Confucius, outlined four cardinal virtues and associated each with an emotion. These are: benevolence and compassion, righteousness and scorn, propriety and respect, and wisdom and judgment. Mencius’ ideas also formed the basis of the Mandate of Heaven, or *tianming*. The Mandate of Heaven is the means by which an emperor had the authority to rule.

By the same token, however, regime change and rebellion were justified, according to Mencius, should the ruler act in a way not fitting his position.

Other major philosophers from the period include Mozi, who advocated “for an egalitarian, pacifist society animated by universal love,” and Laozi, who is attributed as the author of the mystical and foundational text of Daoism, the *Dao De Jing*. Among some of his views, Laozi believed that the perfect leadership structure is one in which the people don’t realize they’re being ruled. Zhuangzi is another well-known Daoist thinker who lived around the fourth century BCE.

Confucians and Daoists diverged considerably in their life philosophy: The former followed a strict form of morality and focused on “the correct course of action in any situation,” while the latter advocated for *wuwei*—or inaction—“flowing like water does in nature.” Nevertheless, both groups revered the divination text known as the *I Ching*, or *Book of Changes*.

Another key figure from the Warring States period, Hanfeizi wrote the first known commentary on the *Dao De Jing*. He founded a school of thought called Legalism, advocating for a system of rewards and punishments and dictating that a ruler defines what is right and wrong.

Confucianism, Daoism and Legalism—alongside many other philosophies—came to be collectively known as the “One Hundred Schools of Thought” and proceeded to compete and inform both politics and society in China throughout history.

In 246 BCE, a boy named Ying Zheng became the king of Qin, “one of the most aggressive states.” Over the course of 25 years, he brought down the Eastern Zhou and the other remaining states, leading to the rise of what would be called the Qin dynasty.

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CHAPTER THREE

THE QIN: UNIFICATION, TYRANNY, AND ALL UNDER HEAVEN

In 221 BCE, Ying Zheng declared himself Qin Shihuang—the First Emperor of Qin. “Never before had so much territory ... been unified under one ruler.” He ordered the construction of a number of Great Walls to secure the territory and divided the realm into regions that were administered by “a joint civil and military bureaucracy” that reported directly to him. This marked the first centralized Chinese state. Qin Shihuang also introduced a single currency, unified measurements for length and volume, and standardized writing.

Qin Shihuang embraced the strict laws and harsh punishments of Legalism. His chief advisor Li Si called for the burning of historical records. A few—including classics such as the *Book of Odes* and *The Analects*—survived. “The Qin would live on as a symbol of tyranny—the expression ‘burn the books and bury the scholars’ entered the language during the following dynasty, the Han, as a metaphor for the despotic repression of intellectual freedom.”

The emperor was hated by many, due to such things as labor conscription and high taxes. He died in 210 BCE, and some speculate that he was murdered. He is also known for having ordered the construction of a huge mausoleum guarded by nearly 8,000 terra-cotta warriors, which weren’t discovered until 1974.

Qin Shihuang’s son, the second emperor, was murdered by a eunuch. He was followed by another relative, whose time on the throne lasted just over a month before he surrendered to Liu Bang, a rebel leader. All told, the Qin lasted less than two decades.

Liu Bang faced another rival rebel leader, Ba Wang, but managed to vanquish him, as well. Liu Bang went on to found the Han dynasty, known as one of the greatest in Chinese history. As the Gaozu emperor, reigning from 202 to 195 BCE, Liu Bang maintained some of the Legalist policies of the Qin but also lifted many of the dynasty's harshest laws.

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CHAPTER FOUR

THE HAN: INTRIGUE, INNOVATION, AND A BRIEF INTERREGNUM

Gaozu's death sparked "one of the most dramatic and bloody succession crises in Chinese history." After Gaozu died, his young son Hui took the throne. But when his mother, Empress Lǔ, murdered his half-brother, Ruyi, Hui refused to govern. This had the paradoxical effect of leaving Empress Lǔ to lead in Hui's name.

Another of Gaozu's sons was named ruler following Empress Lǔ's death, and all of her clan was killed. "She has served as an exemplar ever since about the dangers of giving women too much political power."

The Han's fifth ruler, Wudi, ascended the throne in 141 BCE. He embraced Confucianism in his policies, which would come to be known as Confucian statecraft or "state Confucianism." Wudi called for the execution of a census, which allowed him to build an efficient system of taxation and labor or military conscription. At the same time, he allowed for more private enterprise, and the landed gentry grew. The dynasty continued building Great Walls, and its military devised a sophisticated system of advanced tools, such as record keeping, passports, policing and monitoring.

The military wasn't the only way the dynasty handled struggles at its borders. The Han also devised the idea of "pacification marriages," in which princess brides were sent as peace offerings to leaders of other tribes. Feng Liao, a maidservant of one princess bride, was such an adept diplomat in her own right that she was called upon to mediate disputes. She was later appointed as an official envoy to the Han court—the first woman to hold a position of the sort.

In addition to the pacification marriages, the Han kept foreign princes hostage, but provided them a luxurious lifestyle with the hopes that when they were released, they would become cultural ambassadors for the dynasty.

“Trade and diplomacy grew in tandem.” The Han sent gifts of silk, lacquerware, jade and more to neighboring states and tribes, and received items they needed in return. This “tribute system” led to what would later be called the Silk and Tea Roads. A civil service was also established, but the system faced significant corruption and nepotism.

In 7 BCE, the Emperor Ai took the throne. “Although intelligent, he was easily distracted, allowing the nepotism and corruption to flourish.” Ai named Dong Xian, a minor official with whom he was enamored, as his successor. After just a few years, Ai died, but the court refused to honor his appointed successor. An official named Wang Mang led a rebellion and declared himself the emperor of the Xin (“new”) dynasty.

Wang Mang was a Confucian who nationalized farmland and outlawed slavery. But after just more than a decade, corruption took hold, and rebellions broke out. The Han took back power in 23 CE and moved the capital east, from Chang’an to Luoyang. With this move, the first part of the dynasty was retrospectively renamed the Western Han, while the second became known as the Eastern Han. Guangwu, the first emperor of the Eastern Han, reinstated order and allowed the dynasty to flourish.

Throughout the duration of the Han, there were a number of innovations, including crop rotation and the production of steel. Further inventions during the Han included paper, the seismograph, odometer and topographic map. They even developed a means to extract and transport natural gas. There were also important works produced in a number of disciplines, including music, pharmacology, acupuncture, astronomy and math, as well as advances in jade carving.

Homes were built around central courtyards during this time, and wealthy women were expected to stay home. Despite this, the Han also saw China's first female historian, Ban Zhao.

The beginning of the end of the Han was marked by conflict between the scholars and eunuchs of court, as well as growing tensions between military leadership and the eunuchs. At the same time, wealthy landowners began to exploit peasants. Assassinations, rebellions and massacres broke out. Amid this anarchy, "the Han lost control over much of its empire."

Emperor Xian was just a child when he took the throne in 189 and quickly became mixed up in the conflict. Cao Cao, a "military man, politician, and poet," came in with his troops and saved the day. "With the emperor now his grateful puppet, Cao Cao set out to reunite the fractured Han empire." After conquering the Han's northern rivals, Cao Cao "led a huge army south, and into the most legendary battle in Chinese history—Red Cliff."

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CHAPTER FIVE

THE GREAT DISUNITY: THREE KINGDOMS, TWO WOMEN WARRIORS, SEVEN SAGES, AND A FIVE-MINERAL POWDER

Cao Cao had set out to conquer the Han's two remaining major rival states, Wu and Shu, but failed. A period of chaos and disunity followed the Battle of Red Cliff. After Cao Cao died from illness in 220, one of his sons—Cao Pi—forced Xian to abdicate, which marked “the formal end of the Han dynasty.” Cao Pi declared himself emperor of the state of Wei, yielding an era of “three kingdoms.” The period lasted about 70 years.

In 280, the Jin dynasty conquered the three kingdoms and reunified the country. Yet the dynasty wasn't without its own share of problems, including famine, droughts and warfare. “A number of the non-Han nomadic tribes that had formed settled communities within its borders ... took advantage of the anarchy” and established their own states during this period.

The wars in the early fourth century fueled southern migration, “shifting the heart of Han civilization to the fertile lands below the Yangtze for the first time.” In fact, the Jin court moved to Nanjing, “where the dynasty reestablished itself as the Eastern Jin.”

Although Buddhism arrived in China during the Han, the religion grew during the Jin. Yet neither religion nor a boom in poetry helped the dynasty survive. The Jin collapsed in 420, followed by an “even more chaotic and violent period” that lasted for more than a century. By 589, a new dynasty called the Sui had reunited the north and south.

The Sui built the Grand Canal and a road that would one day link Beijing and Hangzhou. It also “put all land under dynastic control and distributed it to the people on the basis of their ability to cultivate it.” While agricultural production and the economy improved, the Sui dynasty began to decline during the reign of the second emperor. “A catastrophic flood in the late Sui ... appeared to augur the dynasty’s loss of the Mandate of Heaven.”

Rebellions took hold again, including one led by Li Yuan. Li Yuan conquered the Sui in 617 and then founded the Tang dynasty, “ushering in what would become one of the most celebrated and open-minded eras in Chinese history.”

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CHAPTER SIX

THE TANG: FROM GOLDEN AGE TO EVERLASTING SORROW

During the Tang, the dynasty extended its borders into parts of central Asia and the Korean peninsula. The region of Tibet had long been a military threat, and during this time, the Tang employed “princess diplomacy” to improve relations. The dynasty also introduced Buddhism to Tibet, where it would later evolve and become Tibetan Buddhism.

A number of political changes were also made. The power of the landed gentry was diminished, and the Tang dispatched administrators to oversee provinces where they had no personal ties. A new penal code was introduced, as well. “Social standing, determined by the Confucian moral schema that privileged scholar-officials above others, influenced the application of the law.”

The first Tang emperor was succeeded by his son, Li Shimin, known as the Taizong emperor. Under Taizong, the dynasty was stable and prosperous. This was partly due to the advisors Taizong surrounded himself with, including chief minister Wei Zheng, who is renowned as China’s most famous *zhengyou*, “a loyal friend who is capable of speaking hard truths.”

Taizong was followed by his son, Gaozong. The latter emperor brought his father’s concubine, Lady Wu, back to the palace and made her empress, even giving many tasks of governing to her. After Gaozong died, their son Zhongzong took his place on the throne in 684, but Empress Wu quickly removed him and replaced him with his younger brother Ruizong, naming herself regent.

In 690, Empress Wu “dispensed with the Tang altogether” and declared herself Empress Wu Zetian, founding the Zhou dynasty and “becoming the only woman in China ever to rule in her own name.” Under her rule, the civil service examination process became more meritocratic. She also invested in public works and even invented new Chinese characters. Yet, as it had in many of the dynasties before hers, corruption took hold, and after a coup in 705, she gave the throne back to Zhongzong, who restored the Tang dynasty.

Zhongzong died five years later, and, after “more palace intrigue,” Ruizong returned to the throne. In 712, Ruizong’s son Xuanzong became emperor and proceeded to rule for 40 years, a time that became one of China’s golden ages.

From a social and cultural perspective, the Tang at its height was cosmopolitan and inclusive. Visitors from neighboring countries were common in the Tang capital of Chang’an, one of the wealthiest and most vibrant places in the world. “The Tang were eclectic in matters of belief.” The civil service exams tested on both Confucian texts and the *Dao De Jing*. Poetry and calligraphy flourished, as did the arts more broadly. One of the most famous poets from this period was Li Bai.

Emperor Xuanzong, later in life, fell in love with his son’s wife, Yang Guifei. She gained significant power as Xuanzong’s concubine. During this time, a military general named An Lushan became a presence in the court and was particularly liked by Yang Guifei. Although she was warned that An Lushan was plotting a rebellion, neither Yang Guifei nor Xuanzong heeded the warnings.

In late 755, however, An Lushan led an army of 200,000 men and captured the secondary capital of Luoyang. He named himself the emperor of a new dynasty—the Yan—in 756, ending an extended period of peace. Xuanzong, in turn, abdicated, and his son Suzong took over, raising an army to fight the rebels. Yet An Lushan was ultimately taken down by one of his own sons. “The Tang dynasty never fully recovered.”

Not long after, the Tibetans took power over a region that they called the Western Xia kingdom, which cut off the Tang's access to the Silk Roads. Maintaining power after these and other conflicts became difficult, and another rebel army attacked Chang'an in 881. After more years of chaos, the Tang collapsed in 907, and what became known as the Five Dynasties period began. Then, in 960, the Song dynasty was born, with Zhao Kuangyin as its leader.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

THE SONG: PROTO-SOCIALISTS, NEO-CONFUCIANS, AND URBAN LIVING

In 979, the Song had consolidated the rival states under its power, and the throne had passed from Zhao Kuangyin, the Song Taizu emperor, to his younger brother the Song Taizong emperor. The early years of the Song were relatively peaceful, and while the territory the dynasty held was smaller than that of the Tang, its population was greater.

During the time of the fourth Song emperor, a man named Wang Anshi was appointed to the imperial board of finance. He criticized the wealth inequality between landowners and those who worked the land, denounced the existence of tax loopholes for the wealthy while the poor faced greater tax burdens, and called for better pay for low-level officials. Wang Anshi also proposed something called the *baojia* system, which bound multiple households into units as a means of defense, law enforcement and tax collection. “This concept of mutual defense, surveillance, and collective responsibility continues to inform ideas about policing and social organization to this day.”

With the backing of the sixth Song emperor Shenzong, Wang Anshi drafted laws that incorporated these ideas. The court of his successor Zhezong, however, forced Wang Anshi into retirement. Despite this, many of Wang Anshi’s disciples continued the reforms he had started, as did Zhezong’s successor initially. After some time, the conservatives of court took back control of the system and halted the reforms. A number of legacies of Wang Anshi remain, though, according to Jaivin, including the maintenance of publicly funded institutions such as orphanages, hospitals and schools.

Yet neo-Confucians later succeeded in transforming their philosophy into state ideology. They emphasized the importance of rites and rituals “for everyone from the emperor down.” The most influential neo-Confucian of this era was Zhu Xi, who believed that gentlemen were obligated to rebel if a ruler acted corruptly or ignobly. He proceeded to fall out of favor around 1195, but decades later, his ideas became official doctrine. The canonical list of the Four Books and Five Classics he compiled became the foundation for the country’s civil service exams.

Events within the court distracted the Song emperors and prevented them from seeing that the Jin kingdom of the Jurchens in the north was growing stronger. Eventually, in 1122, the Jin and the Song allied against the Liao dynasty, and they agreed to split the Liao territory between them. But not long after, tensions rose between the two, and the Jin took the Song capital of Kaifeng.

The Song heir apparent proceeded to take the throne in the southern city now known as Hangzhou, creating what came to be called the Southern Song—and the former period was renamed the Northern Song. In 1135, a warrior named Yue Fei helped restore order in the dynasty and sought to help the Song retake some of the territory taken by the Jin. Negotiations between the Song and the Jin collapsed, and Yue Fei was accused of plotting a rebellion before he could march north. The Jin later went on to force the Song “to sign a humiliating treaty that gave the Jin ruler a higher status than their own emperor.”

With access to the Silk Roads cut off by the loss of the north, the Song turned to maritime power and prospered. The Song also saw a period of significant technological achievement, increased literacy and a rise in vernacular literature, along with advances in math, medicine and pharmacology. Women, however, were pushed indoors by neo-Confucian mores, and the Song marked the beginning of the tradition of foot binding. This provided a contrast to the relative liberation of women during the Tang. There were also advances in art during this time, including the rise of the “mountain and water” paintings that included poems calligraphed onto the paintings themselves.

The Jin had successfully confined the Song to the south. In the process, they controlled access to the coal and iron-ore deposits in the north. But instead of using these resources themselves, they sold the iron to the Mongols. Within 150 years and with the help of their iron weapons, the Mongols would go on to conquer both the Jin and the Song.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

THE MONGOL YUAN: FROM “GLORIOUS SLAUGHTER” TO THE SPLENDID CITY

Genghis Khan led his troops in a mass slaughter of the people of the Jin at the beginning of the 13th century. In 1271, his grandson Kublai Khan formally established the Yuan dynasty. “No other non-Han dynasty ... had ever ruled over so much territory.” Kublai Khan built the dynasty’s capital in Khanbalik, which is now Beijing, as well as a palace complex known as the Forbidden City.

International commerce and exchange flourished during the Yuan. Venetian Marco Polo visited the region during this period, and stayed and served on Kublai Khan’s court. Kublai Khan welcomed people to his realm regardless of their race or religion.

However, the Mongols were less welcoming in other ways. Many scholar-officials who had served the Song and the Jin were frozen out of the civil service, and many key appointments were reserved for Mongols. In the process, the Yuan essentially rid itself of the merit and exam-based civil service system that had been refined over the centuries since it was established by the Han. The legal system, too, was unequal: Han Chinese received harsher punishments for crimes than Mongols did.

Paper currency, the *chao*, was introduced during the Yuan, hundreds of years before paper currency appeared in Europe. Much of the south of the empire thrived during this time, with cities such as Hangzhou far surpassing their European counterparts in sophistication and advancements. Many Chinese also began to travel abroad during the Yuan.

Following Kublai Khan's death in 1294, "the old pattern of corruption, infighting, and rebellion took hold." But the rebellion that would mark the fall of the Yuan dynasty didn't come until 1368, led by a group called the Red Turbans. After they attacked Khanbalik, the last Yuan emperor fled, and their leader Zhu Yuanzhang razed the city, announcing the founding of the Ming dynasty.

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CHAPTER NINE

THE MING: SPLENDOR AND DECAY

Zhu Yuanzhang called himself the Hongwu emperor of the Ming. A paranoid man, he didn't trust scholar-officials and even went on to abolish the position of prime minister. In so doing, he put both the civil and military power in his own hands. "Although the Ming would last almost three hundred years, Hongwu's decision to place the emperor at the center of decision-making ultimately condemned the dynasty to incompetent government and endemic corruption."

The realm Hongwu ruled was as large as continental Europe. After moving the capital to southern Nanjing, he divided the country into 15 provinces. Additionally, he pulled together labor forces for infrastructure projects, such as restoring roads and canals, and planting trees.

Hongwu's distrust extended beyond scholar-officials, to eunuchs; therefore, banned them all from being educated to prevent them from interfering in state affairs. What he didn't know was that the eunuchs would one day play a key role in the fall of his dynasty.

When Hongwu died in 1398, his son Zhu Di expected to be named successor. Instead, the throne was given to his nephew, Jianwen. In 1402, Zhu Di burned Jianwen's palace to the ground, killing many and claiming the emperor title for himself. Calling himself Yongle, he moved the capital to Khanbalik, renaming it Beijing, meaning "Northern Capital."

During his reign, Yongle called for the repair of the Great Walls to ward off the Mongols and other tribes and commissioned the creation of the Yongle Encyclopedia, which was intended to be a

“compendium of all knowledge.” But the effort was really an “act of self-legitimization and a means of exerting control.”

Yongle also commissioned several expeditions by the eunuch admiral Zheng He, traveling as far as Africa and the Persian Gulf, carrying out diplomacy and bringing back exotic goods. Zheng He’s last voyage was in 1433, commissioned by Yongle’s grandson, the Xuande emperor. Piracy would soon rear its head again, limiting further maritime exploration.

The Ming, like the Song, saw significant advancements in a number of areas, including weaving and printing, as well as the invention of movable type, a tuning system for musical instruments and a compilation of traditional Chinese medicine. There was also a thriving middle class, which led to an increased demand for luxury goods. Increased literacy led to a greater demand for fiction, as well. Several of China’s most famous novels were written during this time, including *Journey to the West*—which is also known as *Monkey—Outlaws of the Marsh* and *Jin Ping Mei*.

The 10th Ming emperor, Hongzhi, took the throne in 1487. He is renowned as the only monogamous emperor in Chinese history. An exceptional ruler, he selected talented individuals for his court, “clamped down on corruption, and imposed order on the government’s finances.”

His profligate son Zhengde, however, proved to be a less adept leader and faced numerous uprisings, as well as challenging relations with the Portuguese. This led to the demise of friendly relations between the Chinese and Europeans. Zhengde was followed by “his equally reprobate cousin” Jiajing, who neglected his duties and later died. Jiajing’s son Longqing attempted to turn things around but died after only six years in power.

Finally, in 1572, Longqing’s son Wanli became emperor at the age of 10. Unlike his predecessors, he was well advised. He reformed the government and invested in public works, and the country began to prosper. “Chinese historians call the first decade of his

reign (which lasted forty-eight years in total, the longest of any Ming ruler) the ‘Wanli renaissance.’”

During Wanli’s reign, Jesuits sought to convert him. Jesuit Matteo Ricci was granted an audience with Wanli’s court in 1602 and was ultimately invited to stay. He proceeded to help create the first system that transcribed Chinese into the Roman alphabet.

By this time, “the eunuchs had a stranglehold on government,” and rebellions were becoming common. A shepherd and manual laborer named Li Zicheng led one such rebel force in the 1630s. Li Zicheng sacked the capital in 1644, proclaimed himself the emperor of a new dynasty, “and anarchy reigned.”

During the Ming dynasty, “a formidable enemy had been gathering strength” beyond the Great Walls. A chieftain named Nurhaci united the Jurchen tribes and founded the Latter Jin dynasty. His son and successor Hong Taiji renamed the Jurchens the Manchus, and he changed the dynasty’s name to the Qing in 1636. The Manchu army fought Li Zicheng’s forces, declared Beijing the capital of the Qing, and then installed Hong Taiji’s son on the throne in the Forbidden City as the Shunzhi emperor in 1644.

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CHAPTER TEN

THE MANCHU QING: THE ROCKY ROAD TO MODERNITY

Under the Manchu Qing, all men were required to adopt the “queue” hairstyle, and all subjects were commanded to adopt the Manchu style of dress. Like the Mongols, the Manchus didn’t trust the Han. Segregation and unequal treatment were common.

Shunzhi died in 1662, and the throne passed to his son Kangxi. Kangxi was a Confucian, which helped him gain the trust of the Han, but he was also respected by his fellow Manchus. In 1720, his troops invaded Lhasa, setting the stage for China’s control of Tibet. He died in 1722 after reigning for 61 years—longer than any other emperor.

His son Yongzheng succeeded him. He reformed the tax system and cracked down on corruption. Like his father, he retained the service of some Jesuits, but he ended up banning Christianity in 1724. Because Yongzheng’s first language was Manchu, he struggled to understand the variety of Chinese dialects and accents of his ministers. He called for a single pronunciation system, which would later become Mandarin Chinese.

Yongzheng’s son Qianlong ruled during what became celebrated as another golden age. He expanded the realm by conquering the Mongolian homelands, as well as a large central Asian region he called Xinjiang. “The area remained prone to rebellions, each followed by violent suppression.” The Qing later sent Han and Manchu settlers to the area to consolidate control.

The Qing “generally brought peace and prosperity” to the areas populated by the Han. The Qing abolished a Ming law that “bound

men to particular occupations from birth,” leading to greater economic and social mobility. Other advances—such as terraced rice fields and the planting of new crops—increased food security in the country. Prosperity led to population growth, and by 1776, the Chinese population reached more than 300 million.

This prosperous period would soon be clouded by opium, a problem that Qianlong’s successor, Jiaqing, would be tasked with handling. “Opium addiction began to damage the fabric of Chinese society.” In the court of both Jiaqing and his successor Daoguang, debates about the opium problem raged: “whether to legalize opium—encouraging domestic production and limited trade-related corruption—or ban it.”

Finally, in 1839, Daoguang decided to move forward with the ban. But, the decision was not without its detractors, and it led to the First Opium War between the Chinese and the British. The loss of this war forced the Qing to sign the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842, which, among other things, gave Hong Kong to the British in perpetuity. Other countries “piled on with their own demands,” beginning a series of what are called the Unequal Treaties. “They heralded the beginning of the end, not just of the Qing, but of the dynastic system by which China had been ruled for thousands of years.”

The Qing faced an uprising by an anti-Manchu group led by Hong Xiuquan, known as the Taiping Rebellion, which became one of the deadliest conflicts in history. During the ongoing Taiping Rebellion, the Qing faced additional conflict with the British and French in 1856 with the Second Opium War, also known as the Arrow War.

Xianfeng was emperor during this time—the third after Qianlong. He died in 1861, and Tongzhi became his successor. But Tongzhi was only five, so his mother, Empress Dowager Cixi, formed a joint regency with his uncle Prince Gong. When Tongzhi died in 1875, Cixi installed his three-year-old cousin, Guangxu, on the throne, allowing her to continue reigning “from behind the beaded curtain.”

China had significantly less territory under its influence during this time, as Japan and France took control of neighboring areas and as the Portuguese gained the perpetual right to occupy Macao. Bubonic plague also broke out at the end of the century, feeding anti-Chinese sentiment around the world.

A group of scholars during this period advocated for reforms, including transforming the Qing into a constitutional monarchy, and they called for advancements for women, such as banning foot binding and arranged marriages. While they convinced Guangxu, Cixi was not in support and turned on her nephew. “Thus, one of the most powerful women China ever produced crushed a movement that would have given Chinese women greater rights than they had ever known.”

The Qing dynasty fell into crisis, facing corruption, failing infrastructure and increasing pressure from foreign powers. In 1898, the Society of the Righteous and Harmonious Fists—also known as the Boxers—was formed. Composed largely of poor peasants, the group’s slogan was “Revive the Qing, Destroy the Foreign.” They attacked Christians and people who wore or used foreign goods, in what became known as the Boxer Rebellion.

By August 1900, the Eight-Nation Allied Army put down the uprising and pillaged the capital. Cixi and the emperor fled. These events led to the signing of the Boxer Protocol in 1901, the newest Unequal Treaty, which “dealt the dynasty another vicious blow.”

The Cantonese anti-Qing activist Sun Yat-sen, in exile during this period, was also agitating for democracy. He founded the Revolutionary Alliance against the Qing in 1905. There were also women’s rights activists during this period, such as Qiu Jin, who unbound her feet, left her arranged marriage and wore men’s clothing. Queue-cutting also became more prevalent as an act of defiance against the Qing.

Xuantong, also known as Aisin Gioro Puyi, became the last of the Qing emperors in 1908. Following military uprisings in 1911, he abdicated in 1912. “The Republic of China was born, and two millennia of dynastic rule came to an end.”

11

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE REPUBLIC: HIGH HOPES AND VICIOUS BETRAYALS

The transition to a modern nation-state was not smooth. Toward the end of the Qing, the dynasty had appointed a national assembly with the intention of transitioning to a constitutional monarchy by 1917. But after the 1911 uprisings, “the court ordered the assembly to draft a constitution and elect a premier.” Yuan Shikai was chosen as the premier, and he ultimately persuaded the emperor to abdicate.

In 1912, Sun Yat-sen was inaugurated as the provisional president of the Republic of China. His Revolutionary Alliance became the Nationalist Party—or Kuomintang (KMT)—and he moved the capital to Nanjing. But, the arrangement didn’t last; Yuan Shikai caused trouble, leading Sun to resign. Yuan Shikai then became provisional president, and the government moved back to Beijing.

Although activists such as Tang Qunying agitated for women’s right to vote during this period, they would not get it until 1947. Only men with an education and who owned property would be permitted to vote.

It was also during this time that debates about Chinese language and pronunciation reached a fever pitch. At the 1913 Conference on the Unification of Pronunciation, advocates for a modified version of the Beijing dialect won out.

The first elections took place that same year. The KMT won, but soon after, the party’s leader Song Jiaoren was assassinated. “Yuan Shikai declared the KMT a seditious organization and banned its

members from parliament.” Once again, Sun Yat-sen went into exile in 1914—this time to Japan—“to escape the mounting chaos, reorganize the KMT, and lead the resistance.”

Yuan Shikai proceeded to dissolve the parliament and suspend the constitution, giving himself near-absolute power. In 1916, he named himself the first ruler of the China Empire. But this era didn’t last long—protesters took to the streets, and military leaders began declaring their independence across the country, leading to a period known as the Warlord Era. Soon after, Yuan Shikai died.

The dynastic period then had a brief comeback: Qing loyalist General Zhang Xun staged a coup and restored Puyi to the throne. Within days, however, Puyi abdicated again, and another president was installed. But, chaos and division grew, and warlords continued to take control of areas across the country.

The New Culture Movement arose during this period, advocating democracy, rule of law and civil rights. Zhou Shuren, writing under the pen name Lu Xun, wrote critiques of Chinese culture and society, including in his popular story “Diary of a Madman.” His works would go on to have a major influence on Chinese society, as well as on future chairman of the CPC Mao Zedong.

Many Chinese laborers aided the Allied war effort during World War I, and “the Chinese people expected that the Allies would remunerate them by returning the former German concessions to China.” But the Treaty of Versailles gave the territory in China to Japan. This angered many Chinese, who felt the government didn’t protect them and their interests. On May 4, 1919, university students in Beijing marched toward Tiananmen Gate, inspiring similar protests in other cities across China. The May Fourth Movement, as it came to be known, embraced the New Culture Movement.

There were a number of other changes taking place in society during this time. China saw the growth of an urban working class, the common style of dress changed, and the country moved to a Gregorian calendar.

In July 1921, 13 men, including Mao Zedong, convened the founding congress of the Communist Party of China. The Soviet Comintern convinced the KMT and CPC to unite against the warlords and imperialism, and they persuaded Sun Yat-sen to allow CPC members to join the KMT.

The Soviet Union helped the KMT start a military academy, which included among its leaders Zhou Enlai and Chiang Kai-shek. Sun Yat-sen died in 1925, and the following year, Chiang Kai-shek led a joint expedition of CPC and KMT troops against the warlords—but the army quickly split. In 1927, he turned on his CPC allies and executed anyone suspected of having Communist sympathies. He went on to become generalissimo of the Nationalist Army, the chair of the KMT's Central Executive Committee and the head of the government in Nanjing.

12

CHAPTER TWELVE

JAPANESE INVASION AND CIVIL WAR: THE REPUBLIC DISINTEGRATES

Chiang Kai-shek focused his efforts on attacking Communists, ignoring the looming threat of the Japanese. In 1932, the Japanese bombed Shanghai, in the first “terror bombing.” Eventually, Chiang’s government signed a ceasefire with the Japanese, “withdrawing its troops from Shanghai and nearby cities, which it placed under Japanese ‘protection.’”

The CPC was concurrently starting the Land Reform process. They created “revolutionary base areas” in the countryside and mobilized peasants and rural laborers against the landowners, teaching them to “abuse the ‘enemies of the people.’” Both the CPC and KMT relied on violent tactics, and the country became increasingly polarized.

Many intellectuals and artists sided with the Communist cause, and the KMT came to be seen as increasingly elitist, corrupt and inept. In an effort to garner more support, the KMT launched the New Life Movement in 1934. It combined the tenets of Christianity, Confucianism and authoritarianism, but it was out of touch with the people and largely failed.

During that same year, the Communists began what came to be known as the Long March. While it started as a retreat under fire, the arduous trek to Yan’an became legendary and gave the CPC and Mao Zedong as its leader a “heroic origin story.” Mao and his secretary Chen Boda wrote essays and speeches in Yan’an that would eventually “define the unique ideology of Chinese communism: Mao Zedong Thought.”

Chiang Kai-shek remained focused on the Communist threat, rather than that coming from the Japanese, and he refused the Communists' offer to rebuild a united front against Japan. After being taken captive in what became known as the Xi'an Incident, Chiang agreed to work with the Communists. Japan invaded China in 1937, taking several major cities, and killing and raping thousands of civilians in the Rape of Nanjing, also known as the Nanjing Massacre.

With their newly gained power, the Japanese established the puppet Reorganized National Government in Nanjing in 1940, with Japanese sympathizer Wang Jingwei as president. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor occurred the following year, and Chiang's government joined the Allied war effort against the Axis powers. After the war ended with Japan's surrender in 1945, Taiwan returned to Chinese sovereignty.

Not long after the end of World War II, the country fell into civil war, with the People's Liberation Army squaring against the Nationalist Army. Chiang refused to surrender, but on October 1, 1949, Mao declared victory, announcing the formation of the People's Republic of China. Two months later, Chiang fled to Taiwan with the long-term goal of taking back power—but he never succeeded.

13

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE MAO YEARS: CONTINUOUS REVOLUTION

“Even history changed in 1949, which became known officially as the year of Liberation. ... Most people began simply to speak of history as having two eras: Pre-Liberation and Post-Liberation.” The CPC quickly implemented a number of policies, including the Agrarian Reform Law of 1950, which extended the land reform policy nationally and put all arable land under state ownership. The party also called on citizens to inform on one another to discourage corruption.

“Then there was the question of pacifying the borders.” Both the Uyghur majority region Xinjiang and Tibet became “autonomous regions” under CPC control during this time.

When the Americans crossed the 38th parallel in Korea, the Chinese got involved. This fueled growing fears of Communism in the U.S., and Mao went on to embrace isolationism, “calling it a virtue (‘self-reliance’).”

A new system of government then emerged, with two parallel bureaucracies—one belonging to the CPC and one belonging to the state—that still exists today at all levels of government. This new party-state system built public schools and medical clinics, simplified the writing system and used artists to propagate the CPC message.

“The CPC assigned all citizens a ‘class status’ based on occupation, political history, and family background. ... Class status determined all, from access to higher education to marriage prospects. It was inscribed in a person’s *dàng’àn*, the secret dossier that followed them

throughout life, containing reports by schoolteachers, employers, and even informers.”

During this period, banking was nationalized, and a new national currency, the RMB, was introduced. The CPC also introduced its first Soviet-style Five-Year Plan in 1953 and instituted equal pay for women, leading more to go to work. “The CPC banned foot-binding, concubinage, and arranged marriages, and promised women economic, social, educational, and political equality.” In practice, however, women still remain underrepresented in the CPC, and none have ever sat on the Politburo Standing Committee.

The year 1958 saw the launch of what came to be known as the Great Leap Forward. All property was nationalized, and the CPC ran a campaign to dramatically increase agriculture and industrial production. Instead, the agricultural production collapsed, and famine broke out across the country. “Over a three-year period from the start of the Great Leap, tens of millions perished.” The CPC finally relented and reduced the size of agricultural communes, allowing peasants to grow their own food and sell the surplus.

Long wary of detractors, Mao launched the Socialist Education Movement in 1963, intended to “address the problem of ‘reactionary’ elements within the CPC and the bureaucracy.” It led to the persecution of millions and death of thousands, and it served as a prelude to the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

Three years later, Mao called on the people to attack his critics, who were allegedly undermining the revolution. Many students took up the charge, calling themselves the Red Guards and vowing to protect Mao. These students persecuted or killed anyone who had a connection to Taiwan or the KMT, along with “alleged counterrevolutionaries, capitalist roaders, and Soviet-sympathizing ‘revisionists.’” Mao embraced them, calling on the Red Guards to destroy the Four Olds: “old ways of thinking, customs, culture, and habits.” The Red Guards destroyed historically significant sites

across the country. “The point of destroying the Four Olds was to make way for a new, revolutionary culture.”

Revolutionary committees took over local governments, and members of the Red Guards ransacked Macao. Hong Kong was also beset with political labor disputes during this period. The purging of Mao’s enemies within the CPC was successful by the end of 1968, and the CPC declared the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1969.

In 1971, U.S. President Richard Nixon visited China to meet with Mao, which paved the way for the normalization of U.S.-China relations. In 1975, Chiang Kai-shek died in Taiwan, and the following year, Mao died. Hua Guofeng then succeeded Mao as chairman of the CPC.

14

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE REFORM ERA: PROSPERITY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

The people had grown tired of Maoist ideology, and in 1978, “the CPC formally endorsed the principle of collective leadership.” Hua Guofeng stayed on as CPC chairman, but Deng Xiaoping “called the shots.”

Deng had a vision of the PRC becoming modern and powerful, made possible by pursuing the “Four Modernizations,” as first proposed by Zhou Enlai in 1954. “Mao had wanted to take a leap straight into communism. Deng rewound the clock to what he called the primary stage of socialism. This allowed the CPC to introduce market mechanisms into the PRC’s centralized command economy and create the hybrid system of ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics.’”

These reform efforts were wide-ranging—from dismantling the people’s communes and moving to a “responsibility system,” to reinstating the university entrance examination system based on merit. There were even some attempts at modernizing the PLA. In 1979, Deng announced the Four Basic Principles: “adherence to the Socialist road, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the leadership of the CPC, and Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought.”

The PRC endorsed Putonghua as the national language and specified a two-term limit for the presidency with its adoption of the fourth constitution. Hua Guofeng, the last CPC leader to be called “chairman,” stepped down in 1981.

Extreme poverty in China led to the introduction of the one-child policy in 1980. At the same time, however, the government began

loosening its grip on the economy, allowing more freedom for new ventures. The PRC also somewhat relaxed its ban on religion during this time and revived some traditional holidays and customs.

In 1981, efforts to reunify Taiwan with China were unsuccessful. Despite autocratic rule on the island, Taiwan had a quickly growing economy and was not interested in uniting with China. Hong Kong also maintained its autonomy with the signing of a Sino-British agreement in 1984 that put forward the “one country, two systems” formula.

Frustration with the government led to the gathering of thousands of students in Tiananmen Square starting in 1989. A movement erupted, “demanding democracy, accountability, and freedom of speech.” In response, Deng imposed martial law in Beijing, but people defied the orders. Thousands were killed, and many students fled. “The cultural and intellectual renaissance of the 1980s was over.” By the following year, all evidence of outward dissent had been suppressed.

“The party-state would manage the people not through class struggle but ‘stability maintenance’ (stricter policing), ‘harmony’ (social unity through ideological indoctrination and censorship), ‘patriotic education’ (harnessing the force of nationalism), and the building of a ‘socialist market economy.’” Private enterprise was increasingly allowed, and some price controls were lifted. Domestic tourism also began. Despite these reforms, however, urban unemployment rose.

While the CPC began to allow more religious freedom, including Islamic practices in Xinjiang, the government also increased its military presence in the region, as well as in Tibet. In addition, Chinese people saw increased access to the internet from the mid-1990s but simultaneously faced growing surveillance and censorship. Homosexuality was decriminalized in 1997.

China’s economic prosperity created improvements in living conditions and expanded opportunities, and many of its large urban population could aspire to middle-class goals. But, the

picture wasn't all pretty—there was worsening inequality between urban and rural areas, a rise in unsafe working conditions, increasing environmental degradation, and a growing tax burden on peasants in the country.

In 2002, Hu Jintao became CPC general secretary, and in 2003, Wen Jiabao became the state chairman. They decreased taxes on farmers and oversaw policies to address inequalities. At the same time, however, they suppressed dissent and clamped down on human rights organizations.

“The global financial crisis of 2007 to 2008 came as a gift to CPC propagandists, who argued that it exposed the failures of the capitalist system.” But, the gift didn't last, as corruption reared its head, and the combination of shoddy infrastructure and a devastating earthquake led to the deaths of tens of thousands in Sichuan province.

Liu Xiaobo—a critic and democracy activist who had been in and out of prison and labor camps since 1989—helped write a document called Charter 08, which was signed by more than 300 intellectuals and activists. Released in 2008, “it called ‘not for ameliorative reform of the current political system but for an end to some of its essential features, including one-party rule, and their replacement with a system based on human rights and democracy.’” He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in absentia in 2010 and died while still in custody in 2017.

In 2012, the CPC named Xi Jinping as its new general secretary and the chair of the Central Military Commission. He was named president of the PRC the following year.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE NEW ERA OF XI JINPING: RISE OF THE WOLF WARRIORS

In 2018, the National People's Congress abolished the two-term limit. "Xi, like Mao before him, and emperors before that, could potentially rule for life; the hard-won system for orderly succession was broken."

Two years prior, the CPC declared him "a 'core leader,' an accolade previously given Mao, Deng, and Jiang Zemin," which implied his rightful dominance in the party and country. The CPC also revised its constitution, adopting "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" as its "guiding ideology." Xi had, by this time, accumulated so many titles that he gained the nickname "Chairman of Everything."

With more billionaires in China than in the U.S., in 2020, the CPC claimed to have "eliminated 'absolute poverty'" in the country. China has also undertaken other global efforts to increase its power and influence, including the Belt and Road Initiative, which "promotes an alternative, authoritarian-friendly China Model, or Beijing Consensus, for development, prioritizing prosperity and stability over political freedom and choice." At the same time, China has made it clear that it won't abide by international orders with which it does not agree.

Although censorship runs rampant online in China, the so-called "Wolf Warriors of the New Era," are relatively immune to it. Fueled by "aggressive and aggrieved nationalism," they are essentially online trolls who attack anyone believed to have insulted China. Meanwhile, average citizens are subject to a social credit system,

which is “part of a larger system of data collection and other forms of technological and human surveillance that, by 2020, made the PRC citizenry one of the most monitored on Earth.”

The CPC also launched a “rectification” campaign in 2020, intended to purge “disloyal” or corrupt elements from the country’s legal and security institutions. Government and party cadres are prohibited from sharing ideas not aligned with those of the party—even in private. They are also banned from reading unauthorized materials in their free time. Jaivin asserts, “Not since the Cultural Revolution has the CPC attempted such totalitarian control over people’s lives.”

In recent years, suppression of activism and censorship have increased writ large. The gender gap is also growing, and China’s booming economic growth has begun to slow. But, despite severe government attempts at cracking down on any and all forms of criticism, Jaivin believes that support for Xi may be waning.

“The PRC’s economy and technology industries may well overtake those of the United States, and militarily, the PRC is certain to keep flexing its muscles. ... Yet the PRC may struggle to see its soft power—the power of attraction—match its hard power.” Instead of learning lessons from its vivid past, which is complicated by competing narratives and disparate voices, Jaivin argues that the CPC is focused solely on using history to its advantage: “to bolster its claim to be the legitimate rulers of this ancient nation.”

“The present is full of echoes, premonitions, and reverberations from the past.” Jaivin concludes, “But if the future is unknowable, history can at least make it less surprising.”

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