HISTORY AND PLACE

The Land within the Pass

Light brown and almost flat, the plain stretches away to the horizon in all directions. Its only prominent features are the broad fields of wheat, corn and vegetables, thinly bordered now and then by young trees. Copses of trees rise occasionally in the distance, but maybe they are an illusion because they always seem to be near the horizon, never close by. Farmhouses, clustered in loose but recognizable villages or standing alone, are made of the only abundant building material, the earth itself.

All day since early morning the train has been travelling westward across the alluvial lower Yellow River basin of Shandong and Henan. To the east the North China Plain fans out across Hebei and Shandong, as far as Peking in the north and past Xuzhou in the south. To the west it narrows in northern Henan along both banks of the Yellow River. A little west of Zhengzhou the passing landscape changes abruptly. Here the Qingdao-Baoji Express leaves the North China Plain behind and enters the deeply eroded loess plateau. Now, as the train moves into dusk, the roadbed carves through almost vertical cuts in the soil, plunges into frequent tunnels and out again across deep gullies, giving momentary glimpses of green bottom lands and cave-house villages before they are blocked off again by the next cut-bank. The cave houses are built halfway up the banks, opening to narrow terraces connected with each other and to the fields above and below by steep paths. Every foot of precious flat land is thereby saved for planting.

As night falls the Express climbs the plateau into the highlands, slowing on each upward grade and gathering speed again on the downward leg, the steam whistle blowing irregularly. This is the major east-west route across north China, and traffic on the railroad, double-tracked here, is heavy. The engines on this division are mostly steam locomotives, large handsome 2-10-2s with red wheels and trim. Double-headed on slow freights laboring up the pass, their fireboxes glow and flash in the darkness.

Late at night the express reaches Sanmenxia at the gorges of the Yellow River and somewhere near there begins its descent from the Hangu Pass west to Xi'an.

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After making its last great bend toward the east where it is joined by the Wei River, the Yellow River pierces the highlands through the Sanmen Gorge into the lower plains beyond. This barrier separates the eastern plain--the lower Yellow River basin--from the Wei River valley to the west. On the south of the Wei valley a rugged range of mountains, the Qinling, marks the division between north China and the Yangtze River watershed. To the north and west the loess highlands rise toward the Gobi and the Gansu Corridor. This enclosed region, connected with the eastern plain only by the Hangu Pass over which the railroad now runs, is known as Guanzhong--the land "within the pass."

Long ago the valley yielded its cultural leadership to the lower Yangtze region and its political dominance to northeast China.

But for more than a thousand years the political and cultural center of gravity of China was here in the vicinity of the city of Xi'an. A provincial capital now much diminished from its days of imperial glory, as the Tang capital of Chang'an it was probably the largest and most cosmopolitan city in the world. Its leadership in the eighth century rested on a long history as the site of imperial dynasties and feudal kingdoms. Here was once the principal seat of ancient Chinese civilization, vying for dominance in see-saw struggles with the eastern plains.

The early importance of Guanzhong derived from its strategic geographic location. Successive waves of conquerors, having nurtured their forces and developed their institutions in the shelter of the loess country, rode out through the protecting pass to found larger empires. The first of the conquerors from the Wei were the Zhou, rude lords of the northwest who overthrew the Shang, their former kings to the east, toward the end of the second millenium B.C. Subsequently, from their capital near modern Xi'an, they controlled a loose feudalistic confederation of vassal states scattered across the North China Plain.

Perhaps the Zhou kings' most fateful decision was to abandon the Wei valley several centuries later. For it was their new vassals from the same area, the Qin, who eventually grew in strength and went on to defeat them while founding the first unified empire over China. The protection of the pass and the shelter of the valley within gave the Qin time to hone its instruments of conquest to a fine edge--a modern conscripted army, cavalry, new institutions of central control over territories of unprecedented size. Repeatedly the King of Qin led his

new armies out through the Hangu Pass to destroy the states of the east, erstwhile vassals of the Zhou now contending for paramount power. In the year 256 B.C. the Qin extinguished the House of Zhou and carried off the sacred nine bronze caldrons, symbols of royal sovereignty over China corresponding to the Nine Regions into which Yu the Great had divided the land when he conquered the floods. Finally, in 221 B.C. Zheng, the last King of Qin, unified all of China after a dazzling but brutal series of victories over the few remaining states.

King Zheng, ascending the throne of Qin when he was only thirteen years old, was a powerful and ruthless ruler. Aided by equally ruthless and able advisers he created a new order out of the preceding chaos of the Warring States. Especially from the school of the Legalists, bitter opponents of Confucius, came a universal system of laws to replace the familial kinship system of the Zhou based on ritual and feudal obligations. A new name was needed to symbolize the radical departure the Qin was making from the past. So the king abandoned his title and invented a new one more suitable for the new order which he had inaugurated. He called himself Huangdi, "August Sovereign" (now usually translated simply as "Emperor") and because he was the first to adopt this title he was referred to as Shi Huangdi, "The First Emperor." His successors would be numbered for a thousand or ten-thousand generations. This, then, was the beginning of the imperial system which endured under successive dynasties of emperors for more than two thousand years.

The First Emperor is an ambivalent figure in history: the first unifier of his people, a ruthless conqueror, a destroyer of culture, a paranoid autocrat, a forward-looking modernizer. Those whom he dealt with harshly, especially the followers of Confucius, excoriated him in history for centuries afterward:

> Duke Xiao of Qin, relying upon the strength of the Hangu Pass and basing himself in the area of Yungzhou, with his ministers held fast to his land and eyed the house of Zhou, for he cherished a desire to roll up the empire like a mat, to bind into one the whole world, to bag all the land within the four seas; he had it in his heart to swallow up everything in the eight directions. At this time he was aided by the Legalist philosopher Lord Shang, who set up laws for him, encouraged agriculture and weaving, built up the instruments of war, contracted military alliances, and attacked the other feudal lords. Thus the men of Qin were able with ease to acquire territory east of the upper reaches of the Yellow River. . . .
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> The other feudal lords in alarm came together in council to devise some plan to weaken Qin, sparing nothing in gifts of precious objects and rich lands to induce men from all over the empire to join with them in a "vertical alliance," and pool their strength. . . . With a force of a million soldiers drawn from an area ten times that of Qin they beat upon the Pass and pressed forward toward Qin. But the men of Qin opened the Pass and went out to meet the enemy and the armies of the Nine States fled and did not dare advance. Qin, without expending a single arrow or losing a single arrowhead, threatened the fate of the whole empire.
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> With this, the Vertical Alliance collapsed, its treaties came to naught, and the various states hastened to present Qin with parts of their territories as bribes for peace. With its superior strength Qin pressed the crumbling forces of its rivals, pursued those who had fled in defeat, and overwhelmed and slaughtered the army of a million until their shields floated upon a river of blood. Following up the advantages of its victory, Qin gained mastery over the empire and divided up its mountains and rivers. The powerful states begged to submit to its sovereignty and the weaker ones paid homage at its court. . . .

> After this came the First Emperor who, carrying on the glorious spirit of his six predecessors, cracked his long whip and drove the universe before him, swallowed up the eastern and western Zhou, and overthrew the feudal lords. He ascended the throne of honor and ruled the six directions, scourging the world with his rod, and his might shook the four seas. . . .
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> Thereupon he discarded the ways of the former kings and burned the books of the hundred schools of philosophy in order to make the people ignorant. He destroyed the walls of the great cities, assassinated the powerful leaders, and collected all the arms of the empire. . . . All this he did in order to weaken the people of the empire. After this he . . . strengthened the heights and precipices overlooking the fathomless valleys, in order to secure his position. He garrisoned the strategic points with skilled generals and strong crossbowmen and stationed trusted ministers and well-trained soldiers to guard the land with arms and question all who passed back and forth. When he had thus pacified the empire, the First Emperor believed in his heart that, with the strength of his capital within the Pass and his walls of metal extending a thousand miles, he had established a rule that would be enjoyed by his sons and grandsons for ten thousand generations. . . . Qin, beginning with an insignificant amount of territory, reached the power of a great kingdom and for a hundred years made the ancient eight provinces pay homage at its court. Yet, after it had become master of the six directions and established its palaces within the Pass, a single commoner opposed it and its seven ancestral temples toppled, its ruler died by the hands of men, and it became the laughing stock of the world. Why? Because it failed to rule with humanity and righteousness, and did not realize that the power to attack and the power to retain what one has thereby won are not the same.[1]

Now that Confucius has lost out after all, the First Emperor has been rehabilitated, like some recent victim of political vagaries. When unification and modernization of the country have become bywords, the First Emperor may be seen as a model and a precedent, not flawed. Thus the recent unearthing of the vast army of clay figures he buried near his tomb east of Xi'an has come at an appropriate time. His

tomb itself, a large artificial hill as yet unexcavated, had long been known. But the discovery of his army was entirely unexpected and casts new light on the accomplishments of the Qin.

Much about this vast array of more than 6000 life-size figures, beautifully detailed, of soldiers and their officers and horses, can be pointed to with justifiable pride. The remarkable technological sophistication of the Qin is displayed in the weapons buried with the clay army--carefully fashioned bronze trigger mechanisms of crossbows; finely made fluted arrow heads; bright and slender swords, still showing little corrosion after 2000 years in the earth. Contemporary social lessons drawn from the army are less certain. Guides at the site point to the variety of facial types represented by the figures of officers as proof that the First Emperor incorporated units of different minority nationalities into his real army. What these might have been one can only speculate--this is nothing more than a wishful ideological interpretation which serves current national policy concerning the diverse nationalities of contemporary China. What is more remarkable is that the facial features of the officers and men alike bear little resemblance to contemporary Chinese. (The realism with which details of clothing and armor are executed suggests the craftsmen who created the figures were faithful to the originals in other respects, so why not in this one also?) The origin of the Qin people is shrouded in their unknown connections with people further to the north and west, from whom they may have drawn some of their rugged frontier virtues.

One thing is clear: The First Emperor could not forget the violent circumstances of his unification of the empire. His funerary

army is arrayed to the east of his tomb, facing the pass and the plains beyond whence he expected the threat to his rule to come. In this he was correct. The great irony of the Qin is that though it expected to inaugurate an order enduring ten-thousand generations, it barely outlasted the life of the First Emperor. It was overthrown by the legion of enemies it had created.

Perhaps the Qin offers a lesson for the present after all, one which is being implicitly heeded by the present rulers. Modernization and unification must not run roughshod over the culture of the people who are their intended beneficiaries, and those who attempt to break too violently with the past may find that their efforts are ephemeral. The First Emperor and his minions unleashed one of the most destructive cultural revolutions in Chinese history. In the name of a new world order the old books were burned and scholars were humiliated and killed. Yet many of the measures taken by the Qin--reform of the language, economic standardization, the liberation of the land from a feudal control--were a necessary prelude to a more stable unified order to follow. It was especially the uncompromising cultural radicalism which accompanied these reforms, the insensitivity for the process of change, and its insistence on a singular vision of the future, for which the Qin was discredited later.

With these lessons of the Qin catastrophe immediately before it, a more enduring structure was created out of its wreckage by the Han. Some of the Han's success was due to its repudiation of the radical methods of the Qin, while building a new order which nevertheless owed

much to the legacy of new Qin institutions. Making constructive use of the past, the Han brought the followers of Confucius back into government.

Among the more influential achievements of the First Emperor and his Han successors was the imperial cult. The new imperial style left its mark in divers ways. Its most tangible monuments were the tombs of the emperors which transformed the landscape around the capital. After centuries as the site of successive imperial capitals under the Han and Tang dynasties, the plain north of the Wei River and the low hills skirting it came to be studded with tumuli of emperors and their relatives and high officials.

The greatest rulers commanded the building during their lifetimes of virtual mountains under which they were later buried in deep vaults. Nearby were placed the smaller tomb-mounds of their imperial relatives and empresses, and crowded about were the tumuli of loyal ministers and generals. Tomb building must have reached such proportions that it inhibited the agricultural productivity of the valley. Now nothing remains of the tombs but the mounds themselves, the monumental stone funerary figures which guarded the sacred approaches, and in a few places the earthen ruins of gate towers and walls. Originally they were surrounded by long high walls enclosing large parks of land and magnificently decorated halls.

The Han practice was to erect great earth pyramids rising directly from the plain. Greatest of all is the tomb of Wudi, the "Martial Emperor," a flat-topped pyramid of impressive size. Wudi was

a vigorous conqueror who expanded the boundaries of the empire to the north and west and pushed the Hun invaders out past the Gansu corridor.

In 121 B.C. one of his favorite generals, Huo Qubing, who at the age of twenty had organized a light cavalry force on the Huns' model, led an army of ten-thousand mounted soldiers through the Gansu corridor. The general inflicted a crushing defeat on the Huns and thereby secured the corridor and the area around Dunhuang for the Han. In appreciation of his victory, Wudi sent a gift of prized wine to his general encamped at Jiuquan near the present western end of the Great Wall. Huo Qubing, wishing his soldiers to share the honor, poured the wine into a clear spring where all could drink. The spring, still flowing in a city park at Jiuquan, thus gave the name "Wine Spring" to the town.

Huo Qubing died only four years later after winning an even greater victory over the Huns in eastern Mongolia. To show his esteem, the emperor located the general's tomb near the site of his own. In front of the tumulus a large stone horse trampling a Hun chief under its hooves was erected. Hu Qubing's tomb is remarkable for its many other large stone figures of crouching tigers, cattle, turtles, and men imaginatively carved in ways the primitive shapes of the rocks suggested. The rocks and trees were arranged on the tumulus to imitate a natural mountain landscape.

To achieve maximum effect for their tombs, the Tang emperors departed from the Han practice by shaping and excavating the hills themselves. Li Shimin (the Emperor Taizong, founder of the Tang

who reigned 626-649) initiated the new form by placing his tomb in the bowels of a wide, gradually sloping ridge surmounted by a solitary peak. Spread down the slope in front of it are 167 satellite tombs of his loyal followers and relatives.

Seven centuries separated Tang Taizong from his precursor of the Han, Wudi. Many changes had swept China during that time. The Han empire had fallen into the throes of barbarian invasion and internecine feudal warfare; missionary Buddhism had spread to China; new cultural and ethnic strains were mixed with the old so that the models established by the First Emperor and Wudi were now but distant memories. Yet the ideal of a unified Chinese world survived. When Tiazong reestablished the imperial order of antiquity after these centuries of division, the Wei Valley within the pass once again became the strategic center of power. Although it remained so for the time being, other regions were assuming a larger role.

Taizong was no doubt the greatest Chinese conqueror before or since his time. Personally leading his armies (something which Chinese emperors rarely did), he campaigned beyond the northern and western borders. Six battle-horses died under him: he loyally celebrated them in six large stone bas-reliefs which once stood at the entrance to his tomb. Taizong's armies pushed the Turks far back to the west past the desert oases kingdoms beyond the Great Wall, reestablished Chinese authority over Chinese Turkestan, and reopened the Silk Road.

The new capital Chang'an ("Everlasting Peace") near Xi'an became the commercial and cultural hub of the Tang Empire, a huge

cosmopolitan city to which foreigners and their exotic goods and customs of every description came: merchants from the kingdoms of Central Asia and the Middle East; ambassadors bringing gifts to the court from tributary rulers; missionaries purveying Indian Buddhism, Persian Manicheanism, Nestorian Christianity, and Islam. The city was laid out on a great square plan surrounded by walls twenty-four miles in circumference. Avenues leading from the gates on the four quarters intersected the city and divided it into 108 districts, each like a kind of walled village locked at night to restrict the movement of unauthorized persons or thieves. Almost two million inhabitants lived here, making Chang'an perhaps the largest city in the world at the time. In the eastern and western quarters were sprawling markets subdivided into numerous specialty bazaars where one could find silk, leather, herbs and drugs, iron wares, tea (a new item just catching on at the time), or almost any other necessity or luxury. The Western Market, to which most of the foreign merchants resorted, was the most exotic. There the citizens of Chang'an might delight in exciting foreign entertainers --musicians, dancing girls, jugglers and acrobats--or find strange foods, or the Central Asian and Turkish costumes which were particularly in fashion among upper class men and women.[2]

The reopening of the Silk Road and contact with the Buddhist oases kingdoms to the west promoted an upsurge of Buddhist piety in Tang China. With the trade routes safe once again, missionary monks arrived from as far away as India and settled in newly built monasteries around the capital. In the southern quarter of the city the Monastery of Compassionate Grace was under construction.

It was not only foreigners who brought the Buddhist message to China; Taizong's conquest of Central Asia also opened the way for pious Chinese converts to go abroad. In the year 629 the Chinese Buddhist monk Xuan Zang began a pilgrimage west to find the sources of Buddhism. After a fifteen-year odessy which took him to the Middle East and India, he returned to China in 644 with precious Buddhist scriptures, and settled down in the Monastery of Compassionate Grace to translate them. Here he built a huge yellow brick pagoda of seven stories, 240 feet high, to house the holy texts. Later named the Great Wild Goose Pagoda, it is all that survives of the original monastery. It now leans noticeably to the west.

A robust old man, a former monk, is custodian of the present temple buildings. Although worshippers no longer frequent the monastery, he maintains the altars with their equipment and candles and incense. During the Cultural Revolution the Red Guards came to destroy the Buddhas, but the old man refused to admit them, declaring that he was old enough not to care about dying and would open up only on a direct order in Chairman Mao's own handwriting. Thus the temple was spared.

The early years of the Tang were lively and prosperous times. Exotic tastes abounded and society was more open, less rigid than it became in later centuries. The extravagance of life in the capital is still reflected in the polychrome-glaze ceramic figures which were arranged in the tomb vaults of the emperors and great officials, and in the murals painted on the walls of their underground passages. Swarthy Turkish soldiers in armoured breastplates and helmets stand guard; here are magnificent powerful horses with arching necks and

flaring nostrils and tall Bactrian camels laden with trade goods; elegant ladies with elaborate coiffures boldly ride out on horseback. Other women in long pleated skirts dance to Central Asian music while dignified officials in court uniform stand in attendance. Here also are reminders of everyday life: barnyard animals, a dog asleep with its head on its paws, models of farmers' houses and their farm tools and utensils.

In the year 637 a beautiful and clever concubine, Lady Wu, entered Taizong's harem. She was only twelve years old and at first did not attract particular attention. When Taizong died in 649 Lady Wu shaved her head and entered a Buddhist convent along with all his other wives and concubines. But his son, who became the Emperor Gaozong (reigned 650-683) had already spotted her among his father's favorites, and after the respectful period of mourning for the dead emperor was over, he recalled her to his court.

In ability and energy Gaozong could not hold a candle to his magnificent father. But Lady Wu, forever scheming to augment her own position at court over that of the other wives and concubines, made up for his deficiencies with her own ambition. Working inexorably, she became Empress, and as Gaozong's health and eyesight failed, she assumed direction of state affairs from 660.

By setting aside the heir apparent, their son, and ruling in his name the Empress Wu kept her grip on power after Gaozong's death in 683. Whatever the failures of Gaozong as a ruler, he was majestically celebrated in death. His tomb was built to the west of Taizong's in a steeply sloping narrow hill. The approach from the south leads up a

gradual slope from the plain, between two lower hills on either side. These are surmounted by large towers to form a pass through which the road enters the sacred way ascending to the tomb at the base of the main hill. Flanking the avenue along its entire length are monumental stone figures of guardian beasts and men--huge winged horses, phoenixes, warriors, and officials. They end at two large steles on either side, and behind these ranks of stone statues representing foreign emissaries who attended the funeral, and finally two massive stone lions.

Nearby is the tomb of Empress Wu's granddaughter, a princess who died at the age of sixteen. A long shaft runs down from ground level to a cool chamber deep below the tumulus. The walls of the tunnel passage are gracefully decorated with paintings; small alcoves spaced along the way contain miniature pottery figurines of palace attendants, animals, and figures from the court. One can only dimly guess how much more elaborate the imperial tomb, still unexcavated, must be.

The Empress favored her own relatives with impressive tombs which rivalled the imperial tombs themselves. Judged by her efforts, the imperial ancestral cult must have reached unparallelled proportions at the height of the Tang. A large earth pyramid built in the Han style marks the resting place of her mother, the Lady Yang. It was originally enclosed by an inner wall pierced on the south by the sacred avenue leading to the tomb. Later Empress Wu enlarged the tomb with a long outer enclosure on a much vaster scale, perhaps a kilometer on each side. Seated stone lions guarded gates on each quarter. The approach through the south gate passed in turn between

two huge stone unicorns and two equally awesome standing lions. Because the Empress had planned to locate her father's tomb there also, Lady Yang's tumulus is offset to the west of the main axis. But she was never able to accomplish her grand design, and Lady Yang rests alone amidst wheat and bean fields cultivated by peasants from a nearby commune.

Not content to rule merely in fact, in 690 the Empress Wu went so far as to depose the puppet emperor and usurped the throne for herself, the only woman in Chinese history ever to have reigned as emperor. And, as if this were not enough to satisfy her ambition, she changed the dynastic name to Zhou after the first dynasty of now almost legendary kings who had first made the land within the pass their home. But for one whose vanity knew no bounds, merely to emulate her illustrious predecessors was still not sufficient. So, surpassing even the First Emperor in her personal exaltation, she adopted the title Zetian Dasheng Huangdi--"Great Sacred Emperor Modeled on Heaven"--from which she is later always styled Wu Zetian,"Wu Modeled on Heaven."

Though Wu Zetian cultivated a belief in her own divinity, time and her enemies eventually caught up with her. She was overthrown by a palace coup as she lay ill in 605 at the age of eighty, and died shortly afterward. The tomb of Emperor Gaozong was reopened and she was buried alongside him. Even in death she eclipsed her lackluster husband; the tomb is associated more with her than with him and seems to bear her imprint, like some giant's death mask lying upon the land. The local people say that from a distance the skyline of the tomb resembles the profile of a woman on her back--the tall hill her head, the ridge below

it her neck, and the two lower hills in front, her breasts.

While Zu Zetian ruled with a strong hand, her armies held the frontier against the invading barbarians. But her ruthless arrogance, and her partiality toward her favorites and relatives made her long reign a controversial one. Her perversions of power stood as a warning to later ages' transgressions, even into modern times. So when Jiang Qing, Chairman Mao's wife gathered around her a clique of favorites and presumed to speak in the name of her ailing husband, the memory of Wu Zetian came to mind again. For her ruthlessness, her vanity, and her attempt to usurp power after the death of Mao in 1976, Jiang Qing was styled Jiang Zetian.

The capital on the Wei River enjoyed scarcely a half-century more of peace and stability. The Emperor Xuanzong, who sought Heaven's approval and left his eloquent explanation on the summit of Taishan, ascended the throne in 712 in an atmosphere of high hopes and relief from the troubled times of the previous decades. He presided over a court celebrated by the great poets of the age, unrivalled in its cultural diversity and brilliance. But his reign ended ignominiously in rebellion, flight, and abdication. In his later years the emperor became infatuated with an another lady of the harem, the hefty beauty Yang Guifei. For a time she dazzled the emperor and his court with her wit and charm, dancing to the tune of the "Rainbow Skirt and Feathered Coat." Doting on his Imperial Concubine,Xuanzong ignored the responsibilities of the empire as he became more dissipated by the pleasures of the palace.

The Tang never fully recovered from the catastrophe of rebellion and invasion which followed upon the emperor's neglect, and the

brilliant cosmopolitan culture of Chang'an slowly dimmed and tarnished. The problem of ruling from Guanzhong had become more intractable as time passed and the scope of empire grew. The historical arena came to include the Yangtze Valley and beyond as the frontier pushed southward. By the tenth century the Wei Valley was too far removed and isolated from these new areas of growth. The region was also vulnerable to the invasion of nomadic conquerors from Inner Asia. So the capital was subsequently moved first east and then south in later times, nearer to the new cultural center on the lower Yangtze Valley and more secure from harassment.

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Until the Communist Revolution found refuge here at the end of the Long March out of the south in the 1930s, the isolation of the Wei Valley relegated the area for centuries to a political and cultural backwater, and the progressive desiccation of the surrounding highlands reduced it to one of the poorest regions of China. The city of Xi'an built on the site of the old capital Chang'an was hardly more than a frontier outpost. But the Communist Party, relying on the protection of the passes and the rugged terrain within the Great Wall to the north, forged new instruments of organization and power as the Qin had done before it, and emerged to unify China. Now Xi'an is an important new industrial and agricultural center and a communications hub on the main east-west route across north China.

The Long River

Between the eroded highlands around Guanzhong in the northwest and the lush watery land of the south lies the Qinling range. The transition from north to south is striking. As one flies across the mountains, the gathering clouds obscure from view the brown river plain and foothills as the plane leaves Xi'an behind. But later, through gaps in the cloud blanket, come glimpses of a different landscape, wooded dark green hills and deep, narrow valleys cut by frothy streams. Then, as the clouds disperse again, the rich Chengdu plain of Sichuan opens out below where densely planted rice paddies are fed by broad rivers.

Sichuan means "Four Rivers"--the Min, the Tuo, the Fu, and the Jialing--which run south through the province to join the mighty stream of the Yangtze, greatest of all China's rivers.

The Changjiang--the "Long River," as the Yangtze is properly known in China--rises from glaciers on the border between Qinghai and Tibet far to the west. For nearly 4000 miles to its mouth on the East China Sea near Shanghai, it cleaves China from west to east. Along the way it gathers the water of countless smaller streams and many large tributaries--the Yalong, the Min, the Jialing, the Hsiang, the Han, the Gan, and the Huai--draining an area of more than one million square miles.[3] (Compare the Yellow River, about 3000 miles long, which has only two major tributaries, the Wei and the Fen, and a watershed of less than 300,000 square miles.) Among the rivers of the world, the Yangtze's volume is fourth only to the Amazon, the Congo, and the Indus rivers.[4] The Yangtze is a grand avenue of

communication uniting central China east with west. It is navigable nearly 1500 miles from the sea through the heart of China Proper. Between the rich rice lands of the lower delta and the expansive lake country of the central valleys to the east, and the fertile Sichuan Basin ringed by mountain ranges to the west, stands a wide mountain wall where the river plunges through the famous "Three Gorges."

The Jialing, a mighty river in its own right, joins the Yangtze at Chongqing (Chungking) built on a steep peninsula gripped between the two streams. In July both rivers are at flood stage, high and roiling with mud. Traffic on the water is brisk. Sounding their horns, river boats and tugs race down with the current on each side and breach the rough water stretching away from the tip of the peninsula where the streams converge. Then they labor up the other stream, or make careening landings at the floating piers on either bank. Here passengers embark on river steamers which will carry them down to the great cities of the Yangtze Valley hundreds of miles to the east through the mountains.

As soon as the river steamer Dongfanghong ("The East is Red") No. 40. casts off from its pier along the Jialing bank of the city it begins to edge into the current, bow facing upstream, while holding level with the bank. Whether travelling up-river or down, all river vessels land heading into the swift current like airplanes heading into the wind. Like the other passenger steamers navigating the Yangtze--each numbered but with the same name--this one has a light green hull and trim, and a white superstructure. On the funnel is a yellow band

with a red star. Swinging slowly around to begin its voyage down river, the steamer faces a stiff upstream breeze. Fresh and bracing, in spite of the summer heat of the city, the sensation is like that on an ocean-going ship heading out to sea, but without the salty taste.

Even in these more placid reaches the river is turbulent, full of great upwellings of brown muddy water darker than the yellow-brown of the surface, and churning whirlpools sucking the surface down again. Low down along the banks the flood laps at corn and vegetable fields. The river sweeps around gradual bends between green rolling hills and occasional rocky outcroppings. A low haze straddles the water; light fogbanks lingering into the morning obscure the view from time to time.

The river journey through eastern Sichuan is slow and uneventful, punctuated only by infrequent stops at major towns along the way. Wanxian, "The Gateway to Eastern Sichuan," where the steamer stops for the night, is the largest. Wanxian is a city of winding streets and flights of wide stone steps climbing the steep bank from the water's edge. A series of pontoons supporting short gangways connects the floating pier to the shore. The current eddies backward along the bank here, creating a strange phenomenon of two streams flowing in opposite directions at the same time. Boys swim in the muddy water among the pontoons, carried upward by the eddy. Local people display their products and handicrafts on the steps for travellers--rattan furniture, baskets and mats, crocks of pickled vegetables.

Below Wanxian the mountains mount higher along the banks. But just beyond the town of Fengjie the scene changes abruptly. Here at

the entrance of the Qutang Gorge, the first of the "Three Gorges" of the Yangtze, the river is forced through a narrow passage between towering walls of rock. The steamer veers sharply from one bank to the other around tight bends as it follows floating navigation buoys and pylons on ledges marking the hidden channel. Although this is the shortest of the three gorges (only eight kilometers), it is in some ways the most dramatic because it comes so suddenly and contrasts so sharply with the rolling landscape preceding it. After the mountains widen out again for a spell, comes the much longer (forty kilometers) Wushan Gorge. Sheer cliffs drop perpendicularly to the water from sharp spires five hundred or more feet above. Ragged taluses jut into the river.

Surprisingly even this seemingly forbidding place is inhabited. Single dwellings cling to narrow margins of level land along the shore, or higher up on shelves and shoulders where steep ravines descend to the river. Small villages hang on bluffs above narrow bays and eddies or side canyons where small boats can land away from the tearing current. The inhabitants cultivate the most unpromising patches of land in corn and vegetables right down to the water's edge and far up the gullies and steep hillsides. Sheep and goats gingerly graze high up among the rocks. For most the river is the only way out. Fragile sailing craft hug the banks where the current is weaker, assisted upstream by trackers straining along paths cut in the rock.

The apparent idyllic security of villages nestled comfortably above the muddy river is deceptive. The bloated bodies of pigs, sheep, goats, and other unidentifiable small animals--and even of men--sweeping down with the flood are reminders that living here is perilous.

Travellers on the river now enjoy the leisure to view the passing scenery of the gorges from the decks of the modern Donganghong steamers. Once, before the river was tamed by blasting out the rocks and shoals, attention was riveted on the river itself and its perilous rapids:

> Wild shrieking, frantic yelling, exhausted groaning, confusion and clamor,--one long, deafening din. A bewildering, maddening mob of reckless, terrified human beings rush hither and hither, unseeingly and distractedly Will she go? Yes! No! Yes! Then comes the screeching, the scrunching, the straining, and then--a final snap! Back we go, sheering helplessly, swayed to and fro most dangerously by foaming waters, and almost, but not quite, turn turtle. . . . We were at the Yeh T'an, or the Wild Rapid, some distance on from the Ichang Gorge, were almost over the growling monster, when the towline, straining to its utmost limit, snapped suddenly with little warning, and we drifted in a moment or two away down to last night's anchorage, far below, where we were obliged to bring up the last of the long tier of boats of which we were this morning the first.[5]

Travel then was on the same light wooden boats which today still navigate the gorges by sail and are towed by teams of trackers on the banks. The narratives of European travellers were captivated by the details of these boats, their equipment, and their negotiation of the rapids, as well as the disasters which befell many of them on the river. Trackers were used along the entire route, and were assisted only by sails, so that the absence of wind, or a contrary wind, forced the boat to stop. At difficult places where the current was especially strong additional trackers were put on, hired from camps along the way. The skillful use of bow and stern sweeps, staying lines, and poles was essential to get around the dangerous rocks. Most important of all were the towing hausers of various sizes, made

of braided bamboo very strong in tensile strength but not in shear strength.[6]

The rapids were filled with rocks, sudden falls in the water, whirlpools, and dangerous eddies. Every rapid had its name and personality--and also its victims.

> Certainly the perils of the rapids are great, and few people of whom I have heard have escaped without risks to life and loss or damage to property, either, like Consul Gardner, finding their boats disappear from under them, or like a missionary, who, coming down with his wife's coffin, came to grief, the coffin taking a lonely and ghastly voyage to a point far below, or like many others whom I met who reached their destinations minus their possessions in whole or in part. Signs of disaster abounded. Above and below every rapid, junkmen were encamped on shore under the mats of their junks, and the shore was spread with cotton drying. There were masts above water, derelicts partially submerged in quiet reaches or on some sandy beach being repaired, and gaunt skeletons lay here and there on the rocks which proved fatal to them.[7]

Somewhere in the Wushan Gorge the river has crossed the border into Hubei. Here, around the town of Badong, between the second and third gorges, the river runs in a deep valley more densely populated than the gorges. The last gorge, the Xiling, is the longest, seventy-four kilometers. The current is swift and churned by rocks showing even above the flood. Thin waterfalls hang from ledges above the banks. High peaks and imposing buttes rise beyond them. In its final stretch the river straightens into a channel between mountains descending in crumbling rock banks or sheer cliffs.

Where the river meets the plain at the end of this canyon a giant engineering project is underway to build a dam across the river. It will realize a long-held ambition in the ancient tradition of

water-control: to tame China's greatest river at its most formidable point, regulate its floods and harness its power. But silting, floods, and the unstable geological foundation of the river bottom were previously insuperable obstacles. To determine the greatest flood the dam would need to carry, engineers combed old records dating back to 1150 and examined ancient high-water marks cut in the rocks. They designed the dam to discharge 110,000 cubic meters of water per second. When completed, it will generate hydroelectric power, while regulating the river's floods. It will also irrigate an area of one million square kilometers and improve transportation on the river through a series of navigation locks.

Just beyond the dam, at Yichang, the mountains fall away and the river widens out into the central Hubei plains. For four hundred miles, from Chongqing through the gorges to Yichang, the Yangtze has descended more than one foot per mile. For its final thousand miles from Yichang to the sea it will drop no more than one or two inches per mile as it winds, wide and placid, past the great river cities of central China.

* * *

The Yangtze bisects China into two quite distinct cultural environments. The north is a yellow, dry land of plains and plateaus, mostly treeless, where wheat is the staple crop. With few large rivers, too shallow and silted to be suitable for navigation, there roads were the mode of communication for centuries. The south is a humid, green land of mountains and valleys where the staple is rice. Fragmented by mountains and rivers, many of them easily navigable, water was the basis of transportation south of the Yangtze. Where such natural

differences prevailed cultural distinctions followed, and unification of north and south was always a great problem. If the Yangtze never formed an absolute barrier between the two sections, it is more than a symbolic dividing line. It was not bridged until 1957 at Wuhan in the central valley, not until 1968 at Nanking in the east, and 1980 at Chongqing in the west.

The drive for unity has always been strong in China in spite of regional diversity and internal natural obstacles. In ancient times, in the days of the Shang and the Zhou, when the land within the pass contested the empire with the eastern plains, the Yellow River was the central stage of history. The Long River was then only on the southern margin of the struggle for unity. But as the frontier pushed steadily south beyond the Yangtze Valley in later centuries, the horizon expanded. Whether as a main artery connecting east with west, or as a dividing line separating north from south, the Long River became the axis around which the unification of the Chinese world turned.

Along its central valleys and lakes are scattered memorials to the warrior heroes and great statesmen who strove to unify the empire or hold it together in times of crisis. In the twelfth century while the Song dynasty desperately tried to stem the advancing waves of barbarian invaders from the north, a debate was going on over the best policy to meet the crisis. Already, in 1126, Kaifeng, the northern capital of the Song on the Yellow River had fallen to the relentless onslaught of the Jin Tartars. Refugees escaping from the disaster in the north retreated south of the Yangtze, and the Song court reestablished its capital at Hangzhou, the southeastern coastal

city at the southern terminus of the Grand Canal.

Some high officials, believing the Tartars' appetite for further conquest could be quenched with tribute money, advocated appeasement as the only salvation from further defeat. Others urged the court to reinvade the north, to carry the conflict to the bitter end if necessary, as the only honorable course. One of the latter was Yue Fei, an energetic warrior who campaigned successfully against the Jin and carried the battle into the heart of enemy territory. But the exponents of appeasement led by Chief Councilor Qin Gui prevailed at court. General Yue Fei's exploits became an embarrassment and an obstacle to the peace negotiations. The popular general was imprisoned on trumped-up charges of treason as the negotiations were underway, and he was murdered by the prison warden on orders from Qin Qui in 1141. The next year the humiliating peace with the Tartars was signed.

Yue Fei's honor was later rehabilitated and he became the undying symbol of patriotism and loyalty. A shrine was erected around his grave on the edge of West Lake at Hangzhou. On a wall before his tomb is the motto "Loyal to the Last" which he displayed tattooed on his back to protest his patriotism. On either side of the entrance facing the tomb are four cast iron statues kneeling and bound as prisoners. They are the effigies of Chief Councilor Qin Gui, the prison warden who murdered Yue Fei, and the others implicated in his betrayal, perpetually execrated by later generations for their acts.

In spite of protecting iron railings, warning signs to the public, and even the vigilant gaze of a policeman, vistors still spit on the

statues. In the main hall of the shrine is a modern statue of the hero (the original was destroyed in the Cultural Revolution). Soldiers of the People's Liberation Army visiting the shrine can have their pictures taken standing before this exemplar of loyalty and determination to defend China against aggression.

The passage of time has sharpened the issue of Yue Fei's loyalty. His struggle was one of patriotic Chinese against engulfing foreign invaders. Much, much later, though unity was still the key, the issue was less clear-cut.

* * *

A rocky bluff called Shizhongshan ("Stone Bell Hill") covered with trees and brush commands a view of the entrance to Boyang Lake on the Yangtze River in northern Jiangxi province. Next to the town of Hukou ("Lake Mouth") on the eastern shore of the lake, the hill is named for its peculiar stones which ring clearly and musically when struck. From a pavilion on top of the hill a visitor can see the wide smooth river to the north and the narrow entrance to the lake just below the bluff. Around the pavilion are ruins of temples and old buildings and memorial inscriptions left by visitors.

This was a strategic place, the pivot around which the control of the lower Yangtze hinged in successive struggles for mastery of Central China. In an inscription low down on the rocks, a survivor remembered those who fell in one of those great struggles:

Loyal officers and noble heroes;
Wonderful rocks and strange peaks.
We salute you all
together to the end of Heaven and Earth.

In the 1850s a great civil war gripped China. Zeng Guofan, leading the land and naval forces defending the dynasty, was locked in a contest with the Taiping rebels who had burst out of the south and overrun all of south and central China until they made the great Yangtze city of Nanjing (Nanking), downstream from Hukou, their capital. In 1854 the issue was in doubt and the dynasty was gravely imperiled.

As Zeng's forces pressed down river from their base in Hunan, the Taiping rebels drove west along both banks of the river, taking town after town. They met forty miles upstream from Hukou at the border between Hubei and Jiangxi provinces, where the rebels stretched massive iron chains supported on pontoons across the river to block Zeng's warships. Here in December at the Battle of Tianjiazhen the Taipings were defeated and the chains cut.

But Zeng Guofan's victory was short-lived. The Taipings counterattacked, destroyed part of the enemy fleet and even captured Zeng's flagship. Zeng narrowly escaped with his life and his officers had to restrain him from committing suicide to expiate for his defeat. His forces were now bottled up in Boyang Lake while the rebels commanded the river.

Although the rebels had regained the initiative, much of their energy was spent while defenders of the dynasty methodically resumed the offensive. The turning point came in the autumn of 1857 when Zeng Guofan finally captured Hukou from the rebels. The Taipings fell back toward Nanking and Zeng's warships now had free run of the river. On the rock of Stone Bell Hill his senior commanders commemorated the

great victory with a short inscription: Li wan kuang lan, "Force back the raging flood."

Like the Civil War being fought in America at the same time, the Taiping Rebellion was a watershed in history. The conflict was laden with cultural and ideological overtones partly a legacy of the past, partly a harbinger of the future. Unlike earlier struggles which swept China, this one was perplexingly muddled by new issues created by the arrival of European peoples in China. For the first time not just a dynastic house and its throne were at stake, but the survival of the traditional culture itself.

Zeng Guofan was combatting not only insurgents but also the first intrusions of Western influence which entered China through the south at Macao and Canton. The Taipings received part of their ideological inspiration from the new wave of Protestant missionaries and their Chinese converts whose Christian teachings challenged the centuries-old grip of Confucian scholars and officials on Chinese society. Zeng deplored and feared this threat as much or more than the Taiping's military challenge:

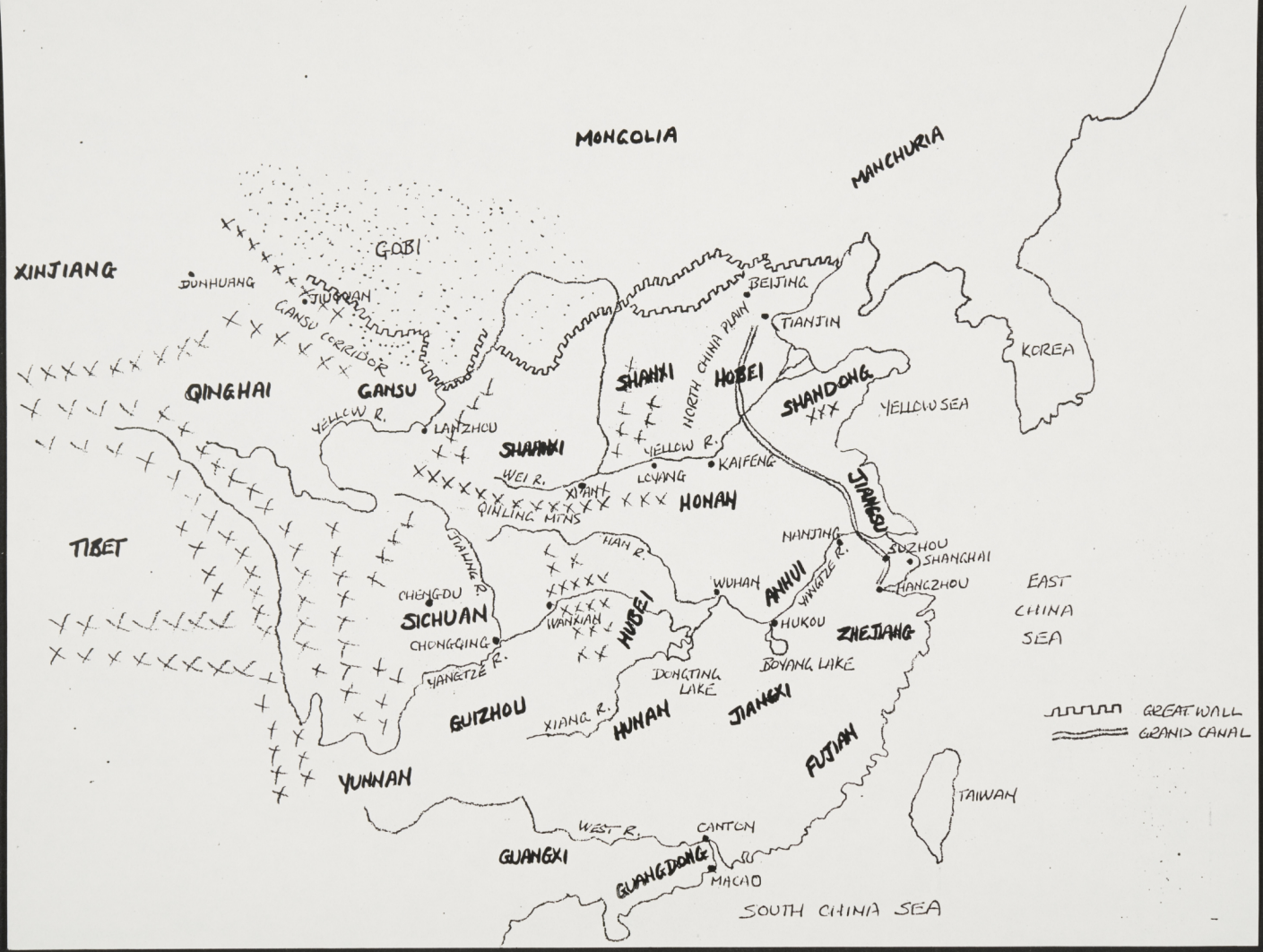
> From the time of the Emperors Yao and Shun and the Three Dynasties until now, through successive generations the sages have sustained our culture and esteemed the social relationships. The positions of lord and subject, father and son, high and low, honored and common, are as orderly and inconvertible as cap and shoe. But the southern rebels, taking their cue from the outer barbarians, venerate the religion of God. From their bogus lords and ministers down to their soldiers and mean people, all are called brother. They say only Heaven is called father. Besides this, all the people's fathers are all brothers and all the people's mothers are all sisters. Farmers are unable to freely cultivate in order to pay taxes, as they call all the fields the fields of the Heavenly King.

> Merchants are unable to freely trade in order to seek profit, as they call all the merchandise the merchandise of the Heavenly King. Scholars are unable to recite Confucian Classics as they have other theories of a so-called Jesus and the New Testament. All of China's several thousand years of propriety, morality, social relationships, of literature and law, are suddenly dragged in the dust and utterly destroyed. How can this be only a change in our Qing dynasty? It is the most extraordinary transformation in our culture since its creation, for which our Confucius and Mencius weep in their graves.[8]

The rebellion left scars, both physical and cultural, almost as deep and long as the Yangtze itself, and its memory evokes ambivalent feelings. The restored temple on Stone Bell Hill has been rededicated to the Taipings, but a stele nearby preserves Zeng Guofan's original dedication of the place. Zeng was the last great Confucian hero who came to the defense of his world in disorder and endangered, but the Taipings were spiritual precursors of twentieth century revolutionaries. Their struggle separated the old world of decay and stagnation from the new world in transformation and revolution.

Notes

1. Burton Watson, Records of the Grand Historian of China translated from the Shih-chi of Ssu-ma Ch'ien (Vol. I; New York, 1961), 30-33. Romanization of names in the original has been changed to conform to current Chinese style (Pinyin).
2. Edward H. Schafer, The Golden Peaches of Samarkand: A Study in T'ang Exotics (Berkeley, 1963).
3. Joseph Needham, Science and Civilization in China (7 vols. projected Cambridge, 1959-), IV, 3, 221-222.
4. Chiao-min Hsieh, Atlas of China (New York, 1973), 44.
5. Edwin John Dingle, Borderlands of Eternity, Embracing "Across China on Foot" (Los Angeles, 1939), 79-80.
6. E. H. Parker, Up the Yangtze (Hong Kong, 1891).
7. J.F. Bishop, The Yangtze Valley and Beyond (London, 1899), 114.
8. Zeng Guofan, Collected Works (5 vols.; Taipei, 1965), Wenji (Essays), 147-148.


MONGOLIA
MANCHURIA
XINJIANG
GOBI
DUNHUANG
JIUQUAN
GANSU CORRIDOR
BEIJING
TIANJIN
KOREA
QINGHAI
GANSU
SHANXI
NORTH CHINA PLAIN
HEBEI
SHANDONG
YELLOW SEA
YELLOW R.
LANZHOU
SHAANXI
YELLOW R.
KAIFENG
WEI R.
LOYANG
XI'ANT
HONAN
QINLING MTNS
JIANGSU
NANJING
SUZHOU
SHANGHAI
TIBET
HAN R.
JIALING R.
CHENGDU
WUHAN
ANHUI
YANGTZE R.
HANGZHOU
EAST CHINA SEA
SICHUAN
IWANXIAN
HUBEI
CHONGQING
HUKOU
ZHEJIANG
YANGTZE R.
DONGTING LAKE
BOYANG LAKE
GUIZHOU
XIANG R.
HUNAN
JIANGXI
FUJIAN
GREAT WALL
GRAND CANAL
YUNNAN
TAIWAN
WEST R.
CANTON
GUANGXI
GUANGDONG
MACAO
SOUTH CHINA SEA