A History of China

J. A. G. Roberts

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Preface

In 1991 Jung Chang published *Wild Swans*, a personal history of China as seen through the eyes of her grandmother, her mother and herself. The book was immensely popular and it introduced many of its readers to a subject entirely new to them: the making of modern China.

This one-volume account of the entire span of Chinese history also attempts to reach a new audience. It assumes no prior knowledge of China's past and is intended for a wider readership, one which is aware of the current interest in China's history and which recognizes the importance of the role that China will play in world affairs in the twenty-first century.

Chinese personal and geographical names have been transliterated into pinyin, the official system of romanization, rather than the traditional Wade-Giles system. Pinyin is now used in newspapers and is being adopted generally in scholarly works, although Wade-Giles is still used in the ongoing 15-volume *Cambridge History of China*. All Chinese personal and place names have been transliterated into pinyin. Thus Mao Tse-tung is rendered as Mao Zedong, and rather less familiarly Chiang Kai-shek is referred to as Jiang Jieshi. Likewise, Peking is transliterated as Beijing, Canton as Guangzhou and Hong Kong as Xianggang. Direct quotations which contain spellings in the Wade-Giles system have been amended to pinyin. When familiar names first appear in unfamiliar forms, the familiar form is also quoted and this practice is also followed in the index.

For the most part, pinyin spelling approximates to the phonetic values of English, with the following notable exceptions:

- c is pronounced 'ts' as in Tsar
- i is pronounced 'ee', except when it follows c, ch, r, s, sh, z and zh, in which case it is pronounced approximately 'er'
- ian is pronounced 'ien'
- q is pronounced 'ch' as in cheap

- r is similar to the English 'r' but is pronounced with the tongue behind the front teeth
- x is pronounced 'sh' as in sham
- z is pronounced 'ds' as in hands
- zh is pronounced 'j' as in jasmine

When citing Chinese names, the family name is given first, followed by the given name. However, in the notes, to maintain consistency with the citation of other names, the Western practice of putting the surname last is observed.

Following the usual practice, Chinese emperors are designated by their reign titles, not by their personal names. Non-Chinese names, for example Mongol or Manchu names, are cited in the form in which they are best known in the West.

Acknowledgements

This book is a direct descendant of Juan Gonzalez de Mendoza's *History of the Great and Mighty Kingdom of China*, which was published in Rome in 1585 and which was both the first, and the first one-volume, history of China. Like all writers who have followed in Mendoza's footsteps, I owe a tremendous debt to my predecessors, to the many scholars who have written about China. What I have written is a synthesis of the labours of others, particularly those whose efforts in recent years have deepened our understanding of Chinese society and transformed our concept of Chinese history.

I must thank my colleagues and students, past and present, at the University of Huddersfield, who have given me their time and ideas. I owe a debt of gratitude to the staff of the University of Huddersfield Library Services and to Mr Steve Pratt, the University's cartographer. My most substantial debt is to my wife Jan, who has endured my prolonged commitment to the task which has now been completed.

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Introduction

The People's Republic of China, excluding Taiwan, has a surface area of 9,560,900 sq. kms, slightly larger than that of the United States. Only the Russian Federation and Canada are larger than China. Its population, which now exceeds 1.2 billion,* is greater than that of any other country in the world. Modern China is divided into 22 provinces, three municipalities (Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin) and five autonomous regions. In terms of both area and population the single province of Sichuan is much larger than Germany.

These statistics illustrate one of the problems of writing a history of China. Modern China is a continental country, which contains within its borders a very wide range of ethnic, linguistic and regional variations. As it is not possible to encompass all aspects of this complex society in a one-volume history, the approach adopted has been to concentrate on the national picture and to make only sporadic reference to developments at regional or provincial levels. In the past this decision might have been excused on the grounds that there were few good regional studies, but this is no longer true. For example, John W. Dardess has used the exceptionally rich sources of Ming date for Taihe county, Jiangxi province, to explore the relationship between the county and 'the national matrix in which it was so firmly and inextricably embedded'.¹

An important feature of this book is the emphasis which is placed on historical interpretation rather than on historical narrative. On a number of topics the variety of views which have been expressed is summarized briefly. However, Chinese history has also provoked wider debates which have had profound effect on historical interpretation. The influence of some of these debates may be discerned in the presentation of events, but they are not referred to explicitly. It is convenient to identify and discuss four of them briefly at this point.

* 1 billion = 1 thousand million.

THE 'DIFFERENTNESS' OF CHINA

In the eighteenth century some French *philosophes* regarded China as a model for Europe and suggested that features of Chinese society should be adopted in Western states. By the nineteenth century this admiration had been replaced with condescension. Western travellers delighted in identifying Chinese 'contrarities', pointing out the ways in which Chinese custom was the direct opposite of Western practice.

The idea that Chinese society was in some fundamental way different from the societies of the West was given fresh impetus by Karl Marx. He posited that all human societies would pass through four stages: communal, slave, feudal and bourgeois society, before advancing to communism. However, he had also referred to an 'Asiatic mode of production', characterized by isolated village communities, large-scale public works projects, particularly for education and defence, the absence of private ownership of land and the absence of a meaningful class struggle. By identifying an 'Asiatic mode' he implied that Asian societies had not evolved on the lines followed by those of Europe, an apparent contradiction of his general thesis. A variation on this theme was developed by Karl Wittfogel in *Oriental Despotism* (1957). Wittfogel argued that in a 'hydraulic society' such as China, where the farm economy depended on the control of water resources, the government had to be able to mobilize vast numbers of peasants for irrigation and flood control works. This situation ensured that government remained autocratic, and that commercial and industrial development was inhibited. References to an Asiatic mode of production continue to appear in Marxist studies of Chinese history. For example, in a recent book Li Jun has argued that the Asiatic mode of production remains a valid concept, but it was the dominant mode of production only in the Western Zhou period (?1122–771 BC).²

References to an 'Asiatic mode of production', even in its attenuated form, distance China's historical experience from that of other societies. Of course Chinese society, like any other society, is *sui generis*, that is to say it has its own unique characteristics. The richness of Chinese culture, the complexity of China's political experience, the drama of China's recent past, might seem to justify treating China as a special case. Nevertheless in

these pages the history of China is presented as being in no fundamental way different from the history of any other nation or society.

THE PERIODIZATION OF CHINESE HISTORY

Traditional Chinese historiography divided the country's history into dynastic periods and explained the divisions by reference to a dynastic cycle. According to that view, dynasties were founded by able and virtuous rulers but their successors failed to maintain the standards that their forefathers had set. If later rulers did not respond to repeated warnings, which took the form of portents, the mandate of heaven was transferred to the founder of a new dynasty. Some modern historians, while accepting that the personal qualities of its rulers had some influence on a dynasty's fortunes, have argued that the dynastic cycle was essentially the product of economic and administrative factors. When a new dynasty was founded the ruler eliminated his rivals, established an effective government, levied moderate taxes and secured the frontiers. Under later rulers the costs of government rose, powerful families began to evade taxation, and the frontiers became over-extended. In time, officials became corrupt, public works were neglected and the burden of tax borne by the peasants increased. Finally the peasants rose in rebellion and overthrew the dynasty.

Even if the concept of the dynastic cycle has some validity, a repetitive cycle is not a consistent feature in imperial history. For prolonged periods, for example between 220 and 589, no one dynasty ruled over the whole of China. At other times the dynasty changed but there was no evidence of a cyclical pattern – the continuity between the Sui and the Tang, for example, was very marked. Some of the most important historical turning points in China's history have come in the middle of a dynastic period. Although the rebellion of An Lushan had a devastating effect on the Tang dynasty, the Tang emperors remained on the throne for another 150 years. On the other hand, the change from one dynasty to another might coincide with a major social transition. The Japanese historian Naito Torajiro put forward what has become known as the 'Naito hypothesis'. He argued that modern

Chinese history began not with the arrival of Westerners in China, but at the end of the Tang and the beginning of the Song periods. That point, he claimed, marked the end of aristocratic government and the beginning of the period of autocratic rule.

From the above, it will be apparent that the division of Chinese history into dynastic periods is often questioned. Nevertheless, periodization by dynasties remains the most commonly used chronological framework. As it is the organizational principle which is most accessible to the reader, it has been used in a modified form in this book.

HAN NATIONALISM

The Chinese call themselves Han Chinese, a reference to the Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 220), when Chinese culture first spread across the territory which is now called China. Inevitably a history of China is a history of the Han Chinese. It will make only passing reference to China's minority nationalities, who comprise 8 per cent of China's population, and it will adopt a Chinese perspective on the long periods in Chinese history when part or all of China was ruled by non-Chinese peoples.

In 1967 Ho Ping-ti, then President of the Association for Asian Studies, gave an address entitled 'The significance of the Qing period in Chinese history'. He began by asserting that the Manchus, the founders of the Qing dynasty, had established the most successful dynasty of conquest in Chinese history. He then argued that the key to the Qing success was the adoption by the early Manchu rulers of a policy of systematic sinicization. Thirty years later Evelyn S. Rawski, also giving the Presidential address, responded to his predecessor. He began by drawing attention to the wealth of Manchu-language materials which until recently Western and Chinese scholars had spurned as being mainly translations of Chinese documents. He suggested that the picture which was now emerging from close study of these materials contradicted Ho's assertion that Manchu success was based on sinicization.

The new scholarship suggests just the opposite: the key to Qing success, at least in terms of empire-building, lay in its

ability to use its cultural links with the non-Han peoples of Inner Asia and to differentiate the administration of the non-Han regions from the administration of the former Ming provinces.

Such a view acts as a corrective to the imbalance created by unreflective Han nationalism, which has denigrated the periods in Chinese history, for example the Yuan or Mongol dynasty, when China was under foreign rule.

CHINA'S RESPONSE TO THE WEST

Much of China's modern history, particularly since the Opium wars, has been presented in Western historical literature as a 'response to the West'. The most important dynamic in China's modern development is assumed to be the reaction to the West's 'challenge' and the question is then posed: why did China not respond more rapidly and more effectively to that challenge? Such an approach defines the dynamic in nineteenth-century history as Sino-Western contact – which means a concentration of interest on the treaty ports, Western economic imperialism, etc., while ignoring the broader context of cultural and social changes already taking place in Chinese society.³ The 'response to the West' approach also assumes that the Western impact on China, whether beneficial or oppressive, was the catalyst which enabled China to escape from the confines of 'traditional' society. This view has been challenged in a number of recent works which take as their starting point the perception that Chinese society was not unchanging, nor were Chinese intellectuals unthinking. In these books there has been a conscious effort to present a more 'China-centred' history of China. It is hoped that something of the same emphasis is to be found in this volume.

Map 1 Prehistoric and early historic sites in north China

Map 2 China at the time of Confucius, c.551–479 BC

Map 3 China Proper on the eve of the rebellion of An Lushan

Map 4 China under the Southern Song and the Jin, c.1140

Map 5 China in the seventeenth century: the Manchu invasion and the Revolt of the Three Feudatories

Map 6 China Proper c.1800

Map 7 The rise of rebellion, 1796–1873

Map 8 Foreign encroachment on China, c.1900

Map 9 The Long March, 1934–5