

On China

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"Fascinating, shrewd . . . The book deftly traces the rhythms and patterns of Chinese history."-Michiko Kakutani, The New York Times

In this sweeping and insightful history, Henry Kissinger turns for the first time at book length to a country he has known intimately for decades and whose modern relations with the West he helped shape. *On China* illuminates the inner workings of Chinese diplomacy during such pivotal events as the initial encounters between China and tight line modern European powers, the formation and breakdown of the Sino-Soviet alliance, the Korean War, and Richard Nixon's historic trip to Beijing. With a new final chapter on the emerging superpower's twenty-first-century role in global politics and economics, *On China* provides historical perspective on Chinese foreign affairs from one of the premier statesmen of our time.

Henry Kissinger served as National Security Advisor and then Secretary of State under Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford. He received the 1973 Nobel Peace Prize, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and the Medal of Liberty, among other awards.

Chapter 1

The Singularity of China

SOCIETIES AND NATIONS tend to think of themselves as eternal. They also cherish a tale of their origin. A special feature of Chinese civilization is that it seems to have no beginning. It appears in history less as a conventional nation-state than a permanent natural phenomenon. In the tale of the Yellow Emperor, revered by many Chinese as the legendary founding ruler, China seems already to exist. When the Yellow Emperor appears in myth, Chinese civilization has fallen into chaos. Competing princes harass each other and the people, yet an enfeebled ruler fails to maintain order. Levying an army, the new hero pacifies the realm and is acclaimed as emperor.¹

The Yellow Emperor has gone down in history as a founding hero; yet in the founding myth, he is reestablishing, not creating, an empire. China predated him; it strides into the historical consciousness as an established state requiring only restoration, not creation. This paradox of Chinese history recurs with the ancient sage Confucius: again, he is seen as the "founder" of a culture although he stressed that he had invented nothing, that he was merely trying to reinvigorate the principles of harmony which had once existed in the golden age but had been lost in Confucius's own era of political chaos.

Reflecting on the paradox of China's origins, the nineteenth-century missionary and traveler, the Abbé Rgis-Evariste Huc, observed:

Chinese civilization originates in an antiquity so remote that we vainly endeavor to discover its commencement. There are no traces of the state of infancy among this people. This is a very peculiar fact respecting China. We are accustomed in the history of nations to find some well-defined point of departure, and the historic documents, traditions, and

monuments that remain to us generally permit us to follow, almost step by step, the progress of civilization, to be present at its birth, to watch its development, its onward march, and in many cases, its subsequent decay and fall. But it is not thus with the Chinese. They seem to have been always living in the same stage of advancement as in the present day; and the data of antiquity are such as to confirm that opinion.²

When Chinese written characters first evolved, during the Shang Dynasty in the second millennium B.C., ancient Egypt was at the height of its glory. The great city-states of classical Greece had not yet emerged, and Rome was millennia away. Yet the direct descendant of the Shang writing system is still used by well over a billion people today. Chinese today can understand inscriptions written in the age of Confucius; contemporary Chinese books and conversations are enriched by centuries-old aphorisms citing ancient battles and court intrigues.

At the same time, Chinese history featured many periods of civil war, interregnum, and chaos. After each collapse, the Chinese state reconstituted itself as if by some immutable law of nature. At each stage, a new uniting figure emerged, following essentially the precedent of the Yellow Emperor, to subdue his rivals and reunify China (and sometimes enlarge its bounds). The famous opening of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, a fourteenth-century epic novel treasured by centuries of Chinese (including Mao, who is said to have pored over it almost obsessively in his youth), evokes this continuous rhythm: "The empire, long divided, must unite; long united, must divide. Thus it has

ever been."³ Each period of disunity was viewed as an aberration. Each new dynasty reached back to the previous dynasty's principles of governance in order to reestablish continuity. The fundamental precepts of Chinese culture endured, tested by the strain of periodic calamity.

Before the seminal event of Chinese unification in 221 B.C., there had been a millennium of dynastic rule that gradually disintegrated as the feudal subdivisions evolved from autonomy to independence. The culmination was two and a half centuries of turmoil recorded in history as the Warring States period (475-221 B.C.). Its European equivalent would be the interregnum between the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 and the end of the Second World War, when a multiplicity of European states was struggling for preeminence within the framework of the balance of power. After 221 B.C., China maintained the ideal of empire and unity but followed the practice of fracturing, then reuniting, in cycles sometimes lasting several hundred years.

When the state fractured, wars between the various components were fought savagely. Mao once claimed that the population of China declined from fifty million to ten million during the so-called Three Kingdoms period (A.D. 220-80),⁴ and the conflict among the contending groups between the two world wars of the twentieth century was extremely bloody as well.

At its ultimate extent, the Chinese cultural sphere stretched over a continental area much larger than any European state, indeed about the size of continental Europe. Chinese language and culture, and the Emperor's political writ, expanded to every known terrain: from the steppelands and pine forests in the north shading into Siberia, to the tropical jungles and terraced rice farms in the south; from the east coast with its canals, ports, and

fishing villages, to the stark deserts of Central Asia and the ice-capped peaks of the Himalayan frontier. The extent and variety of this territory bolstered the sense that China was a world unto itself. It supported a conception of the Emperor as a figure of universal consequence, presiding over tian xia, or "All Under Heaven."

The Era of Chinese Preeminence Through many millennia of Chinese civilization, China was never obliged to deal with other countries or civilizations that were comparable to it in scale and sophistication. India was known to the Chinese, as Mao later noted, but for much of history it was divided into separate kingdoms. The two civilizations exchanged goods and Buddhist influences along the Silk Road but were elsewhere walled off from casual contact by the almost impenetrable Himalayas and the Tibetan Plateau. The massive and forbidding deserts of Central Asia separated China from the Near Eastern cultures of Persia and Babylonia and even more from the Roman Empire. Trade caravans undertook intermittent journeys, but China as a society did not engage societies of comparable scale and achievement. Though China and Japan shared a number of core cultural and political institutions, neither was prepared to recognize the other's superiority; their solution was to curtail contact for centuries at a time. Europe was even further away in what the Chinese considered the Western Oceans, by definition inaccessible to Chinese culture and pitifully incapable of acquiring it—as the Emperor told a British envoy in 1793.

The territorial claims of the Chinese Empire stopped at the water's edge. As early as the Song Dynasty (960-1279), China led the world in nautical technology; its fleets could have carried the empire into an era of conquest and exploration.⁵ Yet China acquired no overseas colonies and showed relatively little interest in the countries beyond its coast. It developed no rationale for venturing abroad to convert the barbarians to Confucian principles or Buddhist virtues. When the conquering Mongols commandeered the Song fleet and its experienced captains, they mounted two attempted invasions of Japan. Both were turned back by inclement weather—the kamikaze (or "Divine Wind") of Japanese lore.⁶ Yet when the Mongol Dynasty collapsed, the expeditions, though technically feasible, were never again attempted. No Chinese

leader ever articulated a rationale for why China would want to control the Japanese archipelago.

But in the early years of the Ming Dynasty, between 1405 and 1433, China launched one of history's most remarkable and mysterious naval enterprises: Admiral Zheng He set out in fleets of technologically unparalleled "treasure ships" to destinations as far as Java, India, the Horn of Africa, and the Strait of Hormuz. At the time of Zheng's voyages, the European age of exploration had not yet begun. China's fleet possessed what would have seemed an unbridgeable technological advantage: in the size, sophistication, and number of its vessels, it dwarfed the Spanish Armada (which was still 150 years away).

Historians still debate the actual purpose of these missions. Zheng He was a singular figure in the age of exploration: a Chinese Muslim eunuch conscripted into imperial service as a child, he fits no obvious historical precedent. At each stop on his journeys, he formally pro-

claimed the magnificence of China's new Emperor, bestowed lavish gifts on the rulers he encountered, and invited them to travel in person or send envoys to China. There, they were to acknowledge their place in the Sinocentric world order by performing the ritual "kowitz" to acknowledge the Emperor's superiority. Yet beyond declaring China's greatness and issuing invitations to portentous ritual, Zheng He displayed no territorial ambition. He brought back only gifts, or "tribute"; he claimed no colonies or resources for China beyond the metaphysical bounty of extending the limits of All Under Heaven. At most he can be said to have created favorable conditions for Chinese merchants, through a kind of early exercise of Chinese "soft power."⁷

Zheng He's expeditions stopped abruptly in 1433, coincident with the recurrence of threats along China's northern land frontier. The next Emperor ordered the fleet dismantled and the records of Zheng He's voyages destroyed. The expeditions were never repeated. Though Chinese traders continued to ply the routes Zheng He sailed, China's naval abilities faded—so much so that the Ming rulers' response to the

subsequent menace of piracy off China's southeast coast was to attempt a forced migration of the coastal population ten miles inland. China's naval history was thus a hinge that failed to swing: technically capable of dominance, China retired voluntarily from the field of naval exploration just as Western interest was beginning to take hold.

China's splendid isolation nurtured a particular Chinese self-perception. Chinese elites grew accustomed to the notion that China was unique—not just "a great civilization" among others, but civilization itself. A British translator wrote in 1850:

An intelligent European, accustomed to reflect on the state of a number of countries enjoying a variety of different advantages, and laboring each under peculiar disadvantages, could, by a few well directed questions, and from very little data, form a tolerably correct notion of the state of a people hitherto unknown to him; but it would be a great error to suppose that this is the case with the Chinese. Their exclusion of foreigners and confinement to their own country has, by depriving them of all opportunities of making comparisons, sadly circumscribed their ideas; they are thus totally unable to free themselves from the dominion of association, and judge everything by rules of purely Chinese convention.⁸

China knew, of course, of different societies around its periphery in Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, Burma; but in the Chinese perception, China was considered the center of the world, the "Middle Kingdom," and other societies were assessed as gradations from it. As the Chinese saw it, a host of lesser states that imbibed Chinese culture and paid tribute to China's greatness constituted the natural order of the universe. The borders between China and the surrounding peoples were not so much political and territorial demarcations as cultural differentiations. The outward radiance of Chinese culture throughout East

Asia led the American political scientist Lucian Pye to comment famously that, in the modern age, China remains a "civilization pretending to be a nation-state."⁹

The pretensions underlying this traditional Chinese world order endured well into the

modern era. As late as 1863, China's Emperor (himself a member of a "foreign" Manchu Dynasty that had conquered China two centuries earlier) dispatched a letter informing Abraham Lincoln of China's commitment to good relations with the United States. The Emperor based his communication on the grandiloquent assurance that, "[h]aving, with reverence, received the commission from Heaven to rule the universe, we regard both the middle empire [China] and the outside countries as constituting one family, without any distinction."¹⁰ When the letter was dispatched, China had already lost two wars with the Western powers, which were busy staking out spheres of interest in Chinese territory. The Emperor seems to have treated these catastrophes as similar to other barbarian invasions that were overcome, in the end, by China's endurance and superior culture. For most of history, there was, in fact, nothing particularly fanciful about Chinese claims. With each generation, the Han Chinese had expanded from their original base in the Yellow River valley, gradually drawing neighboring societies into various stages of approximation of Chinese patterns. Chinese scientific and technological achievements equaled, and frequently outstripped, those of their Western European, Indian, and Arab counterparts.¹¹

Not only was the scale of China traditionally far beyond that of the European states in population and in territory; until the Industrial Revolution, China was far richer. United by a vast system of canals connecting the great rivers and population centers, China was for centuries the world's most productive economy and most populous trading area.¹² But since it was largely self-sufficient, other regions had only peripheral comprehension of its vastness and its wealth. In fact, China produced a greater share of total world GDP than any Western society

in eighteen of the last twenty centuries. As late as 1820, it produced over 30 percent of world GDP—an amount exceeding the GDP of Western Europe, Eastern Europe, and the United States combined.¹³

Western observers encountering China in the early modern era were stunned by its vitality and material prosperity. Writing in 1736, the French Jesuit Jean-Baptiste Du Halde summed up the awestruck reactions of Western visitors to China:

The riches peculiar to each province, and the facility of conveying merchandise, by means of rivers and canals, have rendered the domestic trade of the empire always very flourishing. . . .

The inland trade of China is so great that the commerce of all Europe is not to be compared therewith; the provinces being like so many kingdoms, which communicate to each other their respective productions.¹⁴

Thirty years later, the French political economist François Quesnay went even further:

[N]o one can deny that this state is the most beautiful in the world, the most densely populated, and the most flourishing kingdom known. Such an empire as that of China is equal to what all Europe would be if the latter were united under a single sovereign.¹⁵

Other Books

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