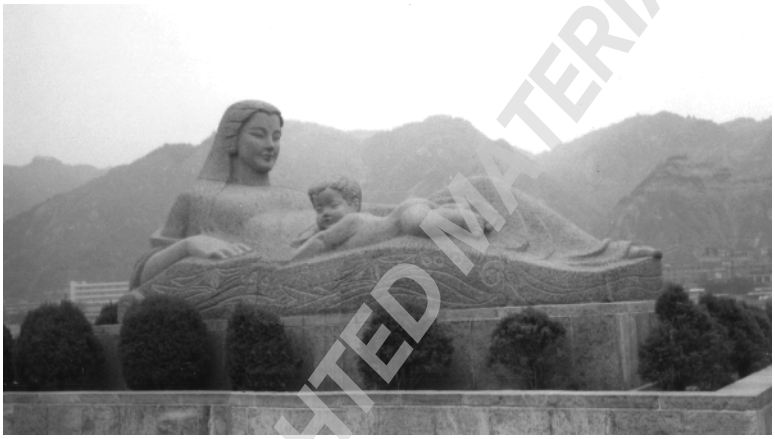
CHAPTER ONE

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHINA



The ''Mother River'' monument in Lanzhou, Gansu province

The Yellow River (*Huanghe*) originates at the foot of the Kunlun mountains in the west and flows over 5,000 kilometers eastward to the Pacific Ocean. The river has been generally regarded as the cradle of the Chinese nation. It was along the banks of the river that the Chinese civilization first flowered. The geographical and hydrological characteristics of the Yellow River have shaped the Chinese nation, its 5,000-year civilization, as well as its distinctive philosophy and history . . .

Tao proliferates One;
*(*dao sheng yi)
One gives birth to Two;
*(*yi sheng er)
Two begets Three;
*(*er sheng san)
Three creates the world.
*(*san sheng wanwu)

—*Laozi (c.* 600 BC)

THE ORIGINS OF THE NATION

China, shaped like a rooster, and situated in East Asia, has a 14,500 km coastline along the East China Sea, the Korean Bay, the Yellow Sea, and the South China Sea. It has shared confines of approximately 22,140 km with North Korea, Russia, and Mongolia in the northeast and north; Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan in the west; India and Nepal in the southwest; and Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam in the south. During its thousands of years of history, there have been many legendary stories about this large nation, as well as its people, culture, and history.

In the prehistoric period, the progenitors of the Chinese people were scattered in small tribes over the middle reaches of the Yellow River. The present-day Chinese see themselves as the descendants of the Hua-Xia people. The Hua people, who first settled around Mt Hua near the middle reaches of the Yellow River Valley, together with the Xia people, who established themselves near the Xia River (the upper course of the Han River, a tributary of the Yangtze River), were referred to as the Hua-Xia people. Both of these areas were located in the central southern region of Shaanxi province. Toward the end of the Neolithic period, these tribes were already using a primitive form of writing, and had developed a system to measure time and to count numbers. They had also developed a variety of articles for daily use, including clothing, houses, weapons, pottery, and money.

According to mythology, the Chinese nation begins with *Pangu*, the creator of the universe. However, Chinese culture began to develop with the emergence of Emperor Yan (Yandi) and Emperor Huang (Huangdi) around 2300 BC. For this reason the Chinese today refer to themselves as the *yanhuang zisun* (the descendants of emperors Yan and Huang). During the period of the reign of Emperor Yan, Emperor Huang, and their successors, people were taught to observe "five basic relationships," including "good relations between sovereign and minister, father and son, husband and wife, elder brother and yonger brother, and friend and friend." This code of conduct, which was later developed systematically by Confucius (551–475 BC) and his disciples, established an ethical philosophy that has influenced Chinese society for the past 2,000 years.

From the twenty-first to the second century BC, three ancient dynasties—Xia, Shang, and Zhou—were established in the Yellow River Valley. The Xia dynasty, founded by the great Yu and his son, Qi, lasted until the sixteenth century BC. At the very least, the Xia dynasty marked an evolutionary stage between the late Neolithic cultures and the characteristic Chinese urban civilization of the Shang dynasty. During this period, the territorial boundaries of the Chinese nation began to take shape. The country was divided into nine administrative prefectures and a system of land taxes was established.

The Shang dynasty lasted from the sixteenth century BC to *c.* 1046 BC. The Shang dynasty (which was also called the Yin dynasty in its later stages) was founded by a rebel leader, Tang, who overthrew the last of the Xia rulers. Its civilization was based on agriculture, augmented by hunting and animal husbandry. Two of the most important events of the period were the development of a writing system, as revealed in archaic Chinese inscriptions found on tortoise shells and flat cattle bones (commonly called oracle bones), and the use of bronze metallurgy. A number of ceremonial bronze vessels with inscriptions date from the Shang period; the workmanship on the bronzes attests to a high level of civilization. For example, in the ruins of the city of Anyang (located at northern Henan province), the last capital of the Shang dynasty, archaeologists have unearthed over 150,000 pieces of

oracle bones and other relics of the dynasty, suggesting that China experienced relative stability and prosperity in that period.

In a war with the 28th ruler of the Shang dynasty, the allied forces, under the command of King Wu, defeated the Shang army, leading to the foundation of a new dynasty named Zhou. The power of the rulers in the Zhou dynasty was based on *Zhongfa*—a system of inheritance and ancestral worship at a time when polygamy was the customary practice among the royalty and nobility.[1] In this way, a huge structure was built up, radiating from a central hub through endless feudal and in-feudal systems. Particularly noteworthy is that during the dynasty, education was widespread with a national university in the capital and various grades of schools. Scholars and intellectuals were held in high esteem and art and learning flourished as never before.

The Chinese name *zhongguo* (or "China" as called in the Western Hemisphere) derives from the term "center under heaven," a term that was first coined by King Wu of the Zhou dynasty. The king's intention was to move the Zhou capital from Haojing in western China to Luoyi (now known as Luoyang) in central China in order to maintain more effective control over the entire nation. During the second half of the Zhou dynasty (also known as the "Spring and Autumn and Warring States" period), a new group of regional rulers sought to obtain the services of talented individuals who could help to increase their political influence. The result was an unprecedented development of independent thinking and of original philosophies. The most celebrated philosophers of this period were Laozi, Confucius, Zhuangzi, Mencius, Mozi, Hanfei, and Xunzi. These individuals became the leading spirits of the Taoist, Confucian, Mohist, and Legalist schools of thought.

RISE AND FALL OF THE EMPIRE

In 221 BC, China was unified by Ying Zheng (also called Qin Shihuang), the first emperor of the Qin dynasty. The most important contribution of the Qin dynasty was the foundation of a completely

new social and political order under a strict system of rewards and punishment favored by a group of scholars known as Legalists. In place of feudalism, the country was reorganized into 36 prefectures and a number of counties. Under this prefecture–county administration, all authority was vested in the central government. For the first time in history, China's written language, currency, and weights and measures were all unified and standardized. In order to consolidate and strengthen his imperial rule, the Emperor Qin Shihuang undertook large-scale construction projects, including national roadways, waterways, and a great wall that was 5,000 kilometers long. At its greatest extent, the Great Wall reaches from eastern Liaoning to northwestern Gansu. These activities required enormous levies of manpower and resources, not to mention repressive measures. After the conquest of the "barbarians" in the south, the Chinese territory was extended to the shores of the South China Sea. In spite of many political and military achievements, the multicultural development was monopolized in the Qin dynasty. Excessive trust was placed in the efficacy of the Legalist method, while the books on Confucianism and other schools of thought were burned in order to keep the people in a state of ignorance. Even worse, those intellectuals and scholars who criticized the government were either executed or forced to work as slave laborers. Due to its cruel and despotic rule, the Qin dynasty was to be overthrown less than 20 years after its triumph. The imperial system initiated during the Qin dynasty, however, set a pattern that was to be repeated over the next two millennia.

Five years later, Liu Bang reunited China and established a long-lived dynasty, the Han (206 BC–AD 220). Strong military forces made it possible for the Han dynasty to expand China's territories to the Western Dominion in today's Xinjiang and Central Asia, and also to Taiwan island in the East China Sea. The Han dynasty was a glorious age in Chinese history. The political institutions of the Qin and the Han dynasties were typical of all the dynasties that were to follow. The nine-chapter legal code drawn up in the early days of the Han served as a model for all later versions of Chinese codes. The political and military

might of the Han dynasty was so impressive that since this time the Chinese have referred to themselves as the "Han" people. Under the Han rulers Confucianism was given special emphasis and those doing research on Confucian studies were given priority for public positions. Emperor Wudi (who reigned between 140–87 BC) listed the Confucian classics as subjects of study for his ministers, and appointed well-read scholars to positions of authority labeled *Boshi* (doctor). Confucianism thus gained official sanction over competing philosophical schools and became the core of Chinese culture. The Han period also produced China's most famous historian, Sima Qian (145–87 BC), whose *Shiji* (historical records) provides a detailed chronicle from the time of a legendary Huang emperor to the period of Emperor Wudi of the Han. This period was also marked by a series of technological advances, including two of the great Chinese inventions, paper and porcelain.

At the end of the Eastern Han period (AD 25–220)[2] political corruption and social chaos, together with widespread civil disturbances and royal throne usurpation, led eventually to the creation of three independent kingdoms—the Wei (AD 220–265) in the north, the Shu (AD 221–263) in the southwest, and the Wu (AD 222–280) in the southeast. China remained divided until AD 265 when the Jin dynasty was founded in Luoyang in central China. The Jin was not as militarily strong as the non-Han counterparts in the north, which encouraged the southward move of its capital to what is now called Nanjing (southern capital). Large-scale migration from the north to the south led to the Yangtze River Valley becoming more prosperous than ever before, and the economic and cultural center therefore shifted gradually to the southeast of the country. This transfer of the capital coincided with China's political fragmentation into a succession of dynasties that lasted from AD 420 to 589. In the Yellow River Valley, the non-Han peoples lived with the indigenous Han people, forming a more diverse and dynamic Chinese nation than ever before. Despite the political disunity of the times, there were notable technological advances, including the invention of gunpowder and the wheelbarrow.

During this period, Buddhism achieved an increasing popularity in both northern and southern China.

China was reunified during the Sui dynasty (AD 581–618). The Sui is famous for its construction of the Grand Canal, which linked the Yellow River and the Huai and Yangtze rivers in order to secure improved communication between the south and the north of the country. In terms of human costs, only the Great Wall—which was constructed during the Qin dynasty—is comparable with the Canal. Like the Qin, the Sui was also a short-lived dynasty, which was succeeded by a powerful dynasty, the Tang (AD 618–907). The Tang period was the golden age of literature and art. A government system supported by a large class of Confucian literati selected through a system of civil service examinations was perfected under Tang rule. This competitive procedure was designed to draw the best talents into government. But perhaps an even greater consideration for the Tang rulers, aware that imperial dependence on powerful aristocratic families and warlords would have destabilizing consequences, was to create a body of career officials that had no autonomous territorial or functional power base. As it turned out, these scholar-officials acquired considerable status within their local communities, family ties, and shared values that connected them to the imperial court. From the Tang times until the closing days of the Qing empire in AD 1911, scholar-officials functioned often as intermediaries between the grassroots level and the government.

By the middle of the eighth century, Tang power had ebbed. Domestic economic instability and military defeat in AD 751 by Arabs at Talas, in Central Asia, marked the beginning of five centuries of steady military decline for the Chinese empire. Misrule, court intrigues, economic exploitation, and popular rebellions weakened the empire, making it possible for northern invaders to terminate the dynasty in AD 907. The next half-century saw the gradual fragmentation of China into Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (AD 907–960).

In AD 960, China was reunited once again. The founders of the Song dynasty built an effective centralized bureaucracy staffed with

civilian scholar-officials. Regional military governors and their supporters were replaced by centrally appointed officials. This system of civilian rule led to a greater concentration of power in the hands of the emperor and his palace bureaucracy than had been achieved in the previous dynasties. Unlike the Tang dynasty, the Song dynasty (AD 960–1279) was militarily confronted by powerful enemies from the north. The conflict between the Song and the Liao (a non-Han dynasty in northern China from AD 907 to 1125) lasted for more than a century before another non-Han dynasty, the Jin (AD 1115–1234), first defeated the Liao and then in 1127 took control of the Song's capital, Kaifeng, and captured two Song emperors as hostages. With northern China falling into the hands of the Jin, the Song capital moved from the Yellow River Valley to Lin'an (today's Hangzhou). As a result, the economic and cultural centers shifted from the central to the southeastern areas of China. Despite its military weakness, the Song dynasty contributed a great deal to the civilization of the world. Many Chinese inventions, including the compass, gunpowder, and movable-type printing, were introduced to the West during this period. Culturally, the Song also refined many of the developments of previous centuries. The Neo-Confucian philosophers found certain purity in the originality of the ancient classical texts of Confucianism. The most influential of these philosophers was Zhu Xi (AD 1130–1200), whose synthesis of Confucian thought and Buddhist, Taoist, and other ideas became the official imperial ideology from late Song times to the late nineteenth century. Neo-Confucian doctrines also came to play a dominant role in the intellectual life of Korea, Vietnam, and Japan.

In AD 1279 the Mongol cavalry, under the leadership of Genghis Khan, controlled the entire Chinese territory. The 88-year Yuan dynasty was an extraordinary one. Under Mongol rule, China once again expanded its borders. During the strongest period of the Yuan dynasty, China's territory even extended as far as the eastern part of Europe. The Mongols' extensive West Asian and European contacts led to a substantial degree of cultural exchange. This led to the

development of rich cultural diversities. Western musical instruments were introduced and helped to enrich the Chinese performing arts. From this period dates the conversion to Islam, by Muslims from Central Asia, of growing numbers of Chinese in the northwest and southwest. Nestorianism and Roman Catholicism also enjoyed a period of toleration. Tibetan Buddhism (Lamaism) flourished, although native Taoism endured Mongol persecutions. Confucian governmental practices and examinations based on the Classics, which had fallen into disuse in north China during the period of disunity, were reinstated by the Mongols in the hope of maintaining order over Han society. Certain key Chinese innovations, such as porcelain production, playing cards, and medical literature, were introduced in Europe, while the production of thin glass and *cloisonné* became increasingly popular in China. European people were also enthralled by the account given by Venetian Marco Polo of his trip to "Cambaluc," the Great Khan's capital (now Beijing), and of the ways of life he encountered there.

In internal affairs, however, the Mongolian caste system—in which the majority of the Han people were seen as inferior to non-Han peoples—was not ideal. Widespread famines, resulting from natural disasters, political corruption, and misgovernment, eventually resulted in a successful anti-Mongol revolution led by Zhu Yuanzhang, who founded the Han-based dynasty, the Ming (AD 1368–1644) in Nanjing. In 1421, the Ming dynasty moved its seat to Beijing, after defeating the nomadic tribes of the northern part of the Great Wall. In Southeast Asia the Chinese armies reconquered Annam, as northern Vietnam was then known, and they also repelled the Mongols, while the Chinese fleet sailed the China seas and the Indian Ocean, venturing even as far as the east coast of Africa. The maritime Asian nations sent envoys with tribute for the Chinese emperor. The maritime expeditions stopped suddenly after 1433, probably as the result of the great expense of large-scale expeditions at a time of preoccupation with securing northern borders against the threat from the Mongols. Pressure from the powerful Neo-Confucian bureaucracy led to a revival of a society that was centered on agriculture. Internally, the Grand Canal was

expanded to its farthest limits and proved to be a stimulus to domestic trade. The stability of the Ming dynasty, which suffered no major disruptions of the population (then around 100 million), economy, arts, society, and politics, promoted a belief among the Chinese that they had achieved the most satisfactory civilization on earth and that nothing foreign was either needed or welcome.

As the Ming dynasty declined, China's last, also the last minority-based dynasty, the Qing (AD 1644–1911), was set up by the Manchus, who rose to power in Manchuria (today's northeast part of China). Compared with the Mongols, the period of Manchu rule over China can be viewed as successful. At the height of the Qing dynasty, the Manchus utilized the best minds and richest human resources of the nation, regardless of race. Although the Manchus were not Han Chinese and were subjected to strong resistance, especially in the south, they had assimilated a great deal of the Han-Chinese culture before conquering China proper. Realizing that in order to dominate the empire they would have to do things in the Chinese manner, the Manchus retained many institutions of Ming and earlier Chinese derivation. Furthermore, the Han-based political ideologies and cultural traditions of the Chinese were adopted by the Manchus, resulting in virtually total cultural assimilation of the Manchus by the Han Chinese. After the subduing of China proper, the Manchus conquered Outer Mongolia (now the Mongolian People's Republic) in the late seventeenth century. In the eighteenth century they gained control of Central Asia as far as the Pamir Mountains and established a protectorate over Tibet. The Qing thus became the first dynasty to eliminate successfully all danger to China proper from across its land borders. Under the rule of the Manchu dynasty the empire grew once again; during this period Taiwan, the last outpost of anti-Manchu resistance, was incorporated into China for the first time. In addition, the Qing emperors received tribute from many neighboring states.

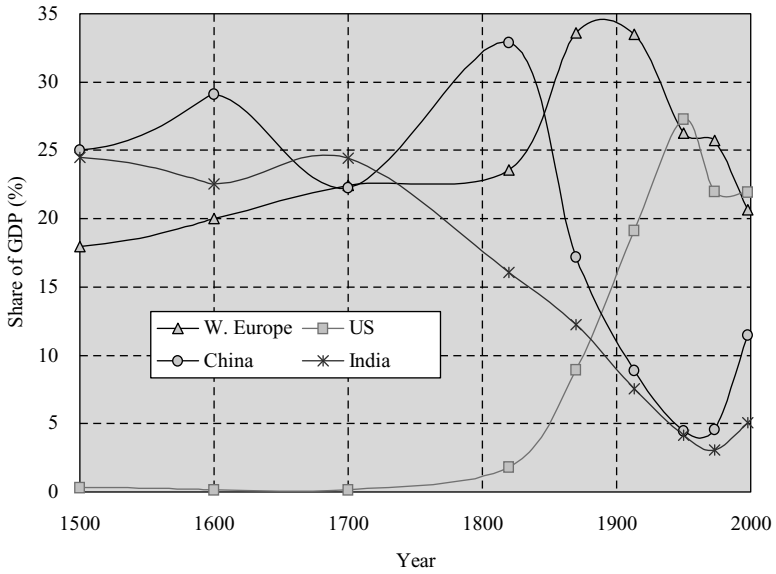
The 1840s marked a turning point in Chinese history. In the early nineteenth century Britain was smuggling large quantities of opium into China, causing a substantial outflow of Chinese silver and grave

economic disruption. In an effort to protect its opium trade, in 1840 Britain initiated the First Opium War. The war ended in 1842, after the Qing court signed the Treaty of Nanjing with Britain, bartering away China's national sovereignty. Subsequently, China declined into a semi-colonial and semi-feudal country. After the Opium War, Britain and other Western powers, including Belgium, the Netherlands, Prussia, Spain, Portugal, the United States (US), and France, seized "concessions" and divided China into "spheres of influence." The second half of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of many peasant leaders and national heroes. The Revolution of 1911, led by Dr Sun Yatsen, is of great significance in modern Chinese history, since with the founding of the Republic of China (ROC) it discarded the feudal monarchical system that had ruled China for more than 2,000 years. In the following decades, however, the Chinese nation was on the edge of bankruptcy.[3]

CHINA IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

During the past century, China's economic development had been interrupted on a number of separate occasions. The Chinese economy was nearly bankrupt at the end of the Civil War in the late 1940s, and was seriously damaged by both the Great Leap Forward (1958–60) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) movements. However, since the late 1970s, when the Chinese government began the gradual transformation of its Stalinesque centrally planned system, the Chinese economy has grown extremely rapidly. In the reform era since 1978, China has been one of the world's fastest growing economies. Between 1978 and 2008, China's real GDP grew at an average annual rate of almost 10 percent.

With China achieving vigorous economic growth since the implementation of market-oriented reform in the late 1970s (see Figure 1.1), the Chinese model has been generally regarded as having achieved the most successful transformation of all of the former Soviet-type economies in terms of the improvement of economic performance. However, it should also be noted that China still lags behind many market-based, industrialized economies. The per capita income of China has still been



Source: Created by the author, based on Maddison, A. *The World Economy: A Millennial Perspective*. Paris: OECD Development Center, 2001.

Figure 1.1 A dynamic view of the Chinese economy, AD 1500–2000

much lower than that of the US, Japan, and other newly industrialized economies. While China's over-centralized planning system was largely responsible for its poor socioeconomic performance, there were also historical, social, and cultural factors that hindered its socioeconomic development. Indeed, it is not easy to develop a market-system framework within a short period of time in China—a huge country utilizing the centrally planned system for nearly 30 years and that was, in particular, deeply influenced by long periods of feudalism but rarely by economic democracy.

Over recent decades, the Chinese economy has experienced dramatic changes and a more rapid development than many other transitional centrally planned economies (CPEs). This was the result of a combination of both internal and external circumstances. In these first few years of the twenty-first century, we can see that China is

scheduled to develop its economy along its own distinctive lines. At the same time, China's current situation poses many significant challenges to its economy. Many inherent problems in relation to economic development still persist. If the Chinese government does not address these properly, its efforts, based on the successful introduction of Chinese-style reforms, will inevitably be jeopardized.

More than 2,000 years ago, Confucius used to instruct his pupils through the telling of this autobiographical story: "Since the age of 15, I have devoted myself to learning; since 30, I have been well established; since 40, I have understood many things and have no longer been confused; since 50, I have known my heaven-sent duty; since 60, I have been able to distinguish right and wrong in other people's words; and since 70, I have been able to do what I intended freely without breaking the rules." Hopefully, after the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the PRC, the Chinese leaders will finally be emerging from their past confused age and know where to go and what to do next.

ENDNOTES

1 According to the *Zhongfa* system, the eldest son born of the highest-ranking wife of a member of the royal household or nobility was called the "major branch" and inherited the right of succession to his father's throne or noble title. Other son(s) was (were) known as "minor branch(es)."

2 Historically, the Han dynasty is divided into two periods: the Western Han had its capital in Chang'an in the west; while the Eastern Han had its capital in Luoyang in the east.

3 The major events that occurred in Chinese society during the twentieth century are listed below in chronological order: 1912, China's final dynasty, the Qing, was replaced by the Republic of China (ROC); 1937, Japan invaded China and the War of Resistance against Japan began; 1945, Japan surrendered unconditionally and, thereafter, the Civil War between the Nationalists and the Communists broke out; 1949, the People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded, followed by the large-scale land reform and socialist transformation.