

CHAPTER ONE

THE MIDDLE KINGDOM

HUMAN culture is a delicate plant, which has come into blossom in only a few places, where a sheltered situation, a fertile soil, climatic advantages and a favorable race temperament have worked together.

In the interior of continents — regions hard of access — in the icy wastes of the polar tracts, the rainy woods of the tropics, steppes and deserts, barren mountain stretches and scattered chains of islands the human race has, to be sure, its outposts. Generally, however, the struggle for existence has been so hard that it absorbed nearly all their attention. Beyond the care and labor needed to provide food and shelter, after fights with wild beasts, hostile tribes and sinister forces, there was little spiritual energy left for pondering the riddles of life or for the systematic observation of nature.

Song and poetry flowed forth abundantly among most primitive peoples; the plastic arts were developed in ceramics and textiles, in the adornment of the dress and weapons, often too in sculpture.

But the invention of a highly developed written speech, the evolution of a compactly organized State, the study of philosophy and astronomy, the specialization of artists and scholars as independent professions, — these are some of the forms of growth

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in a high civilization which can only be attained under specially favorable circumstances.

At the beginning of the metal age the human race lifted itself for the first time to a high plane of culture. In the copper age we find the beginnings of the early civilization which came to full development in the bronze age.

In the terms of geography the picture of the first civilizations is easily comprehensible: they all sprang up on the fertile and arable deltas and valleys of the great rivers. Around the lower bend of the Nile and in the alluvial land of the Euphrates and Tigris blossomed two rich early cultures, both distinguished by their complete dependence on intensive agriculture in the river basins. A third culture meets us in the alluvial land of the Indian rivers.

The fourth region of the Old World to attain a lofty culture in the bronze age lies as an isolated oasis far off in East Asia, surrounded on all sides by the territory of barbarians.

The geographical boundary of the cultural region of ancient China is so peculiar that it demands further explanation.

Leaving out the rivers on the south coast, China proper contains two mighty river regions, both with extensive delta lands, which overlap, forming the wide coast plain of eastern China. The more northerly of these rivers, the Hwang-ho, is extremely rich in silt, a condition which has found expression in its very name (Hwang-ho = Yellow River) and which renders the stream for the greater part of its

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course so very shallow that it is only navigable by flat-bottomed vessels and rafts. The more southerly of the great China rivers, the Yangtze-kiang, is richer in water and decidedly deep, so that it can be navigated from the sea up into the mountain region of Szechuan.

Although the loose earth which surrounds the middle loop of the Hwang-ho offers the most fertile kind of soil, the farmer of northern China can, for climatic reasons, take no more than one or, in the most favorable circumstances, two crops per year. The alluvial land of the Hwang-ho is continually threatened by one or other extreme: a rainy summer with devastating floods, or a dry summer with ruined harvests and famine. The delta region of the Hwang-ho is partly sandy and barren, and the coast is desolate and hard of access.

The Yangtze-kiang runs through a province with quite a different climate; the rainfall is more abundant and more evenly divided over the year. Because of its more southerly situation the conditions for intensive agriculture are very good, and the Yangtze delta in our day is a blossoming garden, where several harvests succeed one another in the relatively long period of vegetation.

Judging by the geographical and climatic conditions, the Yangtze region should therefore be better fitted than that of the Hwang-ho for nourishing an early civilization. And yet for two thousand years the development of Chinese culture took place on the separated plateaus around the Hwang-ho and

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its tributaries, the Wei-ho and Feng rivers, whereas the Yangtze valley only began to appear in Chinese history a few centuries before our time.

It is hardly possible to deduce from mere geographical conditions the superiority which fell to the more northerly and, from a climatic standpoint, less advantageously situated valley. Another as yet but dim yet most intriguing perspective here offers itself for research.

Our investigations touching the primitive history of China have shown that Chinese culture in its first beginnings was in intimate touch with the more progressive orient and that powerful waves of culture were passing over central Asia. In what direction most of these cultural exchanges passed and how far west or east were the main participants it is not yet possible to say with certainty, but it seems probable on the basis of present investigation that the cultures of Egypt and Mesopotamia were the oldest and that the cultural impulses were spread thence to eastern Asia.

That it was precisely the Yellow River and its tributaries that first received and planted these seeds of a higher culture from the west was not an accident but can be fully explained by topographical conditions.

Between the primeval forests of Siberia on the north and the Tibetan plateau on the south, a belt of steppes and deserts extends from the Caspian Sea to the Pacific, and this was the great caravan route over which continental communication between

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eastern and western Asia could most easily be made. A higher culture which pressed from the more advanced orient along this great highway to the Far East would meet first in the valleys around the Yellow River with a continuous tract of arable land rich enough to serve as the foundation for a transplanted culture.

The same influence from the west, as we have proved by our excavations with regard to prehistoric times, was repeated in respect to the earliest historical period of China. The annals of the Chou dynasty (1122-225 B.C.) are full of stories about chieftains and tribes who came from the west. Bishop regards the Ts'in dynasty as rich in western influence, and under the Han period, when the central power was extended to become the first Chinese empire, there was an active exchange of merchandise across the great "Silk Way" through central Asia.

From these historical and archaeological facts we seem to be justified in assuming the cultural connections with the west in early historic times as the factor which gave the Hwang-ho region its two thousand year start over the Yangtze valley.

It is further probable that with the cultural impulses came also racial additions, and one may perhaps represent the development in this way; viz., that the primitive Mongolian peoples in the Hwang-ho valley, who were the original source of the Chinese race, had often grafted upon them scions from central Asia or from regions still further west.

Only during recent years has archaeology thrown

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any light upon these remote and difficult problems. It is likely that great surprises await us in the progress of research, and it is possible that northern China was a more primitive and original center of civilization than we can at present venture to assume. At all events we know with certainty that the cradle of Chinese culture lay around the Hwang-ho and its tributaries, the Wei-ho and Feng rivers. Here in the second and first millenniums before Christ, flourished a Chinese civilization which in speech, writing, art and statecraft already gave indications of what later became the traditional basis of the Middle Kingdom.

During the archaic period of Chinese history the Yangtze valley and the lands farther south are mentioned only episodically as inhabited by a southern barbarian people, which only later were brought gradually under the Chinese power.

It was under the Han dynasty (206 B.C. - 221 A.D.), when China first became a great power, that the country south of the Yangtze was to a large extent brought under the Chinese rule. But far on into later times the strife continued between the mighty usurpers, the Chinese, and the primitive inhabitants, who were a motley conglomeration of Tibetans, Malays, Polynesian Negroes, and possibly other racial elements. Despite the courage and love of liberty of the local tribes, such as Lolos, Miaotze, Shan and many more, the Chinese were naturally in the end the victors, and the result is that the original inhabitants of southern China have now been forced

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away to form isolated groups, which have found refuge in almost inaccessible mountain regions.

With these differing aborigines in the south and southwest, with the Tibetans on the west and with barbarous Mongolian tribes on the north, the world of Chinese culture felt itself very properly as a Middle Kingdom, a center of education, art and government, which gave out its knowledge and its art to the surrounding barbarians but demanded in return a certain degree of political submission. It should be remembered in this connection that as a land of culture Japan too is very young, having received her first impulses to a higher development from China, most notably during the Tang dynasty. Korea in the northeast and Annam in the southwest were likewise made completely Chinese, and Japan has in the course of time been much under Chinese influence. Contact with the Mongolian peoples of the steppes on the northern frontier consisted mainly of strife, often with victorious attempts on the part of the nomads to break into the enticingly rich agricultural land, and with frequently abortive but always persevering efforts on the part of the Chinese to protect their land by adequate defenses against these dreaded invasions.

While the ancient civilizations of the nearer orient and around the east of the Mediterranean were constantly in intimate touch with one another, in strife as well as in peaceful commerce, China for thousands of years went her own way and developed her separate individuality. There were, to be sure,

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exchanges of merchandise and ideas, as for instance when Buddhism set its deep imprint on Chinese religious life and art, or when China sent over the central Asiatic "Silken Way" her light and transparent weaves to adorn the beauties of Rome, to receive in turn Roman glass and impulses from Graeco-Roman art. But this cultural interchange between China and the occident never approached the intensity which characterized the forced transmission of spiritual and material energies around the eastern Mediterranean, where various civilized peoples cross-fertilized, conquered and succeeded one another.

This comparative isolation of China has given rise to the conception, which has till very recently obsessed the Chinese spirit; viz., that China was the one civilized nation, a universal kingdom exalted above all the barbarian realms. It is of the greatest importance to keep this fact in mind, for only by the knowledge of this can one understand the confusion and far-reaching anxiety which fell upon the statesmen of China when in the latter part of the preceding century they made acquaintance in grim earnest with the terrible force which I have later called the white peril, the unconquerable machinery culture of the Europeans.

Let us now see what are the essential characteristics that distinguish this relatively exclusive Chinese culture.

Going first to the material basis of the Chinaman's life, let us note that he is quite predominantly an industrious farmer, cultivating the earth with an

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intensiveness which gives us more the impression of gardening.

This closeness to the soil, this persevering watchfulness over the growth of his harvest which hardly leaves him idle for a day, has assuredly fostered the Chinaman's characteristic defensive nature and instinctive love of peace. The Great Wall, which runs from the ocean at Shan Hai Kuan along the boundary between China and Mongolia till it loses itself in the deserts far up in Kansu, has its spiritual counterpart in the Chinaman's phenomenal power of passive resistance, a quality which has been the greatest strength of Chinese diplomacy.

As a further characteristic of the Chinese national spirit I would call attention to the love and reverence for learning and art.

The literary examinations which formed the only tests for all sorts of official situations and which prevailed in China for two thousand years up to 1905 are significant in this regard. Reverence for the written word has expressed itself in that furnaces have been built in open city squares, in which waste paper is burned so as to give the writing an honorable annihilation. Long and beautiful specimens of writing, often set upon silk, adorn the walls of every home.

Ancient works of art are worshipped to such an extent that in the old days the emperor in some instances only altered the description of his reign by solemnly recording the discovery of some specially venerated bronze vessel. In one of the following

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chapters I have given an example of how the Chinese have adorned their country with innumerable, nearly always beautiful temples.

Professor Karlgren in his excellent work, "East Asia in the Nineteenth Century", maintains that the Chinese character is marked predominantly by a kindly social instinct, and he cites as the maxims for the life of the individual the five fundamental principles of Confucius: *loyalty* on the part of the subject, *filial love* on the part of the son, *obedience* on the part of the wife, *reverence* on the part of the youth, and *fidelity* on the part of friends.

To this we may safely add that the Chinese are without comparison the foremost of all peoples in tact and politeness, in a gentlemanliness which is not an empty form but a noble national trait, as one can observe in even the lowest classes of the community.

A strong point in the Chinese communal structure is the widespread faculty for local self-government, within the province, within the *hsien* (district), and within the village. It is due only to this faculty that China has come so comparatively easily through ten years of civil war.

Finally I would offer as a distinctive trait in Chinese culture its ability to defy time.

All the other exponents of early culture — the rulers in the palaces of Crete, the pyramid builders of Egypt, the folk of the cuneiform inscriptions — are dead long since. The Chinese persist in lonely greatness as direct heirs of the writings, the philosophy

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and the art which their forefathers instituted far back in the bronze age.

Many foreigners out in the East say that the Chinese lack the spirit of initiative which has made us into explosion motors and which speeds our cultural evolution on at an even madder pace. But few of these foreigners consider that the Chinese have a different sort of treasure in the spiritual repose which induces him to cultivate peonies and goldfish or to meditate under the shade of a tree, while we are striving after decorations or for the honor of discovering a microscopic little "scientific truth."

May not the day come a thousand years from now, when the archæologist from the Far East with his imperturbable tranquillity will dig in the heaps of European ruins so that by means of a piece of enameled iron or a bit of cement he may seek to establish the site of those ancient cities, London, Paris and Berlin? And will not the sons of Han then be cultivating their wheat and making offering to their forefathers, while the Hwang-ho rolls its mud-colored waves toward the ocean?