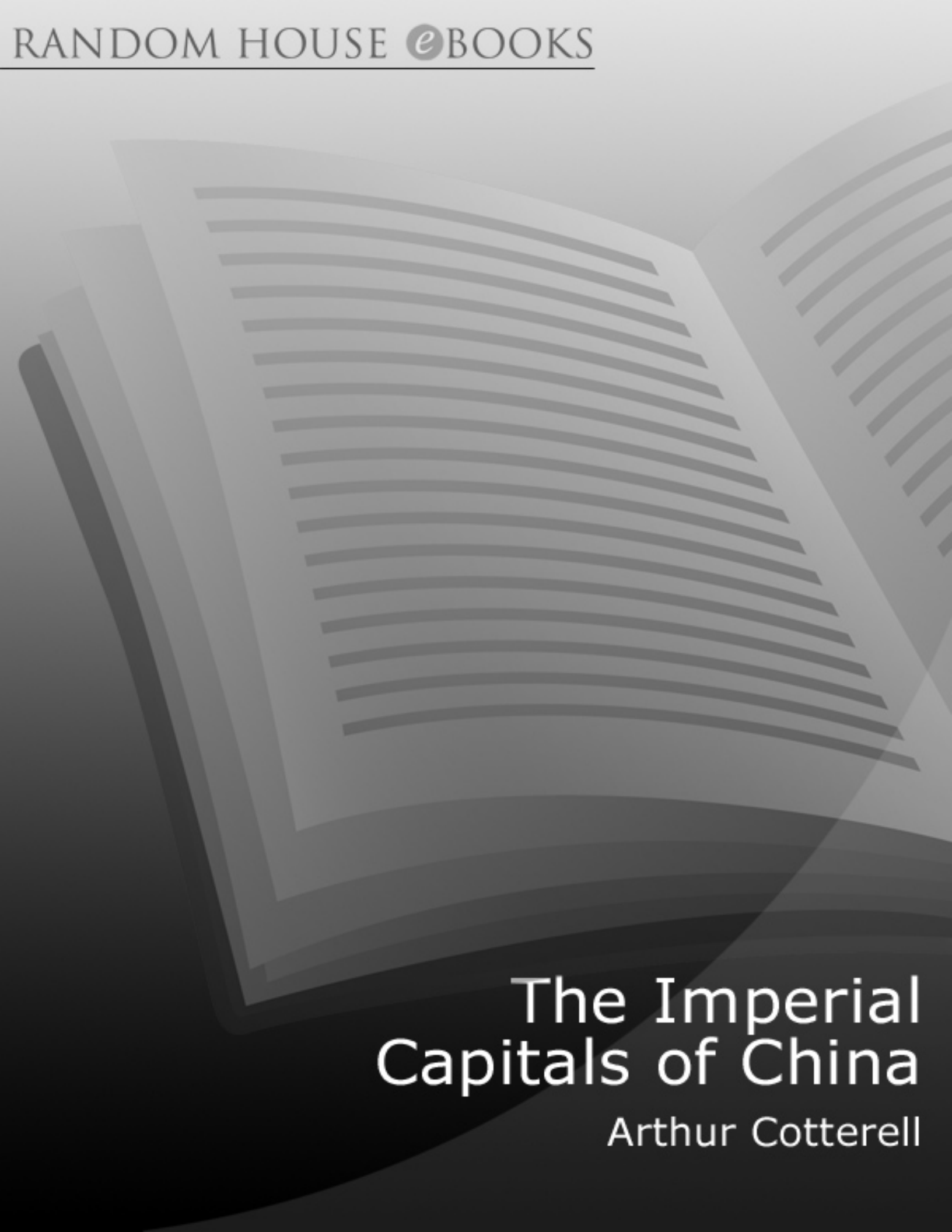


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The Imperial Capitals of China

Arthur Cotterell

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About the Book

From the First Emperor's obsessive - and fatal - attempts to engage the Immortals in 219-210 BC, to the striking creativity that produced the golden age of literature and art in Tang Chang'an, to the culmination of architectural virtuosity seen in The Forbidden City of Yong Lee's Beijing in the fifteenth century, this absorbing new book offers a panoramic sweep of an empire that lasted over two millennia through the imperial cities that were the very foundations of each dynasty.

Using original Chinese sources and eye-witness accounts, Arthur Cotterell provides an inside view of the rich array of characters, political and ideological tensions, and technological genius that defined the imperial cities of China, as each in turn is revealed, explored, and celebrated.

The oldest continuous civilization in existence today stands to become the most influential, its economy expected to exceed that of the United States by 2020. From the cosmological foundations of the first capital to the politics of empire and cataclysmic civil wars, *Imperial Capitals of China* offers a level of insight indispensable for a true understanding of China today.

About the Author

Arthur Cotterell was formerly principal of Kingston College, London. His previous books include *The Minoan World*, *The Penguin Encyclopaedia of Ancient Civilisations*, *The Pimlico Dictionary of Classical Mythologies: Greece, Rome, Iran, India and China*, *China: A Cultural History* and *Chariot: The Astounding Rise and Fall of the World's First War Machine*.

Also by Arthur Cotterell

The Minoan World

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China: A Cultural History

*Chariot: The Astounding Rise and Fall of the World's First
War Machine*

Arthur Cotterell

THE IMPERIAL CAPITALS OF CHINA

An Inside View of the Celestial Empire



PIMLICO

In memory of my brother-in-law Yong Soo

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A Covered Walkway and Pavilions at the Summer Palace
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Preface

One evening in London in 1778 the conversation of the leading literary figure of the day turned to foreign travel. Boswell records that Dr Johnson, who professed an inordinate partiality for tea, also 'expressed a particular enthusiasm with respect to visiting the Wall of China. I caught it for the moment, and said I really believed I should go and see the Wall of China had I not children, of whom it was my duty to care. "Sir," he said, "by so doing, you would do what would be of importance in raising your children to eminence. There would be a lustre reflected upon them from your spirit and curiosity. They would be at all times regarded as the children of a man who had gone to view the Wall of China. I am serious, Sir."'

Such admiration for the Celestial Empire, as China was known in Europe, had much to do with the sympathetic reports sent back by Jesuit missionaries. Their description of a great power administered by highly educated officials, the so-called philosophers, chimed with the most cherished ambition of the Enlightenment: orderly government. Here was a state so rational in its design that the emperor could be regarded as a caring father, the head of all the families which made up China. His solicitude for the welfare of the Chinese people was evident in the rite of spring sowing, when the emperor with his own hand turned the first furrow. Although Louis XVI was persuaded by La Pompadour to follow this imperial example at Versailles, the ancient Chinese ritual could not save him from the guillotine.

Not every visitor, however, was entirely satisfied with the Celestial Empire. Lord Macartney, the first British envoy to be granted an imperial audience in 1793, recognised the Qing dynasty for what it had become: a Manchu domination of China already frightened about change. Powerful though the Chinese empire remained, Macartney was prophetic when he observed how 'a nation that does not advance must retrograde and finally fall back to barbarism and misery'. The nineteenth century was to witness the terminal decline of imperial government as external pressures in Beijing at last forced an acceptance of the modern world. The Great Wall, which Boswell never did visit, was no longer proof against foreign invasion.

Yet neither Dr Johnson nor Lord Macartney possessed any real idea of the antiquity and magnitude of the Chinese empire. Only by looking at the whole stretch of imperial history, from 221 BC until 1912, is it possible to grasp the amazing success of China, whose empire was the most enduring state in pre-modern times. *The Imperial Capitals of China* offers this perspective through the study of its great capitals. In reaction to the military repression of Qin Shi Huangdi, whose famous terracotta army is a potent reminder of this first emperor's attitude to government, the Chinese empire developed a civil bureaucracy that was capable of guiding its destiny under native and foreign dynasties alike. Once officials were recruited by examination the imperial capital acted as a magnet for the learned and the talented, with the result that it was always at the centre of Chinese cultural achievement. During a period when Europe was in the doldrums, from the seventh to the eleventh centuries, the capitals of the Tang and Song emperors shone with artistic brightness, as poets, calligraphers, painters and musicians jostled in their streets. Tang Chang'an was then the largest and most populous city in the world.

An inside view of imperial China is thus available for the reason that anyone who was anybody went to the capital, where they often recorded their experiences. In the case of Song Kaifeng, a painter has even left us an eleven-metre-long panorama of this remarkable city. Whenever personal accounts are in short supply, there are extensive dynastic records to fill the gaps. Greece and Rome alone rival China in their concern for history. All this permits a survey of the imperial era, two millennia of outstanding cultural achievement, from its very centre, from the capital itself.

The Imperial Capitals of China is intended to provide both the armchair traveller and the modern visitor to China, and especially to its great ex-imperial capitals, with a guide to the appreciation of a unique civilisation at its height. For there can be no question that under the emperors the Chinese brought to perfection so many of their original contributions to the heritage of mankind. That is why they were able to regard their empire as representing All under Heaven.

In writing this book I must acknowledge the invaluable help with translation that I have received from an old friend, Professor Chen Hsingpo, and my wife, Yong Yap. I am also indebted to my publisher Will Sulkin, whose interest in the past never seems to wane. And once again I am grateful for Ray Dunning's excellent maps and illustrations.

Introduction

In 210 BC a strange procession made its way across north China. Immediately in front of the imperial conveyance went a cartload of rotten fish, whose smell in the summer heat enveloped everything - horses, people and carriages. What it also disguised was the stench from Qin Shi Huangdi's corpse. Zhao Gao, the chief eunuch, and councillor Li Si had hit upon this subterfuge in order to conceal the death of China's first emperor. For reasons of their own they wished to delay the announcement until their arrival in the imperial capital, the northwestern city of Xianyang. There the two conspirators saw that their preferred candidate ascended the dragon throne, prior to the entombment of Qin Shi Huangdi next to his terracotta army. That China's unifier should have constructed at Mount Li a tomb complex which is the archaeological wonder of the modern world can hardly be a surprise when the other great building projects he ordered are recalled: the Great Wall, a national network of roads, and the first imperial capital with its elaborate buildings, covered roads and an enormous palace.

All that Qin Shi Huangdi did was on the grand scale. During his eleven-year reign he set the pattern for the Chinese empire. Later rulers may not have shared every concern of Qin Shi Huangdi about the spirit world, but they acknowledged the correctness of his cosmological arrangements at the very centre of a united China. Imperial capitals were always laid out according to cosmic principles. It is not a little ironic, then, that Qin Shi

Huangdi's obsession with the Immortals brought about his early death. Advised that a sea god was blocking his own path to immortality, he dispatched on the seashore what was most likely a stranded whale with a repeater crossbow, before sickening and dying of pneumonia. In itself this unexpected event would not have given Zhao Gao and Li Si their chance to conspire had Qin Shi Huangdi not already been told to keep his movements secret from all but his closest officials, lest he gave offence to the Immortals. Hence the covered roads built at Xianyang and the first emperor's frequent changes of residence.

Some of the reasons for Qin Shi Huangdi's spiritual anxiety are explored in [Chapter 1](#), which looks at the cosmology of the Chinese capital. Three assassination attempts certainly increased his fear of death and deepened his sense of loneliness. Yet Qin Shi Huangdi only became preoccupied with an elixir of life after the summoning to Xianyang of magicians and soothsayers from the recently conquered states of the northeastern seaboard. In 219 BC the first imperial envoys were sent up mountains to establish relations with the Immortals who were believed to dwell on their summits. Such beliefs derived from Daoism, the indigenous Chinese faith and arch rival of Confucius' family-based moral philosophy. Whereas Confucius envisaged immortality in terms of the success of descendants, Daoist adepts sought physical longevity, even deathlessness, through drugs and exercise. Though Qin Shi Huangdi was the most determined ruler in his pursuit of immortality, others were tempted to follow his example. In the first century BC the Former Han emperor Wu Di tried to make personal contact with the Immortals on the top of Mount Tai, one of China's sacred mountains, while nine hundred years later the Tang emperor Wu Zong raised an artificial mountain in the palace gardens at Chang'an as a place of rendezvous for these elusive spirits.

Efforts to thwart mortality aside, there were cosmological imperatives which all Chinese emperors accepted as necessary to secure their position as the Son of Heaven, the One Man with a heavenly mandate to command obedience. From earliest times the positioning of a capital city was understood to be critical, since it represented 'the pivot of the four quarters', the point at which the king, and eventually the emperor, was deemed to be in closest contact with the realms above and below the earth. Through geomancy, occult knowledge ancestral to present-day feng shui, the most auspicious site for a capital was chosen and monitored for its continued effectiveness in sustaining government. In the late second millennium BC the Shang kings had moved their capital on several occasions so as to bolster their declining authority. Even though imperial capitals were never transplanted with such rapidity, changing political and economic circumstances did cause new foundations from time to time. The cosmologically perfect imperial capital was Sui and Tang Chang'an, in the eighth and ninth centuries the largest and most populous city in the world. Modern Beijing still preserves the essentials of an imperial capital, in spite of urban redevelopment over the past half-century. That is why the Manchu emperors had no reason to alter the Ming city they inherited in the seventeenth century. Having conquered China, the Qing, as the Manchu dynasty was called, found entirely satisfactory a Beijing 'built in the centre of the earth in order to govern the whole world'.



The Imperial Capitals of China. Only Tuoba Wei Pingcheng was unrecognised by Chinese dynastic historians.

[Chapter 2](#) surveys China's first imperial capitals, Qin Xianyang and Former Han Chang'an. The labour involved in constructing Xianyang remains staggering. Hundreds of thousands toiled on Qin Shi Huangdi's palaces, one of which was almost as large in area as the Former Han capital itself; on his tomb complex at nearby Mount Li; on the houses he built for the 120,000 aristocratic families brought to the imperial capital from all parts of China; and, not least, on the roads and walkways that were specially designed to obscure his whereabouts. Such intensive use of conscripted labour here, and elsewhere in the newly unified empire, was bound to provoke a popular reaction, which it did in the first nationwide peasant rebellion in China's history. How dear this uprising is to the People's Republic can be seen in the emphasis placed on the turmoil that destroyed Qin Shi Huangdi's dynasty. One of the rebel

leaders, the commoner Liu Bang, endeavoured to moderate the violence of the main rebel army when, in 206 BC, it arrived in Xianyang. He failed and the first imperial capital was looted and fired. 'Xianyang burned for three months,' a chronicler tells us. 'That was the end of the Qin empire.'

The accession of Liu Bang four years later as the first Han emperor Gaozu, or 'High Ancestor', was something of a relief to a war-weary China. People expected him to rule with their welfare in mind, unlike the autocratic Qin dynasty. And they were not disappointed, for Confucian advisers helped Liu Bang set up a bureaucracy which would guide the empire through a variety of crises right down to the early twentieth century, and so make China the sole state of any magnitude to endure over such a length of time. Once examinations became the chief method of recruiting officials, the imperial capital was the destination for the learned and the talented, with the result that it was always the focus of Chinese cultural achievement. Just as Tang Chang'an witnessed the great age of poetry, an outpouring of thousands of poems aided by the invention of printing, so Song Kaifeng played host to the greatest painters, Emperor Hui Zong distinguishing himself in bird-and-flower composition. Although Kaifeng fell to the Jin nomads in 1127, the Song emperors presided over further artistic advance at the southern city of Hangzhou prior to the arrival of the Mongols a century and a half later.

With a degree of reluctance, Liu Bang had permitted the building of Chang'an, 'Forever Safe', as a capital worthy of a great empire. His successors embellished the city, which stood near the ruins of Xianyang, and they only moved to Luoyang after the usurpation of Wang Mang. But the Former Han, as the dynasty is called during its stay at Chang'an, was in trouble well before Wang Mang seized power in AD 9. It had already produced China's biker emperor in Liu Ho, who was never dignified with an imperial title. On hearing of his accession to the dragon

throne in 78 BC, Liu Ho and his gang rode a string of horses to death in order to reach Chang'an and begin partying in the imperial palace. Such a blatant disregard for the solemn duties of ancestor worship – the previous emperor lay encoffined but unmourned in the main hall of the palace – led to Liu Ho's deposition after twenty-seven swinging days and nights. Even his embarrassed mother helped in exiling him from the imperial capital.

The capital of the Later Han dynasty, Luoyang, is the subject of [Chapter 3](#). The removal of the ruling Liu family to this city, lower down the course of the Yellow river valley, was a consequence of the complicated civil war that followed the overthrow of Wang Mang. The usurper's frantic attempt to survive in Chang'an became almost surreal when he sought renewed strength, not to mention immortality, through an imitation of the multiple marriages of the legendary Yellow Emperor. The attempt failed and Wang Mang was hacked to pieces, after his enemies had ransacked the tombs of his ancestors outside the city walls. Compared with Chang'an, Luoyang was modest in spite of its plan following the same cosmic principles. One reason for its smaller size was the diminished authority of the Son of Heaven, since the Lius were restored to power by large landowners. Not prepared to see their influence reduced, they prevented in AD 31 a reassessment of the land tax, the basis of the Chinese empire's revenue. Weakness at the imperial court did not throw up another usurper, but it ensured that factionalism kept emperors in an unenviable position. During the period that the imperial capital was located at Luoyang, however, significant technical breakthroughs strengthened China, such as the perfection of papermaking, the production of steel, the stern-post rudder and the invention of a seismograph. The latter was the idea of the court astrologer Zhang Heng. While his 'earthquake weathercock' could not furnish an explanation of seismic disturbance, it gave immediate notice of such an event as

well as the direction from Luoyang, which allowed extra time for mounting relief measures. As the performance of the Son of Heaven was judged by unfavourable and favourable natural phenomena, Zhang Heng's invention was highly prized at the imperial court. In 133 he sent a memorial to the emperor suggesting that a particularly severe earthquake indicated Heaven's disapproval of eunuch influence in government business.

Later Han emperors had turned to the eunuchs as a means of balancing the power of entrenched official families, but this tended to make the eunuchs into yet another court faction. Even though the imperial university at Luoyang enrolled thousands of students, certain families were able to dominate the bureaucracy by marrying their daughters to emperors. Critics like Wang Fu deplored the practice and also expressed concern about reliance on Confucian benevolence as a method of imperial rule. Never denying the potentiality for goodness in man or the shortcomings of force in maintaining order, Wang Fu argued that Luoyang was too complex to be run like the feudal capitals of old. Underworld bosses in the imperial capital had contacts among the higher officials and benefited from frequent amnesties as well. The periodic release of prisoners, an imperial policy believed to please Heaven, obviously created serious difficulties for the police. But it was not criminals who ruined Luoyang: on the contrary, soldiers enraged at the assassination of a general brought destruction to the city. Overconfident eunuchs took this drastic action in 189, and ushered in a period of military rule. Large parts of Luoyang were burned down by the general's incensed troops, who in the imperial palace slew some beardless men by mistake, believing them to be eunuchs.

In 220 a military strongman by the name of Cao Pi decided to dispense with the fiction of the Han dynasty altogether. He deposed the last Later Han emperor and

ruled in his own name as the first Wei emperor. Rivals quickly set themselves up elsewhere and, although the empire was briefly reunited, the final collapse of Liu Bang's imperial house inaugurated nearly four centuries of division for the Chinese empire. By 317 all of north China was in barbarian hands, first those of the Hunnish Xiongnu, later the Tuoba Turks. [Chapter 4](#) surveys China's long period of partition by considering three capitals: in the south Nanjing, the seat of several Chinese dynasties; Pingcheng, near present-day Datong, the first capital of the Tuoba Wei dynasty; and then rebuilt Luoyang to which the Tuoba Wei emperor Xiao Wen Di transferred his court in 494. In taking up residence at Luoyang he signalled the sinicisation of his administration: Turkish speech, manners and clothes were no longer acceptable at the imperial court. How different this is from what was happening in the western provinces of the Roman empire, where German settlers completely ruined its city-based civilisation.

In all three capitals, Nanjing, Pingcheng and Luoyang, the salient event was the rise of Buddhism, which had arrived from India during the Later Han dynasty. At the beginning of the fifth century Xiao Yan, the first Liang emperor, twice became a monk in Nanjing: he was ransomed by enormous payments to the local Buddhist monasteries. But this enthusiastic emperor was somewhat disconcerted by an audience he gave to the Indian monk Bodhidharma, the founder of the Chan sect, which in Japan eventually became Zen Buddhism. When asked by Xiao Yan what merit he had acquired by good works, Bodhidharma replied, 'No merit at all!' Amazed, the emperor then asked his visitor about the first principle of Buddhism. 'There isn't one,' was the reply, 'since where all is emptiness, nothing can be called holy.' Today nothing remains of the lavish building that Xiao Yan erected on behalf of the Buddhist faith at Nanjing. In Pingcheng and Luoyang, on the other hand, impressive cave sculptures survive as testimony of

the equally fervent belief of the Tuoba Turks. Modern tourists cannot but be moved by the Buddhist caves at Yungang, which were virtually complete by the time that Pingcheng was abandoned for Luoyang. Demand for a similar cave complex near this second capital resulted in work starting at Longmen, where the number of carved figures reached an incredible total of 97,000.

In [Chapter 5](#) we see how the reunification of China under the Sui dynasty, which ruled from 581 to 617, led to the refoundation of Chang'an as the most splendid of all imperial capitals. In a repeat of the original Qin unification, the Sui emperors so overburdened the population with public works and foreign wars that their dynasty was swept away in another nationwide uprising. The beneficiary of the rebellion was the Li family, which produced in the second Tang emperor, Li Shimin, a very great ruler indeed. Justly renowned is his relationship with Wei Zheng, an outspoken critic of any policy which he felt was detrimental to the empire. For seventeen years of his twenty-three-year reign Li Shimin received advice from this Confucian minister that often exasperated him, but never failed to prove correct in the event. The incredible openness of the emperor to different opinions was instrumental in setting an intellectual climate suited to cultural experimentation, for Chang'an thrived on a heady mixture of foreign and local influences. Though personally inclined to Daoism, Li Shimin patronised Confucianism for the sake of the imperial bureaucracy and welcomed Buddhism as well as Christianity. The latter religion was brought to China by Nestorian monks who travelled overland from Central Asia. Along this same route, the Silk Road, the Chinese pilgrim Xuan Zhang travelled to India in order to collect Buddhist scriptures. After his return to Chang'an Xuan Zhang persuaded Li Zhi, Li Shimin's ninth son and successor, to build the Big Wild Goose Pagoda in order to house this collection: its majestic brick-built form still rises above the

skyline of modern Xi'an. Even now the Chinese remain aware of the striking creativity of the Tang empire, to which Li Shimin's reign gave real impetus. The earlier period of strength and unity under the Han emperors has always been regarded as the assertive period of their culture, when they differentiated between themselves from their neighbours. So if they refer to themselves today as hanren, the Han people, as opposed to tangren, the Tang people, they are pointing out their Chineseness. For tangren still carries in it the notion of cultural openness, of a willingness to adopt non-Chinese ways.

But Li Zhi lacked the strength of character of his father and soon fell under the domination of Wu Zhao, his empress. She virtually ran the imperial administration during the final years of his reign and, pushing aside two of her sons, Empress Wu declared herself emperor in 690. The only woman to sit upon the dragon throne, she ruled for fifteen years, mostly from Luoyang, a city inhabited by fewer adherents of the Li family. Her use of the examination system to recruit officials she could trust marked the triumph of ability over pedigree: henceforth an official career was open to all the talents. A significant contribution that Empress Wu made to the Tang cultural renaissance was the advancement of poetry, since she allowed would-be officials to write poems in the final examination. In spite of a short period of instability after Empress Wu's deposition, the Tang empire flourished under Xuan Zong, Li Shimin's great-great-grandson. Known as Ming Huang, 'the Bright Emperor', Xuan Zong ruled from a capital city renowned for its artistic exuberance. Poets, painters, calligraphers, musicians and entertainers crowded its streets, many of them receiving the patronage of the emperor himself. Yet Tang self-confidence did not last. In 755 a border general by the name of An Lushan started a rebellion which devastated north China for nearly a decade. Though An Lushan died before its end, the Tang

dynasty had to call upon friendly Turkish tribesmen to recover the dragon throne. The days of glory were gone, but in many ways the events of ninth-century Chang'an were more intriguing than ever.

Despite the inhabitants of the imperial capital suffering at the hands of both rebels and foreign invaders, Chang'an was still largely intact, and the imperial palaces remained the grandest buildings in all China. [Chapter 6](#) traces the experience of the great city down to its dismantling and reassembly in 907 at Luoyang. A new feature of life in Chang'an was the power of the eunuchs, who secured a stranglehold on the selection of emperors. They succeeded in enhancing their authority to such an extent that armed forces stationed close by were under the command of eunuch generals. There was to be no repetition of the eunuch massacre of 189, at least not until the end of the dynasty. Then Zhu Wen not only took Chang'an to bits, he slaughtered every eunuch he could lay his hands on. Perhaps the most important event in late Tang Chang'an took place in 845, when Emperor Wu Zong suppressed Buddhism. Opposition to this imported religion was longstanding among Confucian officials for the good reason that the growing wealth of the Buddhist church was exempt from taxation. In 819 Han Yu, an official responsible for drafting imperial decrees, presented a memorial to the emperor suggesting that a revered relic, a finger bone of the Buddha, should be destroyed by the city authorities so as not to delude the people with foreign superstition. The advice was rejected and Han Yu was lucky to suffer nothing more than a provincial posting, but his memorial acted as a catalyst for anti-Buddhist sentiment in the imperial bureaucracy. It only required the accession of an emperor interested more in Daoism than Buddhism to turn Han Yu's proposal into action.

This occurred in 845. We are fortunate in having an eyewitness account of the upheaval in the diary kept by the

Japanese monk Ennin. He tells us of the dismay felt by monks and nuns resident in Chang'an when an imperial edict announced compulsory laicisation. Not all officials were happy with Emperor Wu Zong's assault on the Buddhist church, although they were pleased that it was the eunuchs who tried to stop Wu Zong, and in consequence suffered a loss of influence at the imperial court. The emperor's personal motive was a quest for the elixir of life, which Daoist advisers said the Buddhist presence in the empire was hindering. Ennin relates how all Chang'an could see the artificial mountain which Wu Zong raised in the palace gardens as a home for the Immortals. It soared on 'high like a solitary peak. On its sides are boulders brought from the mountains to give the appearance of cliffs, planted with rare trees.' Buddhism recovered after the brief suppression, but it was henceforth subservient to the Confucian state, as the ordination of monks and nuns stayed strictly under official supervision.

A no less catastrophic event for Chang'an was the rebel occupation of 880, when the looting and destruction surpassed the earlier confiscation of Buddhist assets. Shortly afterwards an official wrote a memoir of the Willow Quarter, the red-light district, as it was before the rebels arrived. The memoir provides a fascinating insight, a detailed description of the pleasures available to the rich and famous. Quite astounding was the degree of sophistication expected of its courtesans, who were never obliged to bestow their favours on a visitor. Accomplished singers and dancers, they offered access to an elegant neverland remote from the bustle of Chang'an's crowded thoroughfares. The extent of the Tang poetical revolution is perhaps best glimpsed in this verse composed by a distraught courtesan.

Tears on my pillow,

Rain falling outside.
Only the window
Makes a difference.

No longer visited by her lover, she could at least give expression to her sadness in a satisfying manner. That poetical composition was commonplace in Chang'an is evident in the violent reaction of the rebel leader Huang Chao to satirical verse written on the gate of a government office. In despair at the ability of the inhabitants to articulate their grievances, he ordered a cull of poets.

Northern Song Kaifeng is considered in [Chapter 7](#). It remains a paradox that this early imperial capital, about which we know so much through visual as well as written records, should have almost nothing to show a modern visitor. The depiction of Kaifeng in the panoramic scroll entitled *Spring Festival on the River* is a unique view of an eleventh-century city, as it follows the course of a river which flowed through the southern part of the imperial capital. Written sources are also abundant for Kaifeng, because after its capture by the Jin nomads in 1127 refugees recalled living there with such affection that later Chinese came to envy their former good fortune. Of all imperial capitals Kaifeng has always been rated the favourite. It had acted as the capital of several of the Five Dynasties, the brief military dictatorships started by Zhu Wen, the final destroyer of Tang Chang'an. Hardly surprising then was the military mutiny that, in 960, brought to power Zhao Kuangyin, the founder of the Song dynasty. Recognising the problems caused by ambitious commanders since the end of the Tang, Zhao Kuangyin persuaded his senior officers to retire and then subordinated the military to civilian control. In Kaifeng, therefore, the imperial bureaucracy came into its own and through the reforms of Wang Anshi embraced a wider

curriculum for the recruitment of officials. This reformer had to grapple with the inflationary consequences of a money economy because paper currency came into general use at this time. When in the 1270s Marco Polo saw Kubilai Khan's mint at Beijing printing great quantities of banknotes, he thought that the Mongol emperor had 'mastered the art of alchemy'.

Although the Northern Song emperors in Kaifeng, as opposed to the continuation of the dynasty as the Southern Song in Hangzhou, presided over an industrial revolution and reached the edge of modern science, they are remembered today for their patronage of the visual arts. Then the evolution of landscape painting ran in parallel to an appreciation of the garden, long a refuge for the city dweller. Both were regarded as aids to contemplation for the good reason that they allowed the viewer to escape into the world of the Immortals without abandoning the household duties of Confucianism. *Spring Festival on the River* actually ends with a scene from the imperial gardens. So interested was the imperial court in landscape painting that all the walls of the palace were hung with scrolls, while Emperor Hui Zong added painting as a subject in the civil service examinations. In doing so, he completed 'the Three Perfections', the bringing together of calligraphy, poetry and painting. It represented the triumph of the brush in Chinese civilisation. Hui Zong was a talented painter and calligrapher in his own right: he enjoyed staging artistic compositions and offering detailed comment on individual works. Yet he was easily bored and became the subject of gossip through his involvement with the imperial capital's nightlife. Sometimes he would even return home in the company of a courtesan. Hui Zong's gravest error was an alliance with the Jin, who lulled the empire into a false sense of security before falling upon Kaifeng. Enormous crowds besieged the imperial palace in a precursor of the Tiananmen Square demonstrations of

modern Beijing but, as neither Hui Zong nor his eldest son had the stomach for a fight, north China was once again taken over by barbarians. Hui Zong spent the rest of his life in captivity on the steppe.

The body of Hui Zong was eventually sent for burial in south China, where his younger son had established the Southern Song dynasty at Hangzhou. The peace treaty of 1142 between the Jin conquerors of north China and the Southern Song was in effect a tacit admission of the inability of one side to overcome the other. For a second time the Chinese empire was restricted to the southern provinces, now however, the richest and most populous parts of China. Marco Polo enthused about Hangzhou which he visited shortly after the Mongol conquest, calling it 'without doubt the finest and most splendid city in the world.' What he missed in his delight at its elegance and energy was the reluctance of the Southern Song emperors to regard Hangzhou as an imperial capital at all. Kinsai, the name Marco Polo translates as 'the celestial city', was in fact a corruption of 'temporary residence', the only title these emperors could bring themselves to confer on the city, despite the charm and attractiveness of its environs. On West Lake, an expanse of water immediately beyond the city walls, the pinnacle of urban luxury was the floating restaurants that catered for private parties, even to the extent of etiquette. [Chapter 8](#) notes the prosperity that gave chefs ample scope for experimentation. They were able to cook for a sophisticated official class as well as wealthy merchants, and they took full advantage of an acceptance of innovation in order to shape the cuisine we now associate with China.

Yet Southern Song Hangzhou was more than a pleasure resort. It is true that Marco Polo was astounded by the sheer number of prostitutes in the city. 'These women are extremely accomplished in the arts of allurements,' he wrote in *The Travels*, 'that strangers who have enjoyed their

attractions seem so enslaved that they never forget the experience.' Probably Marco Polo's surprise had more to do with these ladies being active throughout the city, since at Mongol Beijing they were obliged to remain in the suburbs. For the Venetian traveller entirely overlooked the Buddhist revival which occurred at Hangzhou less than a century before his visit. Besides the cult of Miaoshan, a goddess whose compassion for the sufferings of sinners was akin to that of the Virgin Mary in contemporary Europe, Marco Polo had no knowledge of Chan Buddhism, the forerunner of Zen. In the monasteries and temples dotted around West Lake some of the greatest Chan Buddhist artists had lived and worked. To create the right atmosphere for meditative self-cultivation Chan monks built their monasteries in secluded places of great beauty, so West Lake was recognised as an ideal location well before the Southern Song dynasty moved to Hangzhou. Here Mu Xi and Liang Kai used the 'abbreviated stroke' and 'splattered ink' in their enigmatic paintings. 'Madman Liang' even refused the accolade of a 'golden belt' from Emperor Ning Zong around 1200. Instead of conforming to courtly taste, with all the rewards that patronage would entail, Liang Kai left the gift hanging in the imperial academy and went off to paint at Lingyin Monastery, whose name means 'the Soul's Retreat'.

Marco Polo was able to admire Hangzhou because its unconditional surrender in 1276 had prevented looting. As a gesture of goodwill, the occupying Mongol troops were ordered not to molest its inhabitants or plunder their property. By this date Kubilai Khan, the grandson of Genghiz Khan, had announced his intention of becoming a Chinese-style emperor. [Chapter 9](#) reveals how at the present-day site of Beijing he had already built Dadu, 'the Great Capital', for his new dynasty, the Yuan. Marco Polo's description of Kubilai Khan's palace still communicates something of the utter amazement that he felt on first seeing 'the biggest building that has ever been'. Its hall