

ARTHUR COTTERELL

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# Asia

# A Concise History

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Arthur Cotterell



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# Contents

Preface	xi
Introduction	xiii
List of Maps	XX
Photo Credits	xxi
PART 1: ANCIENT ASIA	1
Chapter 1: Ancient West Asia	3
The First Civilisation: Sumer	3
The Great Empires: Babylon, Assyria and Persia	12
Understanding the World: Religion and Myth	21
Endgame: Greco-Roman Europe	
Versus Persian Asia	30
Chapter 2: Ancient South Asia	41
Asia's Second Civilisation: The Indus Valley	41
Epic India: The Aryan Invasion	49
The Buddhist Revolution: The Mauryan Empire	55
The Age of Invasion: From the Bactrians	
to the Huns	64
Chapter 3: Ancient East Asia	<b>74</b>
The Cradle of the East: The Shang Dynasty	74
Classical China: The Zhou Dynasty	82
Imperial Unification: The Qin and	
Former Han Emperors	90
Imperial Crisis: The Failure of the Later Han	100
Chapter 4: Ancient Central Asia	107
The Steppe: An Intercontinental Highway	107
Nomads: The Scourge of the Sown	116
The Spread of Buddhism: The First Pan-Asian Faith	126
The Great Raid: Attila the Hun	135

## Contents

PART 2: MEDIEVAL ASIA		141
Chapter 5: Medieval West Asia		143
	Islam: The Second Pan-Asian Faith	143
	The Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates	151
	The Coming of the Seljuks	157
	The Crusades	161
	Safavid Persia	166
	The Ottoman Empire	171
Chapter	6: Medieval South Asia	178
	The Arrival of Islam	178
	The Hindu and Buddhist Kingdoms	186
	The Mughal Empire	192
	European Rivalry	202
	The British Triumph	210
Chapter '	7: Medieval East Asia	213
	Tang and Song China	213
	Confucian Korea	225
	Feudal Japan	230
	The Ming Revival	239
Chapter	8: Medieval Central Asia	246
	The Turks and the Qidans	246
	The Tibetan Empire	251
	The Mongol Empire	256
	Tamerlane, the Sword of Islam	267
	The Manchu Conquests	271
Chapter	9: Medieval Southeast Asia	277
	Independent Vietnam	277
	The Khmer Empire	282

		Contents
	The Kingdoms of Burma	289
	The Island Powers: Srivijaya, Mataram	
	and Majapahit	293
	The Slow Spread of Islam	300
	The Advent of European Power	302
	The Rise of the Thai	307
Part 3: M	Iodern Asia	315
Chapter 1	0: Modern West Asia	317
	The Fall of the Ottoman Empire	317
	Between World Wars	322
	The Founding of Israel	327
	Syria, Lebanon and Jordan	328
	Iraq versus Iran	330
	Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States	335
	Modern Turkey	336
Chapter 1	1: Modern South Asia	339
	The British Raj	339
	The Indian Mutiny	344
	The End of Company Rule	351
	Gandhi and Indian Nationalism	353
	Independence and Partition	358
	Sri Lanka and Bangladesh	360
Chapter 1	2: Modern East Asia	363
	China's Humiliation	363
	Japanese Imperialism	369
	The People's Republic of China	378
	The Korean War	382
	The Rise of the Pacific Rim	384

## Contents

Chapter 13: Modern Central Asia		
-	Гhe Russian Advance	386
-	Гhe Great Game	393
I	Afghanistan, the Land of Bones	397
9	Siberia and Mongolia	400
-	The Central Asian Republics	403
Chapter 14:	Modern Southeast Asia	407
-	Гhe Dutch East Indies	407
-	Γhe British Possessions	410
]	French Indochina and Thailand	415
-	The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere	419
]	Post-War Decolonisation	423
F-	Гhe Republic of Indonesia	427
-	Гhe Tragedy of Vietnam	430
1	Filipino Democracy	434
Postscript: Tl	he Rise of Present-Day Asia	437
Glossary		441 444
Further Reading		
Index		453

# Preface

mpossible. I've spent my entire life thinking about classical Greece." Thus George Forrest responded to a request for a 5,000-word article when telephoned one Friday evening in Oxford. Without hesitation, I told him to imagine that he was going to be shot by the junta next Tuesday and this was his last chance to leave behind a considered view. "I'll do it," he said to my relief as editor of the *Penguin Encyclopedia of Ancient Civilizations*. And I consider his contribution still unmatched as an introduction to the subject.

A not dissimilar feeling of impossibility assailed me when my publisher, Nick Wallwork, thought that a history of Asia was a good idea. Even though I have been allowed many more words, the subject is immense in terms of time as well as space. Only the conspicuous absence of any general treatment of a continent so important to the whole world persuaded me to undertake the task. Because Asia will have a great impact on the present century, we really do need to understand how events have shaped its peoples and polities.

Asia: A Concise History aims to provide this guide through a chronological survey of key areas: West Asia, South Asia, East Asia, Central Asia and Southeast Asia. While any book covering such an incredible range of human endeavour can never hope to be more than introductory, there is the possibility that the general reader will obtain a useful overview. At the very least, it is hoped that some bearings will be furnished for those who wish to explore the vast expanse of Asia's past.

What this book signals are the very different experiences of Asian peoples, not only among themselves, but in comparison with the peoples of other continents as well. Just to list a few of the individuals who have contributed to their history is enough to reveal Asia's significance in world affairs: Gilgamesh, Ashurbanipal, Zoroaster, Cyrus, the Buddha, Asoka, Jesus, St. Paul, Attila, Muhammad, Abd al-Malik, Confucius, Qin Shi Huangdi, Nagarjuna, Zhu Xi, Genghiz Khan, Yong Le, Hideyoshi, Shah Abbas, Akbar, Gandhi, Atatürk, Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh and Sukarno.

#### Preface

By tracing Asia's development from ancient times, and especially through the amazing diversity of the medieval era, the enduring traits of its various cultures can be discerned as they adapt to globalism. The catalyst for this far-reaching transformation was Western colonialism, whose recent retreat from Asia has produced an entirely new political landscape. Yet the most striking feature of the continent's history is the fact of its longevity, and not just the unusual length of Chinese civilisation, because Asian polities were the first to appear on Earth. What is new, however, is an awareness of how complex these earliest states were, thanks to the archaeological discoveries of the past 150 years.

In publishing this book I must acknowledge the invaluable contributions made by several people. First of all, my wife Yong Yap, through the translation of documents from Asian languages; second, an old friend Datuk Hj Harun Din, for advice on Islam; third, Graham Guest, another old friend whose extensive archive of pre-1900 illustrations, Imperial Images, has furnished material for the medieval and modern sections; and, last but not least, Ray Dunning, the creator of the maps and drawings spread throughout the book.

Perhaps the dedication needs a word of explanation. During the 1960s, I had the good fortune to teach in newly independent Sarawak, one of the states of Malaysia. Then I was struck by the communal harmony that existed among its more than forty distinct peoples, an undoubted legacy of the relaxed approach adopted by James Brooke, the first "white rajah". Only six of Sarawak's peoples were represented in the class mentioned in the dedication, but their different perspectives meant that our discussions were often a revelation. Besides making me aware of a wider range of possibilities, they planted an abiding interest in things Asian. I can only hope that this brief survey of Asia's past encourages a similar appreciation of its remarkable achievements.

# Introduction

sia invented civilisation. The earliest cities in the world appeared in Sumer, present-day Iraq, during the fourth millennium BC. Egypt was not far behind this urban revolution, but it was the Sumerians who shaped the consciousness of ancient West Asia. Their seminal thought is known to us from the library belonging the Assyrian kings. Translation of one royal text in 1872 caused a sensation because it comprised the Babylonian account of the Flood, a story believed to have been biblical in origin. When scholars discovered that this myth went all the way back to Atrahasis, the Sumerian Noah, they realised that here were some of the oldest ideas to survive anywhere on the planet.

In chapter 1, the Sumerian heritage is viewed through the empires of Babylon, Assyria and Persia, its successor states in ancient West Asia. Persian rule, however, was interrupted by Alexander the Great, whose conquests stretched as far as northwestern India. His generals could not hold on to these vast territories, so a revived Persia confronted the Romans in the Mediterranean. The seesawing struggle between Europe and Asia lasted well into the medieval period, with the Crusades and the Ottoman occupation of the Balkans. In ancient times, this intercontinental struggle had already acquired religious overtones. Because the multiplicity of deities derived from the Sumerian pantheon were largely replaced by the monotheism of Jewish belief through its powerful offshoot, Christianity. What the Christians retained in Jesus though, much to the later consternation of Muhammad, was the Sumerian notion of a dying-and-rising god.

Chapter 2 begins with the civilisation that arose in the Indus river valley about 2200 BC. Even though an inability to decipher the Indus script renders our understanding of this second-oldest Asian civilisation incomplete, archaeological remains point to a religious tradition that had a profound impact on Indian belief. Ritual ablution, yoga and worship of a mother goddess were passed on to the Aryans, who overran

#### Introduction

the Indus valley between 1750 and 1500 BC. Their chariot-led invasion made this war machine central to Aryan culture: its effectiveness is celebrated in the epic duels that are described in the *Mahabharata*, the second longest poem ever composed. Only the *La Galigo* cycle, belonging to the Bugis on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi, is more extensive in its account of the hero Sawerigading's exploits. Not so easily dealt with was Buddhism, the first pan-Asian faith. The Aryans had to come to terms with its singular concepts once the Buddha's message became popular. The patronage of the Mauryan emperors, as well as the Kushana kings, spread Buddhism into Central Asia by means of monastic foundations, whence monks carried the religion farther east to China, Korea and Japan.

The Kushanas were just one of the Central Asian peoples who controlled northern India during ancient times. Under the native Gupta dynasty a degree of stability returned before the arrival of the Huns. As did Attila in contemporary Europe, the Hunnish king Mihirkula took delight in the intimidation of settled populations. Before Gupta strength was worn down, however, the dynasty had rejected Buddhism in favour of Hinduism: henceforth the dominant religion in South Asia, despite Islam's penetration of the subcontinent during the seventh century AD.

The cradle of Asia's third-oldest civilisation in East Asia is the subject of chapter 3. There the Shang and Zhou monarchs witnessed the formation of China's uniquely continuous culture, which was to endure as an empire from 221 BC until 1911. Before imperial unification under Qin Shi Huangdi, the rival philosophies of Confucianism and Daoism had emerged, although the family-oriented system of Confucius would triumph under the emperors. Possibly the remoteness of China from other ancient centres of civilisation in South and West Asia explains its sense of being a world apart. Troublesome neighbours on the Central Asian steppe had led to the construction of the Great Wall, the boundary between the unsown land of the nomads and the intensive agriculture of the Chinese peasant farmers.

But the Great Wall was never enough to guarantee the safety of the Chinese empire once nomadic peoples were recruited as allies. In a parallel to the fate that befell the western provinces of the Roman empire, the whole of north China was conquered by Central Asian tribesmen in 316 AD. Yet the difference between the Germanic and Central Asian invasions could not have been more marked because, unlike Latin, Chinese survived intact and finally replaced the invaders'

tongues as the official language. Only the Persian language achieved a similar longevity in its struggle with Arabic, although it was greatly transformed as a result.

The Central Asians, who took over north China, and indeed other parts of Asia as well as Europe, are discussed in chapter 4. How the Eurasian steppe acted as an intercontinental highway for charioteers and horsemen has come to be appreciated in recent years. Despite the usual direction of movement being from east to west, as nomadic herders headed towards lusher pastures kept green by Atlantic rain, China received the chariot from the Tocharians, a people originally living on the Russian steppe. Their trek eastwards remains an exception to the rule that migration was westwards, particularly after the Great Wall reduced opportunities for raids in East Asia. The scourge of the sown was how Central Asian nomads were viewed. Not until the Turks and the Mughals established dynasties, in West and South Asia respectively, would this perception begin to fade. Even so, Tamerlane was a terrible reminder that nothing could ever be taken for granted in Central Asia.

Chapter 5 introduces the medieval period in West Asia, an era defined by the rise of Islam, the second pan-Asian faith. Prophet Muhammad's mission was to have a far-reaching influence on the continent. Arab arms took his message to Central and South Asia, while Indian converts involved in trade carried the new religion to Malaya, Indonesia and the Philippines. A crucial decision was the replacement of Jerusalem as the Holy City with Mecca: it meant that the Arab custom of pilgrimage to the Ka'ba provided the means of unifying a community of believers spread right across Asia.

The Prophet's death brought about a poor compromise over the leadership of Islam, with the assassination of three of the four men who were appointed to succeed him, including his son-in-law Ali ibn Abi Talib. Only with the establishment of the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates were the fratricidal tendencies of the Arabs tamed, although in 750 the former were slaughtered in a delayed revenge for Ali's murder. After the decline of the Abbasids, the Turkish Seljuks assumed the leadership of Islam, which was challenged by the Crusades between 1095 and 1229. Out of the mayhem of the Mongol onslaught, however, two major powers arose: Safavid Persia and the Ottoman empire. Today the splendid monuments that their leaders raised can be seen in Isfahan and Istanbul.

The coming of Islam to India is the starting point of chapter 6. Hindu and Buddhist kingdoms continued to flourish in southern India

#### Introduction

and Sri Lanka, but the medieval experience of South Asia was in the main foreign rule. From Central Asia came a series of Moslem invaders until in 1530 Zahir-ud-din Muhammad Babur founded the Mughal dynasty. The transformation of his semi-nomadic followers into the rulers of a great empire is one of the highlights of Asia's medieval era. That his most famous successor, Akbar, tried to accommodate Indian beliefs and customs is still evident in the Indo-Islamic architecture at Fatehpur Sikri, the city he built near Agra.

Foreign interference was not restricted to overland invaders because Europeans arrived by sea. The Portuguese and the Dutch were the first competitors for Asia's seaborne trade, but the contest for mastery pitted the French against the British. Arguably, it was their rivalry that turned the English East India Company into the dominant power, once Arthur Wellesley broke the Maratha confederacy in 1803. Well might a Mughal emperor still sit on a throne in Delhi, but real authority resided at Calcutta, the capital of British India.

Having recovered from the Central Asian occupation of north China, the Chinese empire enjoyed an impressive renaissance under the Tang and Song dynasties. In chapter 7 the splendour of their rule is reflected in the two main capitals they constructed: Chang'an and Kaifeng. The former Tang capital, with two million inhabitants, was then the largest and most populous city in the medieval world.

Such was the zenith reached by Chinese culture that its influence flowed strongly into Korea and Japan, shaping their own traditions in a lasting manner. Only feudalism prevented the Japanese from becoming as Confucian as the Koreans. Interminable civil wars ensured that no Japanese emperor ever acquired the authority of the Chinese throne. Despite the Mongol conquest of China between 1276 and 1368, the Chinese restored their empire under the Ming dynasty, strengthening the Great Wall and dispatching fleets under the eunuch admiral Zheng He into the southern oceans. Had the Chinese not turned away from the sea after 1433, Vasco da Gama would have found his tiny fleet sailing alongside a Chinese navy with vessels four times the size of his caravels. The emptiness of Asian waters gave the Portuguese, the Spaniards, the Dutch, the French and, finally, the English a false impression that they were the first explorers to sail there.

Central Asian arms were at their most irresistible during the medieval period. Not only did Genghiz Khan set the Mongols off on a series of conquests that made them masters of the largest empire ever to exist in Asia, its subject peoples living as far apart as Russia, Persia, Korea, China, Cambodia and Java, but the Tibetans and the Manchus also carved out for themselves impressive states. Both the Tibetans and the Manchus harried China, but it was the semi-nomadic Manchus who founded in 1644 China's last imperial dynasty, the Qing.

In chapter 8 we note as well how Tamerlane's short-lived triumph could never be forgotten: his liking for severed heads resulted in 90,000 of them being cemented into 120 towers in 1401, after the capture of Baghdad. Despite his title, "the Sword of Islam", Tamerlane was by no means inclined to behead non-Moslems. In comparison with his Moslem enemies, Christians, Jews, Buddhists and Hindus escaped lightly. But on rare occasions, almost as though to appear even-handed, Tamerlane would unleash his fury against them too.

Chapter 9 is devoted to medieval Southeast Asia, whose various civilisations then came to the fore. First, Vietnam asserted its independence from China in 939, after a millennium of direct rule. Its rulers never shook off Chinese ways: Confucian learning endured long enough for Ho Chi Minh to despair in the 1900s at its continued use to recruit Vietnamese officials. South of Vietnam, Indian influence prevailed in Champa, Cambodia as well as the Indonesian archipelago, where Hindu-style kingdoms developed. Burma, modern Myanmar, received Buddhism from Sri Lanka, while the Philippines remained isolated from outside ideas before the advent of Islam and Christianity.

Christianity was brought to the Philippines by the Spaniards in the sixteenth century. At first they shared the spice trade with the Portuguese, but the Dutch decision to establish a permanent base on the island of Java gave them the upper hand in Indonesia, soon known as the Dutch East Indies. Another late intruder were the Thai, who left what is now the Chinese province of Yunnan during the fourteenth century.

Modern times commenced with Asian polities in full retreat. Western encroachment either overland or by sea reduced the majority to the status of colonies, protectorates or client states. Political realities were to alter dramatically after the Second World War, but the technological edge then enjoyed by the Europeans and the Americans gave them unprecedented dominance over Asian affairs.

Nowhere was this clearer in West Asia than in the collapse of the Ottoman empire, whose terminal decline is revealed in chapter 10 as the prelude to the formation of the countries into which the area is now divided. Opposition to Israel comprises one of the few policies these new

#### Introduction

states share, because their differences create an atmosphere of suspicion and uncertainty. Iraq and Iran are locked in bitter antagonism; Syria and Lebanon coexist in uneasy tension; Jordan and Saudi Arabia pursue their own separate courses, whereas the programme of modernisation sponsored by Atatürk has transformed Turkey into a potential member of the European Union.

For South Asia the key modern event was the Indian Mutiny of 1857. After the uprising, the deposition of the last Mughal emperor meant that the only way to escape from colonialism was independence, something that Gandhi did so much to achieve. Chapter 11 follows this strenuous effort, whose admirable emphasis on non-violence still failed to prevent bloodshed. But this was to be completely overshadowed by the communal disorder associated with the partition of the subcontinent in 1947, when 700,000 people lost their lives. Its bitter legacy was three wars fought between newly independent Pakistan and India, before the final one in 1971 permitted the emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign state. Independent Sri Lanka also inherited communal problems that are still unresolved, despite the defeat of the Tamil Tigers.

Although theirs was not as extreme as the fate suffered by the Ottoman Turks, the Chinese were hard pressed by modern predators. The British demonstrated the Chinese empire's weakness during the notorious Opium War of 1840–42. Trafficking in opium resulted from the English East India Company's shortage of silver to pay for tea. Force of arms prevented the Chinese authorities from blocking this lethal import, a circumstance that encouraged others to meddle in China's internal affairs. Chapter 12 shows how the French, the Russians and the Japanese all pressed the tottering Qing dynasty for concessions before it was extinguished in 1911. The rise of Japan, the first Asian country to modernise its economy, altered the balance of power to such an extent that the imperial ambitions it ruthlessly pursued in Korea, China and, eventually, Southeast Asia fatally weakened colonialism everywhere.

The tribulations of modern Central Asia are treated in chapter 13. Rivalry with Britain in Afghanistan and Tibet was one reason for Russia's subjugation of its nomadic peoples, another was a desire to exploit the area's natural resources. At its worst under the Soviets, the Central Asian republics were converted into a vast cotton plantation that relied on cheap labour and the draining of the Aral Sea. Only now are its peoples becoming truly independent, notwithstanding a return of inter-tribal

quarrels. Siberia and part of Manchuria remain under Russian control, while Afghanistan retains its capacity to frustrate foreign domination.

Chapter 14, the final chapter, brings this concise history of Asia to a close by reviewing the mixed fortunes of modern Southeast Asia. While the British conducted an orderly withdrawal from empire, after the historic decision to grant India early independence, the Dutch and the French endeavoured to retain their colonies in a totally changed world. For the Vietnamese, who led resistance to France on mainland Southeast Asia, the anti-colonial struggle proved devastating once the United States joined in. The Vietnam War is a salutary lesson of how misconceived were so many actions during the Cold War. Washington simply failed to grasp North Vietnam's essential aim: the reunification of the Vietnamese homeland.

For the Filipinos, the Pacific dimension of the Second World War made no difference to the agreed date of their independence, 4 July 1946. But the wanton destruction of Manila cast a shadow over this event, since the city suffered as much damage as Warsaw and Budapest during their liberation. As did Thailand and Myanmar, the Philippines learned that democracy offered no ready solution to public unrest, although so far it has avoided a military coup. Malaysia and Singapore, on the other hand, have managed the post-colonial period rather well, even though the Malaysian federation needed help to deter Sukarno's territorial ambitions during the 1960s. With the 1999 liberation of East Timor, another victim of the Republic of Indonesia's expansionism, the last European colony reasserted its sovereignty. Because of the abundant sandalwood forests, the Portuguese had established a trading post there in 1642.

# List of Maps

Pg 15	Ancient Mesopotamia
Pg 20	The Persian empire
Pg 70	The Gupta empire
Pg 99	The Han empire
Pg 108/9	The Eurasian Steppe
Pg 158	The Seljuk empire
Pg 193	The Mughal empire
Pg 221	The Song empire
Pg 262	The Mongol empire
Pg 281	Medieval Southeast Asia
Pg 321	The Ottoman empire
Pg 345	The British Raj
Pg 366	The Qing empire
Pg 405	Central Asian republics
Pg 419	Southeast Asia in 1941

All of the maps were drawn by Ray Dunning.

# Photo Credits

#### Chapter 1

Pg 6 The ruins of the ziggurat, or stepped temple, at Ur. Source: Getty Images

### Chapter 2

Pg 56 The Mahabodhi temple which marks the spot where the Buddha's enlightenment came to pass.

Source: Getty Images

Pg 68 An entrance to one of the Buddhist cave sanctuaries at Ajanta in central India.

Source: Corbis

#### Chapter 3

Pg 93 The Great Wall north of Beijing with its Ming dynasty stone facing.

Source: Arthur Cotterell

Pg 96 The mound raised above the tomb of Qin Shi Huangdi at Mount Li.

Source: Arthur Cotterell

## Chapter 4

Pg 113 Rivers and streams from mountain ranges ensure the survival of nomads' herds.

Source: Arthur Cotterell

Pg 117 The deserts of Central Asia meant that a variety of animals was needed.

Source: Arthur Cotterell

Pg 123 Sunset on the Mongolian steppe.

Source: Arthur Cotterell

Pg 128 The fortress at the western end of the Great Wall, whose rammed-earth construction is clearly visible.

Source: Arthur Cotterell

#### **Photo Credits**

Pg 130 The great Buddha at Bingling Si in Gansu province, striking testimony to the Indian faith's arrival in north China.

Source: Ray Dunning

Pg 133 Part of the vast Buddhist cave complex at Dunhuang, near the western end of the Great Wall.

Source: Ray Dunning

#### Chapter 5

Pg 152 The Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem. Source: AFP

Pg 171 Suleyman the Magnificent's mosque at Istanbul. Source: Ray Dunning

Pg 172 Sultan Orhan's tomb at Bursa. Source: Ray Dunning

Pg 174 The Byzantine church of Saint Sergius and Saint Bacchus in Istanbul.

Source: Arthur Cotterell

Pg 175 Haghia Sophia, the former Church of the Divine Wisdom. Source: Ray Dunning

## Chapter 6

Pg 183 The Qutb Minar in Delhi, built by the Ghurids around 1199. Source: Ray Dunning

Pg 184 One of the temples at Khajuraho, where Ibn Battuta found Moslems studying yoga.

Source: Arthur Cotterell

Pg 189 The Kailasanatha temple at Kanchipuram, the Pallava capital. Source: Arthur Cotterell

Pg 191 The standing Buddha at the Gal Vihara rock temple, Polonnaruva.

Source: Ray Dunning

Pg 194 Indo-Islamic decoration at Fatehpur Sikri, Akbar's new city 30 kilometres from Agra.

Source: Ray Dunning

Pg 195 Some of the monumental buildings at Fatehpur Sikri. Source: Ray Dunning

Pg 199 Shah Jahan's tribute to Mumtaz-Mahal, the famous Taj Mahal. Source: Ray Dunning Pg 200 The Taj Mahal viewed from the Agra Fortress, where Shah Jahan spent his final years as a prisoner.

Source: Arthur Cotterell

#### Chapter 7

- Pg 217 The pilgrim Xuan Zhang persuaded Emperor Gao Zong to erect this pagoda at Chang' an as a library for Buddhist scriptures. *Source: Arthur Cotterell*
- Pg 218 Xuan Zhang's tomb at a monastery on the Silk Road. Source: Arthur Cotterell
- Pg 222 The cemetery of the Xi Xia kings at Yinchuan. Its tombs were robbed by Genghiz Khan.

  Source: Arthur Cotterell
- Pg 234 The gatehouse of the Nanzenji temple in Kyoto, Japan's second imperial capital.

  Source: Getty Images
- Pg 241 Monumental sculptures lining the road leading to the Ming imperial tombs near Beijing.

  Source: Arthur Cotterell
- Pg 244 Part of the emperor's private quarters in the Forbidden City, Beijing.

  Source: Arthur Cotterell
- Pg 245 An inner doorway at the Forbidden City, Beijing. Source: Arthur Cotterell

### Chapter 8

- Pg 249 A collection of balbals, Turkish grave markers, dating from the sixth century in Kyrgyzstan.

  Source: Ray Dunning
- Pg 268 Ismael Samani's tomb at Bukhara, constructed in the 890s. Source: Ray Dunning
- Pg 269 The remains of the observatory at Samarkand, where Tamerlane settled learned men from the countries he conquered.

  Source: Ray Dunning
- Pg 270 The Gur Amir, Tamerlane's mausoleum at Samarkand. Source: Ray Dunning
- Pg 271 Inner part of the Forbidden City, Beijing.

  Source: Arthur Cotterell

#### **Photo Credits**

Pg 273 Forbidden City roofs. Source: Arthur Cotterell A dragon holding "the pearl of wisdom" in its claw. Pg 275 Source: Ray Dunning Chapter 9 Pg 279 Van Mieu, the Temple of Literature in Hanoi. Source: Getty Images Angkor Wat, Suryavarman II's great contribution to the Khmer Pg 284 capital. Source: Ray Dunning Pg 286 An example of Indian-inspired decoration to be found on Khmer buildings. Source: Ray Dunning Another example of Khmer architectural decoration. Pg 287 Source: Ray Dunning Pg 290 The Ananda temple at Pagan, dedicated to the Buddha's cousin and favourite follower, Ananda. Source: Getty Images Pg 296 Part of the vast Buddhist stupa of Borobudur in Java. Source: Thinkstock Pg 309 The Emerald Buddha's Hall in the Grand Palace, Bangkok, shows the influence of Khmer traditions. Source: Ray Dunning Pg 310 More Khmer influence is evident in the architecture of the Regalia Hall at Bangkok. Source: Ray Dunning Pg 311 The enormous Buddha at Wat Po in Bangkok, where the Thai king is believed to possess the essence of this saviour. Source: Ray Dunning Chapter 10 Pg 320 The sultan's harem at the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul. Source: Arthur Cotterell

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wearing Arab clothes.

Pg 325

A 1917 military review. Lawrence of Arabia stands at the back

- Pg 331 The extravagant historical parade at Persepolis in October 1971. Source: Getty Images
- Pg 333 Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returning home in 1979 after his exile in France.

  Source: AFP
- Pg 334 American missiles being fired in 2003 during the Second Gulf War.
- Pg 338 "Father Turk", Mustafa Kemal, in his garden in 1923 with his wife and a friend.

  Source: AFP

#### Chapter 11

- Pg 348 The Red Fort in Delhi, the last stronghold of the Mughals. *Source: Ray Dunning*
- Pg 349 From this audience chamber in the Red Fort, the Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar II could exercise no control over the mutinous sepoys.

  Source: Ray Dunning
- Pg 354 The Curzons' visit to Hyderabad in 1902. Source: Corhis

Source: Getty Images

Pg 356 The indomitable Gandhi as determined as ever in 1940 to end the British Raj.

Source: Getty Images

## Chapter 12

- Pg 374 Sun Yatsen in 1923. Source: AFP
- Pg 375 Guomindang troops skirmish in Shanghai with Japanese forces before the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War.

  Source: Getty Images
- Pg 377 USS Arizona going down in flames at Pearl Harbor, 7 December 1941.

  Source: Getty Images
- Pg 379 On 1 October 1949 Mao Zedong proclaims the People's Republic in Beijing.

  Source: Getty Images

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#### Chapter 13

Pg 390 Two views of Kashgar, a Moslem city that was pivotal in the Great Game (above).

Source: Ray Dunning

Pg 392 A towering minaret at Turfan, one of the Central Asian cities incorporated into the Chinese empire.

Source: Ray Dunning

Pg 395 High minarets such as this one at Bukhara have always fascinated visitors, including Genghiz Khan.

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Pg 402 Vladivostok, Russia's port on the Sea of Japan, was an early acquisition

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Pg 404 The Ark fortress at Bukhara, where in 1918 a 20-strong delegation of Russian Bolsheviks was executed.

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### Chapter 14

Pg 412 A Land Dayak longhouse in Sarawak.

Source: Arthur Cotterell

Pg 416 Part of the Royal Palace at Phnom Penh. Source: Ray Dunning

Pg 420 British soldiers surrendering at Singapore on 15 February 1942.

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Pg 422 A second atomic bomb exploding above Nagasaki, 9 August 1945.

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Pg 425 Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew with his Malaysian counterpart Tunku Abdul Rahman.

Source: AFP

Pg 427 President Sukarno rallies Indonesians against the return of the Dutch colonial authorities.

Source: AFP

Pg 428 Taman Ayun temple at Mengwi, a Hindu place of worship in Bali.

Source: PhotoLibrary

- Pg 429 A typical Javanese village with its paddy fields. Source: Alamy
- Pg 431 "Uncle Ho". The leader of Vietnamese resistance to the French and the Americans, Ho Chi Minh.

  Source: Corbis
- Pg 433 Despite this display of technology in 1967, the United States was heading for defeat in Vietnam.

  Source: Getty Images
- Pg 435 Mass opposition to President Marcos that led to his exile in 1986.

  Source: Corbis

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