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PROLOGUE

CHINA IN THE SEVENTH CENTURY A.D.

The significance of the life and achievements of Li Shih-Min, who reigned from A.D. 626–49 as the emperor T'ai Tsung of the T'ang dynasty, cannot be appreciated without some knowledge of the age which immediately preceded his birth. It is necessary to paint, as a background to his life, a picture of sixth-century China, its social organisation and the political trends which dominated the times.

At the dawn of the seventh century China was neither so large nor so populous a country as the modern republic. For more than two thousand years the Chinese people had steadily expanded from their early home in the Yellow river valley, colonising new territories, absorbing or exterminating the aboriginal inhabitants. This expansion had by the seventh century carried the Chinese race and rule south of the Yangtze valley, but had not yet made a permanent conquest of what are now the south-western provinces of the Chinese republic. The northern frontier of the empire was defined by the Great Wall, beyond which lay the country of the nomad Tartars, the secular enemies of the Chinese cultivators. To the south the boundary was less clearly marked. Canton and the coast-line had been brought under Chinese rule some centuries earlier, but this strip was still a colonial territory largely inhabited by non-Chinese races.[1]

The south-western provinces, Yunnan and Kueichou, with parts of Szechuan, Kuangsi and Hunan, were not then part of the Chinese empire, though strong dynasties had from time to time established garrisons at various points. Even on

[1] Shans. The south coast was anciently called Yüeh, and the people of Yüeh were non-Chinese. There are still non-Chinese tribes in Fukien, close to the coast, and in the island of Hainan.

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the southern bank of the Yangtze, in Hunan and Kiangsi, Chinese colonisation was as yet sparse, and aboriginal tribes were still found in the mountains.[1]

The Yangtze valley was thus the real southern limit of seventh-century China. Farther south there was a colonial region standing ethnographically in the same relation to the true Chinese territory as Indo-China and Malaya stand to the modern republic. The important difference was that South China in the seventh century had already been subjected to Chinese rule, whereas the modern Chinese settlements in southern Asia are outside the frontiers of the Chinese state. The centre of gravity in the seventh-century empire was still the great plain lying between the Yellow and Yangtze rivers and the plateaux of the north-west. The powerful Han dynasty (206 B.C.–A.D. 220) had indeed ruled over a far wider area, including Mongolia, Central Asia, Korea, southern Manchuria and even Annam, but these far-flung dominions were in no sense part of "China". They were foreign conquests held by the power of the sword. By the end of the sixth century these extraneous territories had all been lost.

The great Han dynasty was succeeded, after a period of division, by the quarrelsome Tsin dynasty (A.D. 265–419) under which the defence of the northern frontiers was neglected. In A.D. 311 invading Tartars captured the Tsin emperor in his capital at Lo Yang and conquered the northern part of China. The Tsin dynasty managed to retain the south, where in A.D. 318 the dynasty was re-established with its capital at Nanking. The northern provinces were left in the hands of several competing Tartar princes who were only prevented from conquering the whole empire by their violent intestine dissensions.

This disaster led to three hundred years of partition. The unity of the empire was lost, the work of the Han dynasty

[1] *Tzŭ chih t'ung chien*, by Ssŭ-Ma Kuang. Reprinted by the Commercial Press, Shanghai, Book 183. In which mention is made of ManTzŭ aborigines in the mountain country of south Kiangsu province.

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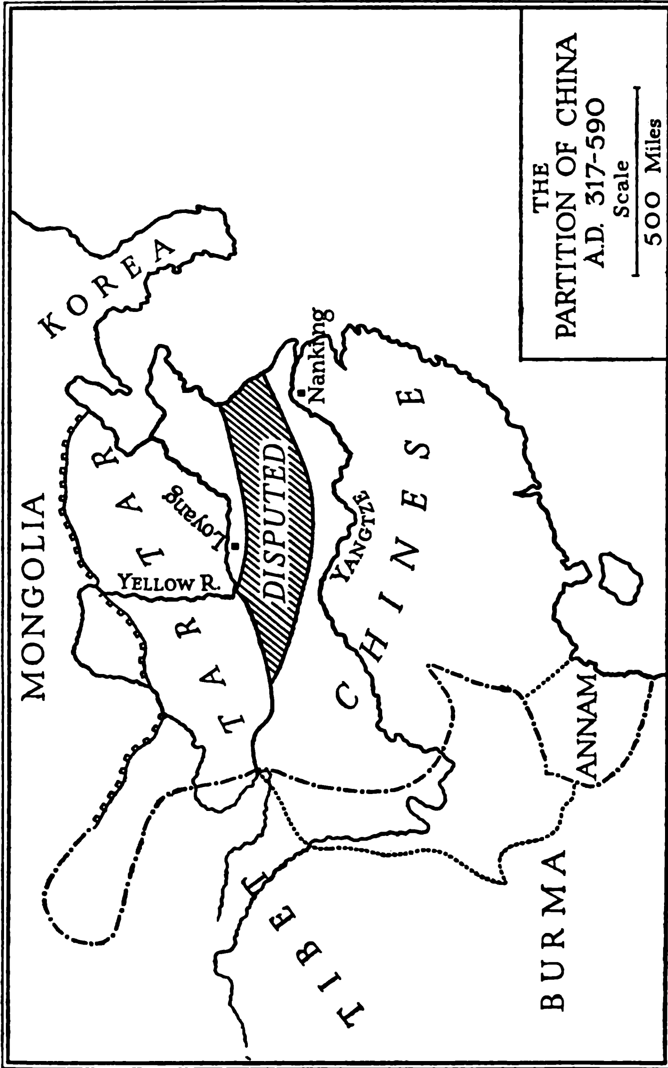

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utterly destroyed. The northern provinces from the Great Wall to the southern edge of the great plain were divided up between a number of short-lived Tartar dynasties, only one of which, the Wei (A.D. 390–500), succeeded in uniting the whole north under one ruler. The southern empire remained in Chinese hands, the Tsin being succeeded by four other dynasties, none of which occupied the throne for more than a lifetime.

During this period of partition the situation in China closely resembled the condition of Europe in the Dark Ages. Just as the Roman empire, partly overrun by barbarians, only maintained its authority in the eastern provinces, so the old Han empire of all China lost the north to the barbarian Tartars, but managed to retain its hold on the southern provinces. Nanking, like Constantinople, was the centre of the polite arts, the last refuge of refined civilisation; and the southern Chinese empire, like Byzantium, was preserved more by the incoherence of its enemies than by its own military prowess. The sequel proved different. Europe remained permanently divided, losing not only political unity but also the language and culture of the classical past. The Chinese absorbed the Tartars, reconstructed the old unified empire, revived the ancient culture and carried it to a perfection never previously attained.

In this splendid achievement, which changed the history of the eastern world, Li Shih-Min played a major part, for the Chinese recovery was consolidated under the dynasty which he founded. The reasons why the Chinese succeeded where the eastern Roman empire failed are worthy of examination. There were two important differences between the plight of Europe and that of China in the fifth and sixth centuries. The Roman empire was assailed not only by the Teutonic barbarians of the north, but also by the Persians, and later by the Arabs, from the south. The Chinese had only to contend with the Tartars of the north, for no formidable power ever developed among the aborigines of South China.

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Secondly the Graeco-Roman population had for some centuries steadily diminished and had never been an ethnographic unity; but the Chinese, a people bound together by a common language and literature, were infinitely more numerous than their enemies. Consequently the Tartar conquerors were rapidly absorbed by the native stock, which yet remained essentially Chinese. In Europe the descendants of Roman citizens and barbarian invaders blended to form new Latin peoples, but in China the Tartars were too few to breed a new mixed race. Political ascendancy was therefore easily recovered by the Chinese majority.

There is no authority for positive statements about the size of the population of China at the close of the sixth century. An estimate has been made, which, while in conformity with such evidence as exists, does not conflict with commonsense or historical probability.[1] According to this computation the population of the northern provinces which had been under Tartar dynasties was in the year A.D. 618 102,300,000, that of the southern, less populous, region which had remained under Chinese rule was 27,150,000. The population of the whole empire being 129,450,000.

The re-assertion of Chinese supremacy was unquestionably mainly due to the fact that, in spite of three centuries of Tartar rule, the overwhelming majority of the population was still of Chinese race. Though the Tartars were always formidable enemies, there is no reason to believe that their hordes compared in point of numbers with the Chinese inhabitants of the empire. Such historical references as can be found all point the other way. The Chinese historians prided themselves on their punctilious accuracy in matters of fact and date, but they cared little for statistics. The histories tell of Tartar invasions, wars and conquests, but there is no record of how many Tartars survived the war

[1] The detailed arguments and data upon which this estimate is based will be found in the appendix. This estimate was first published in *The China Journal*, Shanghai, in the numbers January and February 1932, and is reprinted by the courtesy of the editor of that journal.

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and settled in China, nor of how many Chinese remained in the conquered territory.

The researches of modern historians dealing with the very similar and almost contemporary invasions of the Roman empire by the Teutonic barbarians have tended to discount the traditional belief in vast overwhelming hosts which swept across Europe exterminating the inhabitants. It has been shown that such huge hordes could not have come from the uncultivated forests of northern Europe nor obtained provisions and transport for long marches across the length and breadth of the continent. Their success, it is now believed, was due, not so much to their numbers, as to their superior fighting spirit and the listless resistance of the degenerate subjects of Rome.

The Tartar incursions in North China were unquestionably of the same character. It is against reason to suppose that the semi-desert Mongolian steppe could ever have supported a population equal to that of the North China plain, one of the most highly cultivated areas on the earth's surface. The Tartar tribes, then, as now, were nomads, compelled to range over enormous distances to find pasture for their flocks. Hardiness, horsemanship, and the dissensions among their adversaries were the chief advantages of the Tartar raiders, who made up for their small numbers by superior mobility. Just as the barbarians first gained a foothold in the Roman empire as mercenaries in the service of the emperor, so the Tartars were invited into China to assist in the fratricidal quarrels between the princes of the Tsin dynasty.

When they decided to assume the mastery themselves, they encountered only a feeble resistance. The Chinese population, weary of the misgovernment of the Tsin princes, accepted a Tartar ruler with indifference, if not with relief. The later invasion in A.D. 390 was even easier. These Toba tribes who afterwards founded the most enduring Tartar dynasty, the Wei, first entered China at the expense of the earlier Tartar dynasty, which the Tobas conquered. It was not until A.D. 450

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that the new invaders tried conclusions with the Chinese empire in the south. Their conquest of the northern provinces was not opposed by the Chinese, who felt no interest in the fate of their established rulers. When new Tartars attacked the old settlers, the real natives stood by content, no doubt pleased at the spectacle.

The Toba invasion was in fact a change for the better. The new conquerors were of Tungusic stock, a more intelligent and adaptable race than the earlier Tartar invaders who were Huns (Hiung Nu). The Toba Wei dynasty gave North China peace after a century of ceaseless wars. The Tungusic newcomers speedily adopted the Chinese civilisation and freely intermarried with the natives of the soil. A hundred years after the foundation of this Wei dynasty the Tartar emperor himself issued a decree prohibiting the use of the Tartar language, costume and customs, marking the change by abandoning his name of Toba in favour of the Chinese surname Yüan, which had the same meaning. The Tartars were now so identified with the Chinese that they built new lengths of the Great Wall to defend themselves, in the Chinese manner, against the untamed nomads of the Mongolian steppe.

History confirms the theory that the Tartar invaders formed only a very small minority of the North China population. In A.D. 500, when the Wei emperor issued his sinifying decree, the province of Honan, immediately south of the Yellow river, had a Tartar population of only 14,700. Yet it was in this province that the Wei emperor held his court at Lo Yang. The first Tartar invasion in A.D. 304 is said to have had a fighting force 50,000 strong. If the whole of this horde counting women and children was five times as numerous, it would still have been only a small fraction of the population of one Chinese province.[1]

[1] Evidence that the Chinese did not regard the Tartars as exceedingly numerous can be quoted from other periods. In Han times a Chinese renegade is recorded as remarking to a chief of the Huns, "Your whole horde does not equal the population of two Chinese prefectures". Again, in A.D. 750, a

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If there was no likelihood that the Tartar conquest would result in the permanent mutation of the Chinese race and its culture, language and civilisation, as happened to the Roman population of the western empire, yet there seemed to be a great danger that it would make an end of Chinese unity, effecting a lasting partition into two or more empires. It was the very limitation of the Tartar strength that made for the permanency of the schism. In the dry plains and plateaux of the north the Tartar horsemen found a country admirably suited to their methods of warfare, the traditional Scythian cavalry tactics, which are described by the Chinese historians in almost the very words which Herodotus uses about the Scythian enemies of King Darius. But when the Tartars raided beyond the confines of the central plain into the valley of the Yangtze, they came into a country in every way unsuited to cavalry. The swampy rice-fields, abrupt, wooded hills, and narrow, wet valleys of the southern provinces were unfamiliar and dangerous ground for the northern horsemen.

The Tartar invasions of the Yangtze valley were in every case failures. Three times, in A.D. 379, 450 and 467, they raided to the very banks of the river, but each time they were defeated and driven from the country. It was not until A.D. 540, when the Tartars, almost entirely absorbed, were freely using Chinese armies, that they profited by the dissensions of the south to make themselves overlords, through a Chinese tributary, of the western half of the Yangtze valley. By that time the pure Tartar blood was rare in the north: the descendants of the free horsemen of the conquest had become elegant and cultivated courtiers, indistinguishable from their Chinese colleagues.

The southern Chinese, though they made several attempts, were equally unsuccessful in their efforts to recover the

counsellor of the Turkish khan remarked in the course of discussion with his master, "The population of the Turks is small, not one hundredth part of China's".

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northern provinces. Their troops were mainly infantry, the horse being a rare beast in the south of China, where grazing land is seldom found. The southerners, however, excel as sailors and watermen. Conducting amphibious operations along the navigable rivers, they three times penetrated as far north as the Yellow river (A.D. 380, 417, 450), temporarily reconquering the whole central plain and part of the western plateau. Unfortunately these conquests proved as transient as the Tartar dominion in the Yangtze valley. China seemed doomed to be permanently divided, but without the stability of a lasting clearly defined frontier.

No geographical feature marks the boundary between North and South China. In the west, mountain ranges, by no means impassable, provide an adequate frontier, but in the east the great, dry, millet-growing plain south of the Yellow river shades off imperceptibly into the flat, rice-growing valley of the Huai river, which communicates by channels and lakes with the Yangtze. There is no frontier, only a gradual, indeterminate change in the character of the country. Consequently the history of all partitions of China is ceaseless border warfare punctuated by short intervals of uneasy truce. Peace in China has ever depended on unity.

This border warfare in the fifth and sixth centuries was characterised by endless sieges, for the southern Chinese were skilful and obstinate in the defence of fortified places, while the horse-riding Tartars were unused to siege work. The southern empire, owing its preservation more to its frontier fortresses and its climate than to the valour of the army in the field, seemed likely to endure indefinitely, but entertained no real hope of reconquering the north. Reunion, when at last it came, was the work of the northern Chinese. By the middle of the sixth century the pure Tartar stock had practically disappeared, but in the process of absorption the northern Chinese had acquired something of the virile energy of the nomads, while retaining their Chinese character, language and culture, to which the Tartars could make no useful contri-

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bution.[1] It was from this fortified race in the north, Chinese in all essentials, but rendered more dynamic by the addition of some Tartar blood, that the artificers of reunion were drawn, their work being facilitated by the close relationship existing between the aristocracy of both empires.

Although the Chinese feudal system properly so called had been finally overthrown by the foundation of the centralised Han dynasty eight hundred years earlier, Chinese society at the close of the sixth century was still essentially aristocratic. With the collapse of the united empire under the Tsin dynasty, many great families established in the south became locally very powerful. Governorships were passed on from father to son; influential clans dominated whole provinces, claiming an hereditary right to positions of authority.

This was the principal weakness of the southern empire, which was forever spending its strength in suppressing rebellious governors instead of fighting the Tartars. In the north political power was at first confined to the Tartar ruling clans, the Chinese aristocracy having fled south when Lo Yang fell. But as the Tartar stock became absorbed a new Chinese aristocracy rose to power, these families often having some admixture of Tartar blood.

Throughout the whole period of partition there was much intermarriage between the ruling classes of both empires. Princes and governors of the southern state frequently fled to the north when some political complication at Nanking made life in the south unsafe; while the many and sanguinary revolutions in the Tartar kingdoms sent another exodus of refugees across the southern frontier. The short duration and violent perturbations of the dynasties ruling both empires tended to depress the imperial authority and prestige. Few families occupied the throne for more than forty or fifty

[1] It is possible that the Tobas brought with them from a west Asiatic source the art for which their Wei dynasty is famous—sculpture in stone. Against this view there is the earlier evidence of Han sculpture at Hsiao T'ang Shan in Shantung, and the contemporary Liang stone lions at Nanking. But Greek influence is present in the Wei Buddhistic figures.

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