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THE RISE AND SPLENDOUR

OF THE

Chinese Empire



NÉ GROUSSET

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

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BY RENÉ GROUSSET



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MARBLE SEATED BUDDHA and POLO PLAYER IN PIGMENTED POTTERY
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CHAPTER I

CHINESE EARTH

ASIATIC civilization is the product of "Mesopotamias", of great alluvial plains where the natural fertility of the soil stimulated man's agricultural vocation. Such was the case of Babylon in western Asia; such is the case of the "Central Plain" of China in eastern Asia.

This great plain, from Peking in the north as far as the Huai River in the south, from the approaches of Loyang in the west to the mountain spur of Shantung in the east, covers more than one hundred and twenty-five thousand square miles, an area greater than England and Ireland. In the same way that Egypt, according to Herodotus, is a "gift of the Nile", the Central Plain is a gift of the Yellow River and its tributaries. "At a relatively recent period—using that adjective in the sense which geologists give to it—this plain was an arm of the sea, the cliffs of Shansi were lashed by its waves and the present-day peninsula of Shantung was an island." Since time immemorial the Yellow River has carried away immense accretions of mud from the plateaux of yellow earth farther west and deposited them in this area, thus creating a marvellously fertile alluvial soil. As a result of this accumulation of muddy sediment, the sea has been checked and the coastline has receded ever farther eastward; a process which is still continuing today. Thus it has come about that year after year the mud has raised the bed of the Yellow River and the riverside dwellers have been obliged to build up their embankments proportionately, with the result that the river has ended by flowing in a great gutter above the level of the plain; a paradoxical situation and one fraught with extreme danger.

Towards the west and beyond the Central Plain stretch the

terraces of yellow earth, covering an area of more than two hundred and sixty thousand square kilometres, from which the nutritive stream descends. All this hilly country is in effect covered by an immense blanket of yellowish earth analogous to the Alsatian loess, a fine dust of clay, sand, and limestone deposited by the wind in past millennia, formed into a great mass and cut in terraces by erosion. A land which (when there is no lack of rain) is on the whole as fertile as the Central Plain and equally destined for agriculture. It is the kingdom of millet and wheat.¹ Finally there are immense areas, from Peking to Kaifeng and from Kaifeng to the approaches of Nanking, where the yellow earth of the terraces of the northwest and the alluvial mud of the Central Plain fuse imperceptibly and constitute the most fertile part of the whole. In this area the cultivation of millet, suited to the terraces of loess, is combined with that of rice,² more properly suited to the basins of the Huai River and the Long River.³

Chinese civilization arose in this area, hand in hand with the development of agriculture, or more specifically with the cultivation of millet and later of rice. The unknown centuries before history were employed in burning and clearing the undergrowth, which covered the plateaux of loess in the northwest, and in draining the marshes which must have covered the larger part of the Central Plain in the northeast. The ancient songs of the *Shih-ching* celebrate this work: "Ah! They are clearing the land! Their ploughs are opening up the earth. Thousands of couples are digging up roots, some in the lowlands, others on the high ground." And again: "Why have they torn up the thorny brushwood? So that we may plant our millet." Among the divine heroes glorified for the direction of this

¹ Nowadays nearly all of North China grows either millet or wheat. Shansi is about 43 per cent millet, 16 per cent kaoliang, and 14 per cent wheat; Honan, Shensi and Kansu from 45 to 60 per cent wheat.

² Rice is foreign to North China, but must have been grown in the south at a very early date; in the eighth century B.C. it is listed as one of the Five Grains.

³ Usually known to foreigners as the Yangtze; but only the reaches near Chinkiang are called Yang-tzu-chiang by the Chinese, while *Ch'ang-chiang* (Long River) is the common name for the whole course of the river.

collective labour were Shen Nung, who taught men to burn the brushwood and use the hoe, and Hou Chi, "Prince Millet". A labour of no less importance was ascribed to Yü the Great, the founder of the legendary dynasty of Hsia. In his work of draining and ditching, he reclaimed the land from the water, "led the rivers back to the sea", and increased the number of ditches and canals.

It was the agricultural and sedentary life led by the ancestors of the Chinese in the loess lands and the Central Plain which differentiated them from those tribes—presumably of the same racial stock—who continued to lead the lives of nomad hunters, either on the steppes of Shensi and northern Shansi or among the marshy forests of the Huai River and Long River valleys. There is no reason to suppose a difference of race, still less to imagine the immigration of a race of proto-Chinese, said to have come from Central Asia. Moreover these "barbarian" tribes, who encircled the narrow domain of primitive China, were destined in course of time themselves to adopt a Chinese way of life and thought. From the end of the archaic period onwards they gradually abandoned their nomadic life (spontaneously in the case of the tribes of the lower Long River), and took to agriculture. In the same way, in Tonking, if the Annamites are unlike their kinsmen the Muong, it is because they became cultivators of the paddy fields in the flat plains of the littoral, whereas in the inland forests the Muong made no attempt to learn anything about agriculture.

The life of peasant society in archaic China cannot have differed greatly from what it is today in the same regions. In the Great Plain they lived in mud huts (brick was to be used later) which generally failed to resist the monsoon rains and destruction by rodents, while on the plateaux of loess they inhabited caves hollowed out from the side of cliffs in such a way that the fields overhung the farmhouse and the air vents from the caves sometimes opened strangely into the midst of cultivated fields. The breeding of silkworms would also appear to have a very ancient origin. If we can believe the economic map suggested by the *Tribute of Yü* (about the seventh century B.C.),

Shantung and the neighbouring districts may well have been the "land of the mulberry". Apart from this, it is traditionally held that the second of the mythical "three kings", the legendary Huang-ti, himself taught the Chinese to breed silkworms and replace with textiles their "barbarian" garments, made of straw or from the pelts of wild beasts. Finally, it would seem that from time immemorial the Chinese peasant, having once reclaimed the soil from brushwood and marshland, in order to ensure his conquest adopted a system, still in force among his present-day descendants, of intensive cultivation. It has been written that "Chinese agriculture is no more than gardening on a larger scale". It may be added that, having failed to find real woodlands at his cradle, either on the plateaux of the loess or in the alluvial soil of the Central Plain, the Chinese was to acquire an antipathy to the forest no matter where he found it. Central and southern China, which he was to colonize in the course of time, was originally a wooded region. After they had become masters of the country, the Chinese systematically felled the trees and overcame their immediate need for fuel without troubling to make any further use of the hills they had thus laid bare. For, having been bred on the terraces of the northwest or in the immense low-lying stretches of the northeast, they were reluctant to establish themselves on the heights. The yellow earth of the plains was thus instrumental in fashioning the Chinese for all time.

There is no life more laborious than that of the Chinese peasant. In spite of his obstinate and tireless patience, and notwithstanding the natural fertility of the plateaux of the loess and the Central Plain, he is constantly at the mercy of the elements. The lands of the loess are threatened by appalling famines in time of drought, while on the Central Plain, although there is less danger of drought owing to the monsoon rains, there is the danger of floods and the terrible divagations of the Yellow River. The superstitious dread in which the Chinese held the god of waters, "The Lord of the Rivers" as they called him, bears witness to the terror felt by the riverside dwellers of primitive times for this untamed neighbour. In order to pro-

pitiate him they used to offer periodic sacrifices of youths and maidens. In these great tracts of low-lying ground, defenceless against flood or drought because of the lack of forestation, the peasant was more narrowly dependent on the soil than in any other part of the world. The order of his daily life was controlled by the rhythm of the seasons.

More than in any other agricultural country, rural life was broken up into two clearly divided phases; work in the fields from spring to autumn, followed by the indoor winter season. At the spring equinox the "interdict", which had been laid on the fields during the winter months, was lifted and the soil was "desanctified" by a ceremony of prime importance, the first tilling of the sacred field, which was solemnly carried out by the king in person. The spring equinox augured not only the fertility of the soil, but also that of the race. On the "day of the swallows' return", marriages, which were forbidden in winter, began to be celebrated. In the country, "at the first crash of thunder", young peasants and peasant girls gathered together to sing love-songs and to be united among the fields:

The Chen and the Wei
Have overflowed their banks.
The youths and the maidens
Come to the orchids.
The girls invite them . . .
Suppose we go there?
If we cross the Wei,
There stretches a fine lawn,
Then boys and girls
Play their games together,
And the girls receive
The token of a flower.

At the autumnal equinox, after the harvest festivals had been celebrated, the closed winter season began for the villagers, during which the women devoted their time to weaving.

It can be seen that the pattern of peasant life followed closely on the cycle of the seasons. From this conformity may well have been

derived the first Chinese conceptions of the universe, and especially the first "classification" of objects into two general categories, a classification which up to modern times was to dominate all Chinese systems of philosophy without exception. Peasant life in early times was rigorously divided into the period of the closed winter season, when female work was pre-eminent (it was the season of the weavers), and the period of agricultural labour, principally carried out by men. Following an analogous distribution, everything was divided into two principles or modalities: *yin*, which corresponded to shadow, cold, contraction, moisture, and the female sex, and *yang*, which corresponded to heat, expansion and the male sex. These two principles, like the seasonal phases on which they appear to be modelled, are in opposition, and at the same time are modified, called forth and transformed the one in the other. Their interdependence, or the order which presides over their alternation and mutation, is the order of the universe and of society, or as the Chinese say, it is *tao*, the central notion which came to be the key-stone of all subsequent philosophic doctrines.¹

Primitive Chinese religion had as its primary objective to assure the concordance of the seasonal cycles with the cycle of agricultural life, or, as was to be said later, between Heaven and Mankind. The celestial order was regulated by August Heaven (*Huang-t'ien*), also known as the Sovereign On High (*Shang-ti*), who dwelt in the Great Bear.² In the same way, human order was assured by a king, invested for this purpose with the "Mandate of Heaven" (*T'ien-ming*), which made him "the Son of Heaven" (*T'ien-tzu*). It was the king's duty to fix the calendar for the regulation of agricultural work and to inaugurate the seasons with the necessary sacrifices and ritual acts in harmony with the Sovereign On High. His first duty, in his role of high priest, was to inaugurate the new year and invoke the spring by sacrificing a red bull as a burnt-offering to the Sove-

¹ *Tao* is a term whose sense varies greatly in different schools of philosophy. Originally it meant "road" or "way". In *Yin-yang* speculation it is either the order controlling the alternation of *yin* and *yang*, or their synthesis.

² *Shang-ti* is also the Protestant word for God.

reign On High. This was followed by the tilling of the sacred field, which was a signal for the beginning of agricultural work. With the second month of summer he offered a further sacrifice accompanied by prayers for rain, which if unsuccessful were followed by the execution of all the wizards and witches, who were burnt alive because their incantations had proved fruitless. Finally, at the approach of winter he celebrated the abandonment of the fields and the return to winter dwellings with a sacrifice (like the Roman *Suovetaurilia*) in which the victim was a black bull. This sacrifice, offered to the "sun-god", was followed by another, offered to the Ancestors. The cycle was closed by the harvest festival, the most important of all, in which the whole population joined in the general feasting and carousal. At each season the king was dressed in garments appropriate to the "orientation" of the season; black in winter, green in springtime, red in summer and white in autumn: these being the priestly robes with which he officiated in his pontifical career. In his various duties he was aided by a whole "clergy" of diviners and sorcerers—whose role in the elaboration of early Chinese philosophy will be examined later.

Apart from this "seasonal cycle" there was the "ancestral cycle", nowadays common to the whole Chinese population, but in early times restricted to the noble class. Indeed it was only the nobles who had any reason to be preoccupied with their ancestors, as that class alone possessed a soul capable of survival. They possessed in fact two souls, one a mere animal exhalation, destined to become a sort of ghost which hovered round the corpse; the other the spiritual soul, which after death ascended to heaven in the form of a genie, but was only able to exist there when its substance was nourished by the funeral offerings of its descendants. This "ancestor worship" was essentially concerned with the daily or seasonal offerings which enabled the corpse, represented by its funeral "tablet", to take part in the life of the family. In its origin, the cult of the dead was represented in primitive times by a tree or rough stone, and was likewise connected with this seignorial religion. This god, the spirit of the



earliest territorial groupings, was fierce and cruel: "He loved blood," notes Henri Maspero, "and the sacrifices that were offered to him began with the anointing of his stone tablet with the fresh blood of the victim. This was generally a bull, but human victims were not unpleasing to him."

In these earliest times we find a peasant society, living at the junction of the Central Plain and the deposits of yellow earth, and engaged in clearing the undergrowth in this primitive Chinese domain, a society with a class of nobles and a monarchy. The presence of these war leaders proves that the Chinese farmer was forced to live in a state of constant alertness against the tribes of semi-nomad hunters who surrounded him.

The riches accumulated by the toil of this peasant society soon produced a state of luxury at the top of the social scale. Although we know practically nothing of the political history of the first royal dynasty, the Hsia, archaeology has recently given us certain indications as to the utensils which they used in this distant epoch, and during the last seven years it has provided us with a store of unexpected discoveries about the second dynasty, the Shang (1558-1050 B.C.?).

The earliest discoveries, dating from the Hsia period, have brought to light a roughly decorated pottery, ornamented in the so-called "comb" patterns. It was a style in general use in European Russia and well known in Siberia between the years 2000 and 1500 B.C., and its discovery may indicate that there were already some relations between the two continents.¹ This was followed by the excavation of painted vases, discovered in recent years in the villages of Yang-shao and Ch'in-wang-chai in the province of Honan, brick-red earthenware vases painted with a spirited and sensitive decoration of unexpected groups of bands, triangles, spots, crossed lines and eyes fringed with lashes. This Yang-shao pottery made its appearance

¹ One should note especially the incised and painted ceramics, with parallel lines and simple chequer work, recently discovered at Hou-kang, near An-yang in the extreme north of Honan. Also the ceramics of near-by Hou-chia-chuang, decorated with an impression of fibres and basketwork. The two groups may date from the beginning of the Hsia dynasty. (G. D. Wu, *Prehistoric Pottery in China*, 1938.)