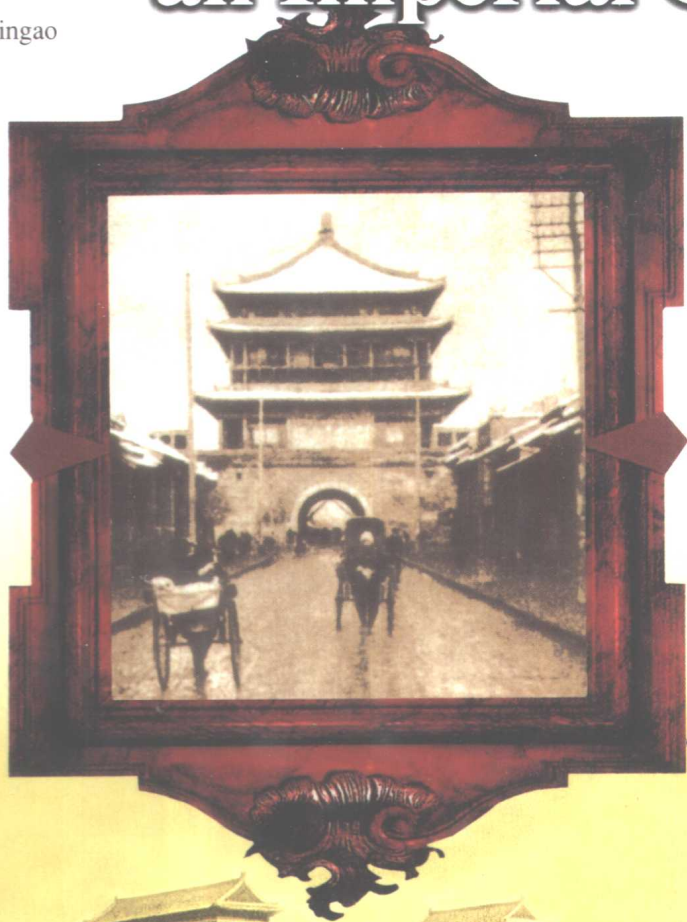


OLD XI'AN

Evening Glow of an Imperial City

Text by Jia Pingao



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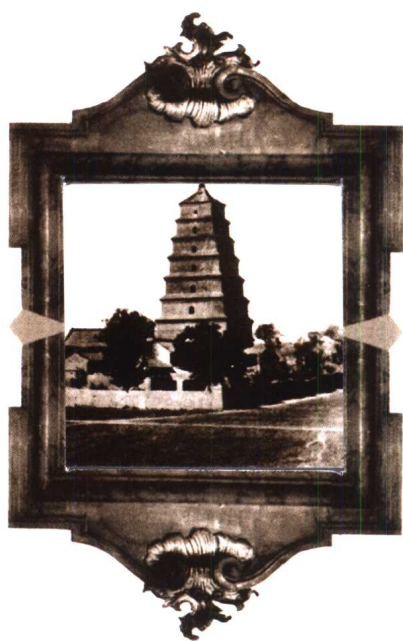
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Foreword

Xi'an Is Xi'an Indeed

When I accepted the work of writing a book about the history of Xi'an, I was actually committed myself to a tough job. For one reason, I am not a native of Xi'an, though I have lived in the city for twenty-seven years, and can hardly give a thorough account of its past. Another reason is the scarcity of old photos of the old Xi'an that are available now, as opposed to piles of fading yellow photos available that one can collect to write a book about Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, Tianjin or Guangzhou. I went to one archive after another and raked through piles of files. I then ran to homes of connoisseurs and scrutinized at the an-

tiques and paintings they had collected. What I obtained is only the stuff associated with the Xi'an Incident and the "Liberation of Xi'an", which are well known to Chinese. How can a book written on those events still be interesting?

Aren't there any photos of the past available about the old Xi'an? This raises a baffling question in one way or another. In effect the photographic information about Xi'an has never been in plenty. The old Xi'an without photographic annals just testifies to the fact of the city as being ancient. As is known to all, Xi'an was originally called Chang'an, the capital city of thirteen dynasties, particularly the Han and Tang dynasties when the city, as the heart of the country's politics, economy, military and culture, was famous for its magnificence and prosperity. As the Song and Yuan Dynasties came and passed and the capital seat was moved to the north, however, the popularity of Xi'an gradually faded.

By the third and fourth decades of the twentieth century, the ancient city had dwindled to the size of an ordinary county town of today in Shaanxi. Enclosed by the city walls built in the Ming Dynasty, the city,

with an area only one tenth of the Tang's capital, embraced dirt roads and one-story stores and looked out into crop fields, trenches, mounds and swamps outside the city walls with the gates missing. At dawn when going out of town, one often saw wolves, pulling their long brushy tails, roam around between ridges in the fields. At that time concessions were granted to foreign countries in Beijing and Shanghai, in which life was heavily tainted in foreign nature, such as fashionable women wearing high-heeled shoes and carrying the small lady's handbag and men being dressed in the western-styled suit hung with the pocket watch and uttering sporadic foreign words like "mister".

In Xi'an, however, on the street corners, large patches of advertisements covered the walls about aphrodisiac medications, remedies for sexually transmitted diseases and ointments for treating headache and scalds, with a couple of Shanghai movie stars' photos sticking out at places. Popularly, matches were called the foreign fire, and the soap the foreign soda. Even a photo studio emerged called "Good Reputation." What a fashionable thing to do to take pictures in a photo studio! A popular saying went at that time that

one's soul would be snatched away, if one walked into the studio to have a photo taken, and that one should make sure to have his whole body photographed, or he could never escape being killed. What the taking of photos really looked like remained a puzzle to ninety percent of the locals, who would only steal a couple peeps inside when stopping by and quickly moved on.

Because of the few small photo studios existing by that time, of which only government officials, war lords and rich people took advantage, my hope was dashed for using old photos to represent the folk culture of the city more than half a century ago. Moreover, the same reason brought me to the sharp distinction that parts Xi'an from other metropolises like Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou.

But Xi'an is not trivial in any sense. From any perspective of examining the past and present of China, its historical significance can hardly be ignored.

In speaking of Xi'an, the local people, any one of them you can stop on the street, would brag away about it: "Well, you want to know something about Xi'an. During the time when it was capital city of the Han Dynasty (206 - 220 B.C.) and the Tang Dynasty

(618-907), the northerners were dismissed as northern tribes and the southern areas the southern alien regions. Now the Sichuan Basin takes on the favorable name of 'nature's storehouse'. In fact the name was originally referred to our Xi'an which is located on the Central Shaanxi Plain. Xi'an is a point of the earth and the center of China. Situated around the city, Mount Hua is to its east, Mount Taibai to its west, the Qin Mountains to the south and the Wei River to the north. The city possesses the thickest loess in the country and the best preserved ancient fortifications in the world. Chang'an, the original name of Xi'an in history, means, in Chinese, long periods of order and stability. Was it ever flooded in the past? Never. Was it ripped by an earthquake? Never. Look at the Japs who rampantly invaded China. But their military march stopped just outside the city gates of Xi'an! It was said that Xi'an narrowly missed being selected as capital city of the new China in 1949. Think about those state heads who have visited China. Who would have passed on Xi'an as the third stop after Beijing and Shanghai on his itinerary for visiting the country? A tour around the country without paying a visit to Xi'an is only a

fragmented visit to China at most!”

Such vanity and braggadocio might send people from other parts of the country laughing. But it is a reflection of the psyche that subconsciously but tenaciously gripped the mind of those from the declined family. When I started writing this book, the lack of old photos did not really bother me, nor was I obsessed with the searching for a proper angle to begin with. I found it hard to specify the historical place of Xi’an. I often think a creature created on the earth should have its soul. A city is bound to have its soul. A big city like Xi’an, what does its soul look like?

In the color-fading thread-bound books, Shaanxi is short termed as Qin, an ancient tribe which lived in the distant regions in the Zhou Dynasty from the eleventh century B.C. to 771 B.C. With the tribe name of Yingshi, the people were skilled at horse-raising, and its first ancestor was granted the territory in which they lived for his meritorious horse-raising for Zhou’s emperor Xiaowang. Originally this land was in Gansu instead of Shaanxi of today. This history complicates a problem of identity in that people from Shaanxi are not likely to call themselves natives of the province, be-

cause Shaanxi, actually, refers to the region west of the county of Shaan in Henan. During the Spring and Autumn Periods, the emperor Mugong of the Qin state (reigning in 659-621 B.C. and bringing his state into full development) expanded the territory to the west to embrace many regions of Shaanxi of today. The influence of the state grew more powerful in the following years, strengthening the long-sustained link of this region with Europe and other parts of Asia and scattering Qin's fame far and wide through the visitors of western tribes. Therefore neighboring countries called China Qin, a name translated in pronunciation that branches out to variations in ancient times such as Saini used by Persians, Xini by Hebrews and Zhina or Zhendan by ancient Hindus.

By the time the first emperor Shihuang (reigning in 246-210 B.C.) of the Qin state united the country, "driving the Huns out to the north and striking terror into the northern tribes, some of whom fled to as far as the present northern Europe ... and who then called China the Qin. This address was adopted and used by other European countries down to modern times." The transliteration of Qin is China. Chinese are also called the

Hans, the language used in China is Chinese, and a foreign scholar on the language and its culture is called Sinologist. In Japan the doctor on traditional Chinese medicine is called a doctor of Han medicine. Then how was the Han derived from history? Liu Bang, (a farmer, who led a rebellion of farmers against the rule of the Qin toward the end of the Qin Dynasty, then became the first emperor of the Han Dynasty, reigning in 206-194 B.C.) was granted a territory in central Shaanxi and the title of Prince Han, after the fall of the Qin Dynasty, by Xiang Yu, a senior military general of the Zhu state. A few years later Liu defeated Xiang and set up the Han Dynasty in Xi'an, who rose to the peak of development in the rule of the emperor Wudi (reigning in 140-86B.C.).

The Silk Road was opened up, and merchants addressed themselves subjects of the Han Dynasty. The use of the Han was adopted by Western countries and handed down in history. Another spur of full social growth of the country came in the Tang Dynasty, when the Silk Road became a more prosperous medium of trade, and marine transportation and international exchange ushered in an era of unprecedented

vigorousness. Foreigners called Chinese the Tang people, which has been used since then. Today the part of town in a large city, such New York and San Francisco in the U.S., Vancouver in Canada, Sao Paulo in Brazil, Melbourne in Australia, and Singapore, retains the name Chinatown, in which most overseas Chinese live.

In history the rest of the world got to know China by learning of Shaanxi and Xi'an, thus setting up the coordinate of studying the country. In my perspective, though I am not quite sure, one should concentrates on Beijing to understand China's modern civilization, and study Shanghai to know about China's contemporary civilization. But, to learn about the country's ancient civilization, focusing on Xi'an is the only way. It is probably true that Xi'an has no longer played the significant role as it did during the Qin, Han and Tang Dynasties. It started to decline in the eighteenth century and waned to a wretched state in the following centuries. It has now lagged behind many other provinces in industry and economy.

However, due to its long-time historical position, the city has preserved Chinese traditional culture in its

true and multi-dimensional sense. (In Modern times Chinese tradition is often referred to things handed down from the Ming and Qing Dynasties, such as Chinese martial arts, lion dance with lanterns, mandarin gowns, Peking Opera, eating animal internal organs and drinking sorghum-and-maize-distilled spirits, which overseas Chinese like to showcase to the people in the foreign countries in which they live. But the things that best feature the Chinese nation are those that are handed down from the Han and Tang Dynasties.) With the tradition of a long history, Xi'an retains unique characteristics of boundlessness and profundity. It is this essence that sustains its existence, shrouds it with mystery, emits beams of glamour, and calls to the world for due attention.

