3 The Age of Cosmopolitanism

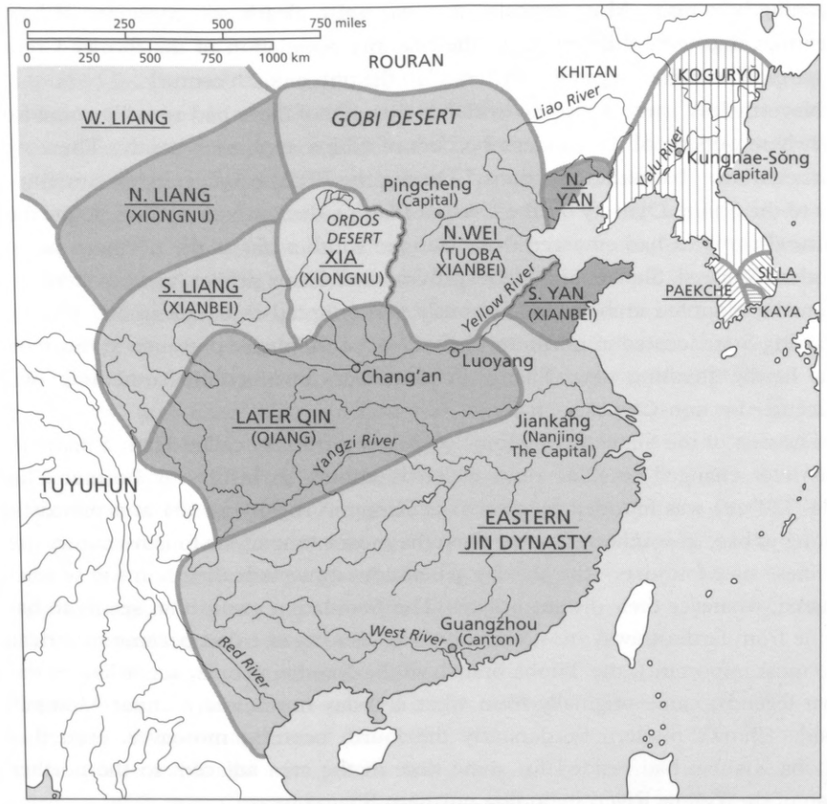
China in Division

The Sixteen Kingdoms (North China, 304–439)

In the early fourth century, centralized imperial government disintegrated almost completely in north China. For over a hundred years, the ancient Chinese cultural heartland in the north was shredded between what are conventionally known as the Sixteen Kingdoms.[1] More precisely, historians actually recognize twenty-one distinct regimes in north China between the years 304 and 439 (not to mention other independent local communities that never aspired to become states). Despite the conventional English label "Sixteen Kingdoms," moreover, these regimes were also often really empires, in the sense of being relatively large, multiethnic, military-conquest states ruled by men claiming the Chinese title "emperor" (*huangdi*). An alternate title, "heavenly king" (*tianwang*), was, however, invoked with unusual frequency during this period, possibly as a result of cultural influences coming from the steppe.[2] As it happens, most of these Sixteen Kingdoms had rulers with non-Chinese ethnic identities.

While north China plunged into chaos during the fourth century, perhaps an eighth of the entire northern Chinese population may have fled to the relative shelter and stability of the south. Many of these refugees settled in the general region of the lower Yangzi River valley, where members of the Western Jin imperial family reestablished a court in exile, known to history as the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317–420). The Eastern Jin capital was the city that is today called Nanjing (English: Nanking). This became the nucleus for a series of five (Eastern Jin, Song, Qi, Liang, and Chen) culturally and economically flourishing, but politically and militarily weak, Southern dynasties. Including the earlier third-century southern state of Three Kingdoms Wu, these Southern dynasties are sometimes also referred to as the Six Dynasties. Those people who remained in the north, meanwhile, huddled behind thousands of improvised local fortifications.

Trade and commerce ground to a virtual halt in the north during this period. No new coins were issued in north China for almost two hundred years. Much



Map 3.1 States and Peoples in 410 CE

farmland was given over to pasture (or stood vacant), and a ranching or herding economy spread deeply into north China. The raising of livestock was a fundamental part of the lifestyle of the non-Chinese peoples (generically referred to in the Chinese sources as Hu, and divided into five major different population groups[3]) who now came to dominate the northern landscape politically and militarily. Some scholars believe there may have even been millions of these originally non-Chinese people in fourth-century north China.

These people typically emphasized the raising of livestock (though they were not necessarily actual nomads) rather than Chinese-style agriculture, and they consumed much animal flesh, such as mutton, as well as quantities of the dairy products that Chinese cuisine has otherwise normally abhorred. They spoke languages that were not merely different from but completely unrelated to Chinese. Most of their languages were probably related to either Turkic or Mongolic, but it has been speculated that the core of one group (the Jie) may have even originally been speakers of an Indo-European language. At least some of these people were, furthermore, said to have a distinctive physical appearance, featuring deep-set eyes, high (i.e., protuberant) noses, and full beards (sometimes even described as "yellow," although probably really

meaning brownish). Most critically, they were also clearly still conscious of having identities that were different from the majority population of the former Chinese empires, whom they began to call "Han" in the fifth or sixth century.

Nevertheless, there is also no evidence that any of them had actually come from anywhere outside of the modern borders of China anytime recently. There were not really any "barbarian invasions." During the Bronze Age, roughly contemporary to the Shang Dynasty on the Central Plain, a distinctly non-Chinese northern cultural complex had emerged that extended south as far as the northern parts of modern Shaanxi, Shanxi, and Hebei provinces of China proper, and northern-style nomadic mounted archery was famously first adopted in China in 307 BCE by a Warring State located in northern Shanxi.[4] A non-Chinese presence in this region was hardly anything new. Shanxi in particular now became something of an epicenter for non-Chinese activity.

The first of the Sixteen Kingdoms (which was initially called Han, a name that was later changed to Zhao, and which is known to history as Former Zhao; 304–329 CE) was founded by a scion of Xiongnu royalty in 304 at a preexisting Xiongnu base in southern Shanxi. Even the most exotic of the fourth-century non-Chinese state founders – the Jie – for generations now made their home in southern Shanxi, whatever their distant origins. The population group that seems to have come from farthest away most recently (and also the one that became historically the most important), the Tuoba branch of the Xianbei people, according to their own legends, came originally from what is today northeastern Inner Mongolia, inside China's modern borders. By the fourth century, moreover, even these Tuoba Xianbei had resided for some time in the area adjacent to the northern loop of the Yellow River, including northern Shanxi.

The Qin and Han empires had unified multiple local populations under a single political structure, with a single common written language and a broadly shared elite culture, but they had remained, nonetheless, significantly multicultural and multiethnic empires. The Han Dynasty had also relied heavily upon client non-Chinese tribal allies as a kind of defensive buffer along the broad and often vaguely defined northern border between the zones of Chinese-style intensive farming and steppe-style pastoral nomadism. The non-Chinese groups who appeared so suddenly on the historical scene in the fourth century had therefore, in reality, mostly already long been there. Many were at least nominally Chinese imperial subjects, spoke at least some of the Chinese language, and their elites not infrequently already had some acquaintance with the Chinese classics.

The collapse of imperial government in north China in the early 300s provided military men with an opportunity to seize power. Because the non-Chinese peoples of the north were typically already accustomed to life on horseback, they made naturally fine cavalry. When, in the fourth century, the stirrup and complete armor for both horse and man was added to their equipment, such mounted warriors became truly formidable.[5] From the fourth century until the sixth, heavy cavalry would remain militarily dominant in north China.

At the same time, political legitimacy still tended to be most convincingly defined in Chinese terms. Several of the armed bands that arose in the early

300s, whether they were ethnic Chinese or not, did so in the name of saving the throne – that is, at least nominally rallying to the defense of the legitimate but beleaguered Jin Dynasty. Significantly, also, that first Xiongnu Sixteen Kingdoms state that was formed in southern Shanxi in 304 was founded by a Xiongnu prince who also claimed descent, on the maternal side, from the Han Dynasty founder Liu Bang (Emperor Han Gaozu). The early Han Dynasty had provided imperial brides for Xiongnu leaders, and therefore the Xiongnu elite had literally intermarried with Chinese royalty. This particular Xiongnu prince even bore the Han Dynasty imperial surname Liu (his name was Liu Yuan; 251–310), had lived for years in the Chinese imperial capital, and pointedly even called his new state Han.

As another way of invoking legitimacy in Chinese terms, this same Xiongnu leader is also quoted as claiming that both Great Yu (the legendary founder of China's first Xia Dynasty) and King Wen of Zhou had also been born among non-Chinese peoples. "What is of concern" in founding dynasties worthy of the Mandate of Heaven, he concluded, "is only who has been conferred with virtue."[6] Whether such words were really uttered by this Xiongnu ruler, or merely put into his mouth later by a Chinese historian, the argument very clearly was that the Mandate of Heaven did not belong to any one particular people. As the Zhou had conquered the Shang, and the Shang had supposedly conquered the Xia before that, so, too, the legitimate Mandate could always pass again to some other group. Why not to a Xiongnu?

Perhaps even more significantly, these words, whether really spoken by this Xiongnu leader or not, were recorded in the written Chinese language. Despite the multiethnic and multilingual character of the era, and the fact that identifiably non-Chinese people were frequently the political and military rulers, Chinese remained (with minor exceptions) almost the only written language. Even a particularly barbarous Jie tribal ruler of northeast China in the mid-fourth century, Shi Hu (295–349), felt compelled to dispatch a scholar to copy the stone inscriptions of the Confucian Classics in the former imperial capital at Luoyang. Although the fourth-century Sixteen Kingdoms often had at their core a non-Chinese tribe, with conscious bonds of tribal solidarity, and administered their Chinese and non-Chinese populations separately, by the late fourth century some of those ethnic divisions were already beginning to be erased.

The Southern Dynasties (South China, 317–589)

As the Western Jin Dynasty tore itself apart amid vicious civil wars in the early fourth century, one imperial prince established a new headquarters for himself in 307, just south of the Yangzi River, in the city we now call Nanjing. After the final collapse of the Western Jin, this prince assumed the throne in 317 to become the founding emperor of an Eastern Jin Dynasty in exile, the first in a series of five Southern dynasties that claimed to represent the sole legitimate line of Chinese imperial succession. Despite a reasonably plausible claim to superior legitimacy, however, their immediate situation was precarious.

The watery terrain – with many rivers, canals, lakes, and flooded rice paddies – of the south provided a degree of natural protection against northern cavalry, but

the south was thrown into confusion by a flood of refugees from the north. These recent émigrés from the north may have amounted to as much as 17 percent of the total southern population. Because refugee members of former northern Great Families carved out large new estates for themselves in the south and tended to dominate the Southern dynasty governments, there was a serious potential for resentment and conflict with the older southern Chinese natives – who themselves, meanwhile, remained distinct from the pre-Chinese aboriginal population of the south, which was also still quite large.

In the third century, Three Kingdoms Wu had experienced much conflict with so-called Mountain Viet (in Chinese, *Shan Yue*) peoples in the lower Yangzi River area. These were presumably, at least in part, descendants of the Hundred Viets who had inhabited much of southeast China in antiquity. As recently as the Han Dynasty, this southland had still been something of a frontier region. In one three-year campaign beginning in 234, Three Kingdoms Wu reportedly forced the surrender of a hundred thousand Mountain Viet people in modern Anhui Province, converting the more vigorous among them into soldiers for the Wu Dynasty and the less vigorous into ordinary tax-paying farmers. After the Three Kingdoms period, the label "Mountain Viet" ceased to be heard much, but large numbers of aborigines continued to exist, under other names, throughout the Southern dynasties.

Despite the potential for conflict between northern refugees and older native southerners, between ethnic Chinese and aborigines, and with invaders from the Sixteen Kingdoms in the north, and despite the serious weakness of its government, the Eastern Jin Dynasty enjoyed a surprisingly lengthy period of stability and prosperity. The secret of the Eastern Jin's somewhat unexpected success was compromise, conciliation, and a relatively robust balance of power, in which the threatened rise of any one Great Family to supreme power (at a time when the emperors themselves were particularly weak) stimulated all the others to rally against that family to restore stability. Much credit should also go to the adroit leadership provided by a number of outstanding statesmen such as Wang Dao (276–339). Wang Dao, although a northern émigré himself, immediately began to practice the local southern dialect to win southern support. According to one contemporary description, "there were few who could resist Wang Dao's welcome," and everyone felt that Wang Dao "met them like an old friend."[7]

The Eastern Jin Dynasty produced an astonishing cultural efflorescence in the arts, which included China's first truly famous painter, Gu Kaizhi (341–402), and arguably the most admired calligraphic genius of all time, Wang Xizhi (303–379). In a much celebrated story, Wang Xizhi once, in 353, hosted an elegant literary gathering at an orchid pavilion in Zhejiang, during which wine cups were floated down a gently winding stream. Wherever the cup touched the bank, each of forty-one guests in succession had to compose a poem or be forced to drink a penalty. The preface to the record of this gathering that Wang Xizhi brushed was so treasured for its calligraphy that a later emperor (Tang Taizong, 600–649) supposedly took the original copy of it with him to his grave.

The brilliant poet Tao Qian (Tao Yuanming, 365–427) also belongs to the Eastern Jin period. Tao is considered one of China's first great landscape poets and an extoller of the joys of a simple life of contentment in rural reclusion. He is famous also as the author of a brief pioneering work of utopian prose fiction known as "Peach Blossom Spring." This short story tells the tale of a fisherman who once followed a stream into a grove of flowering peach trees, where he found a cave. Entering and passing through this cave, he discovered an entire community filled with happy people who had been entirely cut off from the outside world for centuries. Although the residents asked the fisherman to keep their existence a secret, on his return home, he reported directly to the government. Despite much searching, however, no one was ever able to find this marvelous land again.

Another Eastern Jin artistic genius was the painter and musician Dai Kui (d. 396). Dai was known for his performances on a delicate horizontal stringed instrument called the *qin*. According to one story, around the year 345, when a certain prime minister and prince of the imperial family summoned Dai to play for him, Dai smashed his *qin* in front of the messenger instead, remarking that he was not an entertainer for princely houses. Although the prince was reportedly furious, he was unable do anything about Dai's defiance. This story illustrates the remarkable degree of independence from imperial power that gentlemen of this era enjoyed.

The amazing cultural splendor of the Southern dynasties owed much to the fact that scholarship and literary ability had become essential requirements for high social status and office holding since the late Han Dynasty. After the fall of the Han, and with the weakening of imperial government, the focus of learning and education shifted to individual private families. Literary cultivation became one of the most important criteria that separated the Great Families, who were the dominant figures throughout the age of division, from ordinary commoners.

Another contributing factor to the cultural richness of the Southern dynasties was the growing availability, and variety, of books, both in imperial and private collections. In the mid-sixth century, one imperial library is said to have contained as many as 140,000 rolls of books and charts. The possession of some thirty thousand rolls helped one early sixth-century prince to compile an influential literary anthology, the *Selections of Refined Literature* (*Wen xuan*), which "became the text from which most educated men obtained their literary education" for centuries thereafter and which was also widely read by early Korean and Japanese elites.[8] This proliferation of books was partly due, in turn, to a revolution in writing materials that had finally replaced wood, silk, and bamboo with true paper by Eastern Jin times. The vibrant marketization of the southern economy also helped make books more widely available.

Not only did agriculture expand considerably in south China during the Age of Division but the Southern dynasty economy was increasingly privatized and commercialized. By the fifth and sixth centuries, the circulation of money and commerce had penetrated nearly every level of society. Commercialization of the economy was further stimulated by a growing volume of international maritime trade, which had already linked southern Chinese ports with markets as far away as the Mediterranean by late Han times. From the Han Dynasty through the Age of Division, China's most important port was probably located, surprisingly enough,

in the vicinity of modern Hanoi, in the Red River valley area of what is now northern Vietnam. Thanks to this commercial vitality, it is likely that the Southern dynasty capital (modern Nanjing) had become the largest city in the world by the early 500s, with a population of perhaps 1.4 million.[9]

The remarkable cultural and economic dynamism of Southern dynasty China stands in obvious contrast to what was happening in western Europe at about the same time, where – although the trauma associated with the fall of the Roman Empire may sometimes be exaggerated – there does seem to have been a "startling decline in western standards of living during the fifth to seventh centuries."[10] This Southern dynasty Chinese economic and cultural efflorescence also makes a striking contrast to simultaneous developments in the original heartland of Chinese civilization in the north. One sixth-century Buddhist author even marveled at how the Central Plain in the north had once been "China" but had since become a "barbarian waste," while the south had once been "barbaric" yet had now become a "Chinese" land.[11] It almost seemed as if north and south had exchanged places!

Yet the Southern dynasties also had serious weaknesses. Wealth and learning were sharply concentrated in a few hands. The exuberant process of monetization and commercialization, while greatly benefiting some, apparently also reduced many independent small farmers to abject dependency. Economic polarization seems to have become extreme. And although the first Southern dynasty, the Eastern Jin, enjoyed a degree of stability and legitimacy, it was overthrown in 420 by a military usurper. No subsequent Southern dynasty survived long, and every one was founded by an ambitious general. These upstart military houses then frequently tore themselves apart through internal rivalries and suspicions. Of twenty-eight sons of Emperor Xiaowu of the Song (r. 454–465), for example, not one died a natural death – all were killed by other members of their own family. A ditty popular around the year 454 captured something of the viciousness of the internal conflict: "First see son slaughter father, later see younger brother slaughter older brother."[12]

Not surprisingly, there may have been little popular sense of identification with these brief and less than thoroughly admirable Southern dynasties (little sense of what we might call national identity). Despite the cultural brilliance of the Southern dynasties – in the mid-sixth century, for example, one southern writer could sweepingly dismiss all but a few northern literary efforts as little more than "the braying of assess and barking of dogs" – ironically, in some ways, a conservative version of traditional Confucianism may have been better preserved by the non-Chinese regimes of the north.[13] After a devastating rebellion in 548–552, the Southern dynasties never fully recovered. In the end, reunification came from the north.

Northern Wei (North China, 386–534)

In north China, as a degree of stability began to return following the chaos of the fourth century, the most important of the various non-Chinese peoples turned out to be the Xianbei, and especially a Xianbei subgroup called the Tuoba.[14] The

Xianbei, in general, are thought to have originated roughly in the area of modern Manchuria. Tuoba Xianbei legend located their particular homeland just west of Manchuria in what is now extreme northeastern Inner Mongolia. The origins of the Tuoba Xianbei remain murky, however, and their native language (which is now extinct) cannot be identified any more precisely than as Ural-Altaic, somewhere between Turkic and Mongolic. By the late second century, the Tuoba Xianbei had established their grazing area in the belt of hilly grassland that stretches from the northernmost loop of the Yellow River in the west to just north of modern Beijing in the east. Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty had made an effort to incorporate this area into the Han Empire, constructing fortifications and establishing agricultural colonies, but by the third century, Chinese administration had largely been evacuated. The historical Tuoba Xianbei emerged out of the mixture of populations, and cultures, in this area at this time.

In 261, a Tuoba chieftain sent his son to attend the imperial court in north China, and as Western Jin imperial government began disintegrating amid disastrous civil war, the semi-nomadic Tuoba were enlisted by one faction (and courted by others) of the ruling family as military auxiliaries. As a reward for their service, the Tuoba chieftain was invested by Western Jin as first duke, and by 315, as king of Dai (the name of a Chinese administrative unit in the vicinity of their grazing area). After the fall of the Western Jin Dynasty, the Tuoba Xianbei were themselves briefly conquered and incorporated into one of the many non-Chinese empires of the fourth-century north, but Tuoba independence was restored in 386 at a meeting of the tribes near modern Hohhot in Inner Mongolia. The Tuoba ruler then quickly elevated his title from king to emperor, and the name of his state was changed from Dai to Wei (a prestigious Chinese state name). Thus began what is known to history as the Northern Wei Dynasty (386–534).

In 398, the hitherto still semi-nomadic Northern Wei emperor established a new permanent capital near the site of modern Datong, in northern Shanxi Province, and began to develop an agricultural base in the region. In the process, Northern Wei made much use of captive labor, resettled on a truly massive scale around their capital. There are records of over a million persons being forcibly relocated there in the first half of the fifth century, including Chinese people, other subgroups of Xianbei, Xiongnu, persons from what is now northern Korea, and others. By extensively reshuffling and relocating population groups in this fashion, the Northern Wei helped dissolve older identities and began to forge a new and more cohesive Northern Wei identity.

By 439, the Northern Wei had completed the conquest and reunification of north China. Even so, Northern Wei long remained a distinctly Xianbei dynasty. The grazing of livestock remained fundamental to the Northern Wei economy, and historical records mention literally millions of head of cattle, sheep, horses, and camels. Well into the fifth century, the hunting of wild game – often with hawks or falcons – appears to have retained an actual economic significance as well as being a favorite leisure activity for the Northern Wei elite. In 415, a year when there was a poor harvest, someone proposed moving the capital farther south into the Chinese heartland. A counterargument prevailed, however, that as long as the Tuoba

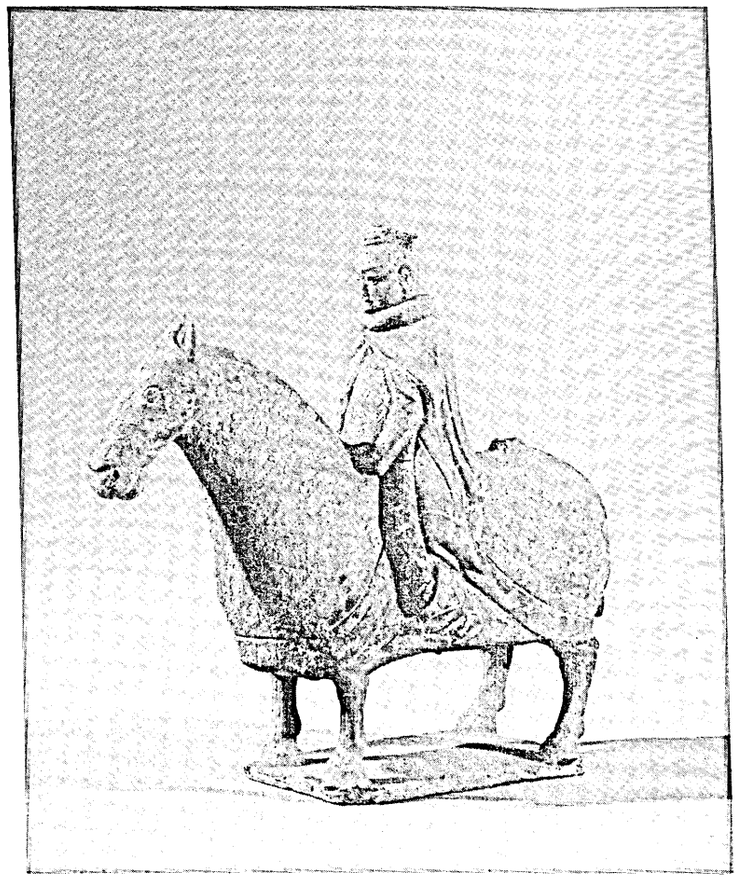


Figure 3.1. Northern Wei Dynasty terracotta funerary statuette of a horseman (fifth–sixth centuries). Musée des Artes Asiatiques, Guimet, Paris. Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York.

Xianbei remained in the north, the Chinese would imagine them as having vast hordes of warriors. Relocating the capital south would expose their small true numbers. Better to remain in the north, from where they could strike south swiftly when necessary, and the Chinese would tremble and submit at the sight of the dust kicked up by their horses' hooves (see Figure 3.1).

In 443, the Northern Wei sent an emissary to offer sacrifices at what they believed to be the newly rediscovered "original" Tuoba Xianbei ancestral temple in a cave in remote northeastern Inner Mongolia. Whether or not this really was the ancestral home of the Tuoba Xianbei, a commemorative inscription was then etched into the cavern wall, and the text of that inscription was recorded in the dynastic history. Amazingly, in 1980, archeologists rediscovered this same cave, complete with its fifth-century inscription. This archeological discovery strikingly confirms the traditional historical account, but with some qualifications. There are

minor but interesting variations between the actual text of the rediscovered inscription and what was recorded in the dynastic history. In particular, the original inscription used the title "khan" for early Tuoba Xianbei rulers (perhaps the earliest known use of that now familiar nomadic title), whereas the dynastic history omitted that term. Khan is not a Chinese title, and this discrepancy is a reminder that the Northern Wei Dynasty may have been less thoroughly Chinese than the standard histories, which were written in the Chinese language by Chinese authors, suggest. On other hand, though, even the non-Chinese word khan in this original inscription is still written in Chinese characters.

Until the mid-fifth century, Northern Wei emperors ruled north China essentially as Xianbei-style overlords, did not apparently envision themselves as sole legitimate successors to the Chinese Mandate of Heaven, and did not display much evidence of any driving ambition to conquer the still independent Southern dynasties and reunify China. A majority of high-ranking Northern Wei officials, moreover, were still identifiably non-Chinese.[15] Eventually, however, in 494, Northern Wei actually did relocate its capital farther south to the hallowed early Chinese imperial site at Luoyang. Even before then, led first by a powerful empress dowager and then by Emperor Xiaowen (r. 471–500), the court began promulgating measures to convert Northern Wei into more of a Chinese-style regime. These included the construction of a Confucian temple with seasonal sacrifices to the spirit of Confucius, the adoption of Chinese names (for example, the non-Chinese imperial surname Tuoba was changed to the Chinese name Yuan), and mandatory court use of the Chinese language. The underlying motive for these actions was probably less due to any obvious superiority or attractiveness of Chinese culture than it was to lay the groundwork for a Northern Wei conquest of the south and reunification of China.

One of the new measures implemented at this time was a remarkable system of per capita state farmland allocation known as the Equitable Fields (*juntian*) system. This Equitable Fields system would continue in operation in China from roughly 485 to 780 and would exert an important influence on early Japanese institutions. It is also a fascinating example of an intrusive early government attempt at management of the economy. Despite drawing on ancient Chinese Confucian egalitarian ideals, however, the Northern Wei per capita assignment of farmland emerged more directly out of the non-Chinese Xianbei practice of putting captive labor to work tilling the fields. From the semi-nomadic Xianbei perspective, farming remained very much a base, servile occupation. Even the imperfect implementation of such an Equitable Fields system was also only possible because of the massive dislocation of population and extensive vacant lands that characterized war-ravaged fourth- to fifth-century north China. Despite its historical interest, the Equitable Fields system was therefore actually something of an anomaly in the overall pattern of Chinese economic history, and the private commercial development that characterized the contemporary Southern dynasties was more representative of long-term Chinese trends.

Even after the relocation of the Northern Wei capital to Luoyang in 494, there were apparently still enough Xianbei people who were not yet proficient in the

Chinese language that it was felt necessary to have the gist of the Confucian *Classic of Filial Piety* translated into Xianbei. A number of books are reported to have been written in the Xianbei language around this time (although today, nothing survives of their language except a handful of words in Chinese transcription). The Northern Wei imperial command to dress in Chinese fashion was also apparently ineffective. To the contrary, it was Chinese men who adopted Xianbei-style tunics, trousers, and boots as the new standard of Chinese male clothing.[16]

However, the Tuoba Xianbei people did come to imagine themselves as descendants of the same mythical Yellow Emperor, and other early legendary figures, as the Chinese. The Northern Wei became enough of an authentically Chinese dynasty that the original version of the classic Chinese story *Mulan* (familiar from the modern Disney animated movie) may have actually been composed under Northern Wei. The dynasty came to be considered not merely a legitimate Chinese dynasty but even (although contemporary Southern dynasties would have disputed this at the time) as the sole legitimate possessor of the Chinese Mandate of Heaven. After the reunification of China in 589, one seventh-century historian even wrote that the reason "the Dao of China did not fall" during the centuries of division was because of the efforts of Emperor Xiaowen of the Northern Wei.[17] In 601, a seventh-generation descendant of a Tuoba Xianbei chieftain actually helped compile a rhyming dictionary, called the *Qieyun*, which set an influential standard for "correct" Chinese language pronunciation! Interestingly enough, the name of the Tuoba tribe, through the Turkic variant of its pronunciation as "Tabgatch," later even became a generic Central Asian name for China.

If the Xianbei who moved south into China proper eventually joined with the preexisting population to forge a new Chinese synthesis, those Xianbei who remained in the far north (and others who joined them) did not. Northern Wei military power remained based on Xianbei-style cavalry, especially those stationed in Six Garrisons at the top of the Yellow River's northern loop. These garrisons commanded the strategic grasslands south of the Gobi Desert, where potential nomadic invaders from the steppe might launch an attack on China. But the warriors in these frontier garrisons felt increasingly neglected by the China-oriented Northern Wei court in Luoyang, and in 524 a rebellion erupted out of the Six Garrisons that ultimately resulted in splitting the Northern Wei Dynasty in half, east and west, by 534. Both these so-called Eastern and Western Wei dynasties themselves soon suffered further usurpations and changes of dynasty.

A counterreaction against the Chinese-style policies of the late Northern Wei government followed, together with a considerable revival of Xianbei culture and identity. Xianbei names were restored. Some ambitious Chinese people even took Xianbei names themselves and learned to speak the Xianbei language in the mid-sixth century. At the same time, however, the regime in the northwest, partly because of the small number of Xianbei warriors at its disposal, also began making unprecedented efforts to incorporate ethnic Chinese into its military. Perhaps because its base area also happened to be the very same region "Within the Passes" that had been the ancient Zhou (and Qin) homeland, this regime also began to consciously evoke the memory of ancient Zhou ideals and standards. In 589, after yet another usurpation and change of dynastic houses, this regime (now called the Sui Dynasty) based in the northwestern region "Within the Passes" finally reunified China.

Cosmopolitan Elite International Culture

"The most striking feature of sixth-century China was its cultural diversity."[18] In north China, as late as the 570s, the rulers, much of the army, and the language of military command were all still identifiably non-Chinese Xianbei. These non-Chinese warriors sometimes shockingly disparaged ethnic Chinese farmers and civilian officials, calling them such offensive things as "Han dogs."[19] At the same time, however, many of the Xianbei had also already absorbed a great deal of Chinese culture. One powerful mid-sixth-century northeastern warlord (Gao Huan, 496–547) – who is famous for urging his Xianbei warriors to regard the Chinese as useful servants who should therefore not be mistreated, while simultaneously telling the Chinese that the Xianbei were their defenders who should therefore be fed and clothed without resentment – is particularly interesting because it is actually difficult to say with any certainty whether he himself was Chinese or Xianbei.

According to the historical record, he was the grandson of a Chinese attendant censor from the eastern Central Plain who had been exiled to a northwestern frontier garrison in the region of the Ordos Desert. Two generations later, however, this man himself was now culturally rather Xianbei (although apparently fluent in both the Chinese and Xianbei languages). Some modern scholars have accordingly argued that his claim to Chinese descent must have been a fabrication. Such genealogical fraud might indeed have been both advantageous and possible, but it is also conceivable that he really was of Chinese descent (although perhaps not from such a distinguished family as he claimed). His claim to Chinese descent, at any rate, must have seemed plausible at the time. In the end, there is really no certain proof either way, and the very ambiguity of his identity illuminates something important about this era.

The culture of this age was something of a hybrid mixture. As early as the third century, it had already become fashionable among wealthy Chinese to adopt such foreign things as so-called Hu beds (an early type of folding chair) and cooking techniques. Foreign influences sometimes even came from surprising distances. A silver pitcher found in the grave of a garrison commander who died in northwest China (modern Ningxia) in 569 was apparently made in what is now Afghanistan, in Persian style, and decorated with scenes from the Trojan wars![20]

In the south, ethnic Chinese rule was maintained throughout the Age of Division, but the southern population was also mixed, and the south, too, was open to wide-ranging contacts. According to historical records, for example, the sixth-century Southern dynasty court was continually visited by embassies, not just from the nearby Korean peninsula but also from Southeast Asia, India, Persia, and Central Asia. Some scholars even believe that stone pillars at certain southern imperial tombs show evidence of Greek influence.

If China was extraordinarily open to outside influences during this Age of Division, and if some of those influences emanated from surprisingly distant sources, on the other hand, this was also exactly the time when certain key cultural features that make East Asia East Asian were planted. A relatively common elite culture spread throughout East Asia in this period, extending to modern China, Korea, Japan, and northern Vietnam. The various local East Asian elites of this period in some ways had more in common with each other than with the peasants in their own nearby villages. This was the age when East Asia was born. One of the key features of this new East Asian cultural community – and one that simultaneously also linked it to a much larger world – was Buddhism.

Buddhism Comes to East Asia

Indian Origins

Buddhism was the world's first great missionary religion. During precisely those same centuries when China was most divided politically, a vast swath of the planet, including much of South Asia, Central Asia, East Asia, and portions of Southeast Asia, came to be united by a shared religious faith in Buddhism. Buddhism had originated, of course, in South Asia. The historical Buddha (the "Enlightened One"), Siddhārtha Gautama, who is also called the "Sage of the Śākya tribe" (Śākyamuni), was born in the vicinity of present-day Nepal around the sixth century BCE. His breakthrough realization is said to have been that, although the realm of material existence continues endlessly (the cycle of birth and death and rebirth that the Indians called *saṃsāra*), nothing within it is permanent, and it is devoid of any higher purpose. That is, to the classic religious question, what is the meaning of life?, the Buddha's answer was that life really has no meaning. After you die, there is no permanent personal identity that is passed on to future incarnations. The various components of your identity instead scatter and recombine in new ways. Everything changes, nor is there any purposeful direction to this endless change. All things are merely the consequences of prior causes, which themselves are the cause of other effects, and so on forever. Existence is therefore ultimately empty, and meaningless, and the truly enlightened goal can only be to escape this endless cycle of misery.

This realization moved the Buddha to preach his first sermon, in which he formulated the Four Noble Truths. The first Noble Truth is that life is suffering. The second is that the cause of our suffering is our attachment to the things of this world. The third Noble Truth then follows with remorseless logic: the way to end our suffering is to break those attachments and desires. The way to do this is explained by the fourth and final Truth, which is to follow the Eightfold Path of proper living. If one succeeds in breaking all attachments, one may ultimately attain an end to reincarnation, or *nirvāṇa*.

Although the Four Noble Truths are said to represent the core of Buddhist doctrine, they have not generally been much emphasized in Chinese Buddhism. The essential Chinese approach to Buddhism may best be captured by the popular

saying "The bitter sea [of existence] has no end; [but just] turn your head, and there is the shore." That is, although there is no end to the miseries of life, release can be achieved through a simple realization of the truth.

For many Chinese and other East Asian Buddhists, furthermore, the most realistic hope for salvation seemed to lie not in any rigorous path of spiritual detachment from desires or sudden burst of enlightenment, but rather simple faith that appeals to the compassionate intervention of a Bodhisattva – an enlightened being who deliberately chose to remain in the realm of existence to help save others – might bring rebirth in paradise. The most important of these Bodhisattvas was Amitābha, the Bodhisattva of Infinite Life and Infinite Light, who had taken a vow to cause anyone who invoked his name in genuine sincerity to be reborn in the western Pure Land. East Asian Buddhism is predominantly what is called Mahayana (Greater Vehicle) Buddhism, a tradition that promises universal salvation, in which the Buddha and Bodhisattvas have come to be worshipped as deities and rebirth in paradise is often seen as a more immediate goal than an end to reincarnation in *nirvāṇa*.

If this version of Buddhism seems strikingly different from what has been described earlier as the Buddha's own original realization, it must be emphasized that it is difficult to speak with any certainty about the original Buddhism, because there are no reliable records for the earliest period, and because multiple different versions of Buddhism quickly sprang up. Buddhism soon became enormously complex and sophisticated, defying easy generalization. The standard modern edition of the Chinese Buddhist canon, for example, includes some 2,184 different complete texts, and this is only one of three different major collections of Buddhist scriptures that have survived (the other two being the Tibetan and the Southeast Asian, or Pali, canons). A great many texts, furthermore, have not survived.

The earliest Buddhist community may have emerged in the Ganges River valley of northeastern India, but by the third century BCE, there were Buddhists all across South Asia, from Sri Lanka in the south to Gandhāra in the northwest (in what is now Pakistan and Afghanistan). Meanwhile, the conquests of Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE) had brought actual Greeks into that very same area of modern Pakistan and Afghanistan. Around the year 160 BCE, one Greek king in that region, Menander, supposedly converted to Buddhism. The result was something of a fertile fusion of Hellenistic, Persian, and Indian cultural influences. Because the main Silk Road trade routes also passed through this same region, some of these cultural and artistic influences began extending eastward into China.

Stone grotto temples began to appear in India by as early as the second century BCE, as places for Indian holy men to practice their austerities. In the first century CE, images of the Buddha began to be created in the Gandhāra region. Both Buddhist images and cave temples spread from there to China and East Asia. Over 120 cave temples are known in northern China, the oldest dating from the fifth century. This cave temple style extended as far east as Korea. The result was a visible expression of Buddhist cultural commonality linking together the entire region from modern Afghanistan to Korea. The world's largest Buddhist statues (until they were destroyed by the Taliban in 2001) were created at Bamiyan,



Figure 3.2. Colossal stone Buddha at Yun'gang, cave 20, Northern Wei Dynasty, 460–49[illegible] CE, near Datong, China. Werner Forman/Art Resource, New York.

Afghanistan, around the sixth century. Among the finest examples in China is the complex of Buddhist grottoes at Yun'gang, near the Northern Wei Dynasty capital at modern Datong, which was largely constructed between 460 and 494 (see Figure 3.2). The Yun'gang complex contains altogether some fifty-one thousand Buddhist images, the largest statue being roughly fifty-five feet tall.

At the same time that Buddhism united vast stretches of Asia into a single religious community, there remained important regional differences, even in specific matters of Buddhist practice. The fashion for constructing cave temples did not extend to Japan, for example, and was also rare in south China. The pagoda, a symbolic Buddhist structure that merged together older Han Dynasty Chinese-style tower architecture with imported Indian religious elements, and which matured in China by the fifth century, is uniquely East Asian.[21] Within East Asia, furthermore, Chinese pagodas were characteristically made of masonry and Japanese pagodas of wood, while Korea is famous for its stone pagodas.

In China, the spread of Buddhism was also paralleled by the simultaneous emergence of a new indigenous Chinese Daoist religion that interacted with Buddhism in complicated ways. Although this Daoist religion drew on more ancient Chinese beliefs in the possibility of physical immortality, divinely revealed texts, an underworld bureaucracy, and both the classical text and deified figure of *Laozi*, the temples, clergy, and scriptural canon of a specifically Daoist religion developed only belatedly around this time. By the fifth century, many new Daoist scriptures were being conspicuously modeled after Buddhist *sūtras*, although such

originally alien Buddhist ideas as rebirth were also modified to suit the somewhat different Daoist purposes.[22] At the same time, Buddhism itself was also being transformed in China.

Buddhism's Spread to China

Buddhism spread to China along the caravan trade routes that led through Central Asia, as well as the maritime trade routes through Southeast Asia. The pre-Buddhist Indian Brahmanical teachings had forbidden sea travel, but the Buddhist Bodhisattva of compassion Avalokiteśvara became a patron saint for travelers, providing merchants with the courage to face the real and imagined dangers of distant voyages in ancient times. Perhaps for that reason, many early Indian merchants were Buddhists, and Buddhist monks not infrequently accompanied them on their journeys.

In a charming example of Buddhism's ability to adapt and transform itself locally, in China, this Indian deity Avalokiteśvara eventually came to frequently (but not always) be portrayed in female form, as the beloved goddess of mercy Guanyin (Kannon in Japanese, Kwanŭm in Korean). Chinese women frequently prayed to Guanyin in the hope that she would help them give birth to a male child. In Tibet, much later, the revered Buddhist leaders known as the Dalai Lamas (a title that dates from 1578) also came to be viewed as incarnations of Avalokiteśvara, known locally as Chenrezig.

Buddhism had unquestionably reached China by the early first century, but it did not initially have much appeal there. Although the preexisting native Chinese religious beliefs, which recognized a wide variety of different spirits, did not necessarily exclude the introduction of new foreign gods, the early Buddhist missionary monks appeared quite outlandish, begging for their existence with bare feet, shaved heads, saffron robes, and bare right shoulders. Most fundamentally, the Buddhist message of withdrawal from a world filled with misery was contrary to the characteristically optimistic Chinese tradition of active worldly participation. Confucian ideals of service to family, community, and state conflicted directly with the Buddhist goal of leaving the family and society to become a celibate monk. As a consequence, Buddhism took root only very slowly in China, and it was not until the third century that the first known Chinese person was ordained as a Buddhist monk. For roughly the first three hundred years of its existence in China, Buddhism was largely confined to the foreign community there.

It was only after the collapse of imperial government in north China in the fourth century and the beginning of a period of large-scale ethnocultural flux that Buddhism found a more receptive audience. Much of Buddhism's appeal then was because of its alleged ability to work miracles. For example, one Indian missionary in early fourth-century south China reportedly enthralled crowds by cutting his tongue off with a knife and then putting it back, and placing paper in a fire only to pull it intact from the ashes. The great missionary monk Fotucheng (d. 348) – who arrived from the western regions in the Chinese imperial capital Luoyang in 310 just in time to see the city fall to non-Chinese conquerors – was "skilled at

reciting supernatural incantations and able to marshal demons. He would smear sesame oil mixed with rouge in the palm of his hand, and affairs from a thousand *li* beyond could all be observed in his palm, as though right before your face."[23] Fotucheng presented himself to one important Sixteen Kingdoms' commander and, filling his begging bowl with water, burning incense, and saying a prayer, caused a blue lotus flower to bloom miraculously from the bowl. As the wielder of such awesome supernatural powers, Fotucheng was welcomed as a trusted advisor to the throne.

It is sometimes alleged that the non-Chinese rulers of the Northern dynasties were especially receptive to Buddhism precisely because it was foreign, like themselves. In fact, textual sources do place just exactly such a claim in the mouth of at least one ruler in the fourth-century north. Nevertheless, of the four most notorious purges of Buddhism in all of Chinese history, two were conducted by non-Chinese Northern dynasties in the fifth and sixth centuries, and none by the native Chinese Southern dynasties of this era. At least one motive for these northern purges of Buddhism, moreover, may have been exactly the desire to demonstrate their credentials as legitimate Chinese-style empires. In addition, government supervision and regulation of the Buddhist clergy began in the north, in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, and the Northern dynasties were generally more rigorous in exerting control over Buddhism than the Southern dynasties. In the south, meanwhile, the philosophical sophistication and ability to engage in elegant conversation of certain distinguished fourth-century Buddhist monks had helped make Buddhism respectable. Buddhism flourished in both south and north, and among both Chinese and non-Chinese.

Unlike in medieval Europe, governments in China did at an early date assert their authority to regulate religion, and the principle of the superiority of state over church. Nevertheless, with rare exceptions, there was no official state church to which everyone was expected to belong in premodern China. The government's concern was chiefly to limit the number of religious tax exemptions and to suppress potential religiously inspired rebellions. Beyond that, the government was generally tolerant of differing faiths. Premodern Chinese people enjoyed a surprising degree of individual religious freedom. For this reason, despite the great popularity of Buddhism in China at its peak, China was never an exclusively Buddhist civilization.

If Indian Buddhists supposedly viewed the endless round of existence as a curse, and *nirvāṇa* as release from the cycle of reincarnation, in China, ironically, the previously unfamiliar Indian idea of reincarnation – of rebirth – seemed to imply a promise of eternal life, which, for many Chinese people, was not unappealing. The idea of reincarnation also solved the classic moral conundrum of why bad things seem to happen to good people: their good deeds are repaid in the next life. In China, Buddhists came to believe that, after death, one could either go to hell for a period of punishment (where Yama [in Chinese: Yan wang], the God of the Dead, judges evildoers), be doomed to haunt the land as a hungry ghost, be reborn as an animal, be reborn as a human, be reborn in a paradise (such as the Pure Land in the west), or be reborn as a kind of demon called an *asura*.

Buddhism changed as it traveled from India to China, but this should not be surprising. Not only were the cultural backgrounds very different but an enormous linguistic gulf existed between the languages of India, in which the concepts of Buddhism were first articulated, and Chinese. For centuries, the first priority of Buddhists in China was translation. In the early period, the region in far northwest China that is today called Xinjiang played a critical role in the transmission process. Many early Buddhist translators were not actually Indians but Central Asians, many of them from Xinjiang.

Xinjiang has, for good reason, been called the crossroads of Eurasia.[24] The principal Silk Road trade routes lay both north and south of the Tarim basin desert that occupies the heart of Xinjiang. Although Xinjiang was first brought into the Chinese Empire as early as the second century BCE, it was only sporadically included inside Chinese borders thereafter, and it long remained largely un-Chinese in culture and population. For example, in parts of Xinjiang such as Kuchā, an oasis community on the northern branch of the Silk Roads, an Indo-European language called Tocharian continued to be spoken until as late as the ninth century.

It was from Kuchā that the greatest of the early Buddhist translators came: Kumārajīva (344–413). Kumārajīva was born in Kuchā, reportedly to an Indian father and a local mother, and as a boy, he traveled with his mother to Kashmir, in India, learning the languages of various lands. In 384, Kuchā, and with it Kumārajīva, was captured by one of the Sixteen Kingdoms regimes in north China. It is said that on his return from Kuchā, the victorious general needed twenty thousand camels to carry all his loot. Together with this loot came the Buddhist master Kumārajīva. Eventually, Kumārajīva settled in the old Han Dynasty capital at Chang'an, in the historic region "Within the Passes." There Kumārajīva assembled a team of eight hundred scholars and embarked on a major translation project, which may have done more than any other to make the Indian scriptures readably available in Chinese, although even the vastly talented Kumārajīva still lamented that much was lost in translation.

Over time, a number of Chinese pilgrims went to India itself and other western destinations to study Buddhism at its source. The most famous early Chinese pilgrim was Faxian, who traveled throughout South Asia in 399–412 and left an important record of his journeys. Even going to India did not lessen the language barrier, however. There was simply no way to avoid having to use Chinese words to translate (or at least explain) Indian concepts – in the process, inevitably involving preexisting Chinese ideas. As Mouzi (late second century), an early Chinese apologist for Buddhism, said when asked why he responded to questions about Buddhism with answers drawn from the Confucian Classics, "If I were to speak the words of the Buddhist sūtras . . . it would be like speaking of the five colors to a blind person, or playing the five sounds to a deaf person."[25]

Buddhism had to be filtered through the lenses of existing Chinese words and ideas. Although Mouzi drew on Confucian principles, and most Chinese Buddhists were at pains to emphasize the fundamental compatibility of Buddhism with Confucianism, in the long run it was Daoist terminology that was most influential

in translating the Indian Buddhist ideas and shaping Chinese interpretations of Buddhism. For example, *nirvāṇa* was sometimes translated into Chinese using Laozi's favorite expression *wuwei* (nonaction). It has been suggested that the title of an important Chinese Pure Land Buddhist text, *The Sūtra of Longevity without Measure* (*Wu liang shou jing*), betrays a Daoist-inspired quest for immortality that is quite at odds with the Indian notion of the goal of *nirvāṇa* as extinction.

A Chinese monk who has been credited with laying some of the theoretical foundations of what became Pure Land Buddhism, Tan Luan (476–542), was a northerner who sought out the immortality techniques of a famous Daoist at Mao Mountain in the south. There he received a Daoist *Classic of Immortality*, but on returning to the northern capital he supposedly encountered an Indian monk who conferred on him the allegedly superior Buddhist *Sūtra Contemplating Longevity without Measure* (*Guan wu liang shou jing*). "Longevity without measure," or "infinite life," was another name for the Bodhisattva Amitābha. This story nicely illustrates the complex swirling patterns of interaction between north and south, Chinese and non-Chinese, and Buddhism and Daoism that characterized this age of cosmopolitanism.

A milestone in the Chinese domestication of Buddhism was the claim, which began to be heard in the fifth century, that all beings already contain within themselves the Buddha Nature (*Fo xing*). The key to salvation is therefore already inherent in all things. A particularly important text for Chinese Buddhists was the *Sūtra of the Lotus of the Wonderful Law* (*Miao fa lianhua jing*), or more simply, the *Lotus Sūtra*. The actual Indian origins of this *sūtra* are obscure, but it was claimed that this *Lotus Sūtra* contained the final sermon that the Buddha had preached on Vulture Peak before he attained *nirvāṇa*. In it, the Buddha explains that what he had said previously about *nirvāṇa* was not exactly the whole truth but merely an expedient intended to elevate the consciousness of his listeners. The ultimate truth is that *nirvāṇa* is not real extinction. Because the Buddha nature is already present in all things, you need only awaken to it to be saved.

By the sixth century, a number of distinctively Chinese forms of Buddhism began to emerge, which were largely without precedent in India. In addition, approximately one-third of all the scriptures in the Chinese Buddhist canon are thought to be apocryphal, meaning that they are original Chinese compositions rather than translations from Indian texts.[26] Buddhism, in other words, was being domesticated, and becoming Chinese.

Most of the ordinary faithful, of course, were little concerned with fine scripture-based scholastic distinctions. The promise of rebirth in paradise, the threat of hell, and stories of karmic retribution – good and bad deeds being justly rewarded – excited more popular enthusiasm. Buddhism came eventually to be popularized in China through public sermons, consisting of excerpts from the *sūtras* followed by prose and poetic explanations. To enhance the appeal of the Buddhist message, the entertainment value of the stories was often highlighted. For a sermon by a famous master, an audience would be summoned by the sound of a bell, each arrival making a small cash donation to pay for incense. The priest would ascend his dais holding a *ruyi*, a Chinese-style scepter, amid clouds of incense, and the sermon would begin.

China changed Buddhism, but Buddhism also greatly changed China. The religion exercised a profound influence on Chinese art, especially statuary, as it developed during this period. Buddhist temples and pagodas became characteristic features of the Chinese, and East Asian, landscape. Buddhism enriched the scope of Chinese literary forms, introducing such things as fables, parables, and Indian-style hymns. The knowledge of Indian phonetic writing systems that was introduced with Buddhism may have contributed to the invention of a new Chinese system for indicating pronunciation (using combinations of two characters) and also for the first time to the conscious recognition and analysis of the tones of spoken Chinese. Chinese people moved from kneeling to (sometimes) sitting cross-legged during the Age of Division, apparently under Buddhist influence, and the chair was also introduced from the northwest in these centuries. The ancient practice of sacrificing live animals in religious ceremonies was ended because of the deep Buddhist abhorrence of killing. For a time, during the Age of Division, it even became quite fashionable for Chinese people to take Sanskrit or other Buddhist names. A Chinese emperor who ascended the throne in 307, for example, went by the childhood name Śramaṇa (Sanskrit for "monk"), one sixth-century man styled himself Bodhisattva, another styled himself Arhat (Sanskrit for "holy man"), and the founding emperor of one sixth-century dynasty in northwest China styled himself Dhāraṇī (Sanskrit for "magical verses"). A great many people included the Chinese character for "monk" (*seng*) in their personal names.

By the end of the Age of Division, there were thousands of Buddhist temples throughout China, and by some reports millions of monks and nuns. One devout sixth-century southern emperor donated his person to the Buddhist church four times, obliging his government to lavishly ransom him back on each occasion. A contemporary complained, perhaps with some exaggeration, that the empire had "lost almost half" its population to the Buddhist monasteries.[27] By the late sixth century, copies of the Buddhist scriptures were said to have been more numerous in China even than the Confucian Classics. As a final example of the pervasiveness of Buddhism in sixth-century China, the great emperor who would finally reunify China in 589 (Yang Jian, 541–604) was born in a Buddhist monastery and raised as a child by a Buddhist nun, who gave him a Sanskrit baby name.

Buddhism and the Birth of East Asia

It was from China that Buddhism spread to Korea and Japan – but from a China that was itself also both divided and part of a much larger Buddhist world. For example, Buddhism was first introduced to the northernmost Korean kingdom of Koguryŏ in 372 by an apparently Chinese monk (known as Sundo in Korean and Shundao in Chinese) who was sent by one of the non-Chinese regimes of fourth-century north China, whereas Buddhism was separately introduced to the south-western Korean kingdom of Paekche in 384 by a non-Chinese monk (Mālānanda) sent by a so-called native Chinese Southern dynasty. Despite the international flavor of early East Asian Buddhism, the transmission of the religion was also intermixed, at the same time, with more specifically Chinese cultural influences.

In 541, for example, the Korean kingdom of Paekche requested and received from Southern dynasty China not only copies of the Buddhist *sūtras* but also physicians, craftsmen, painters, and specialists in the Confucian Classic *The Book of Odes.* Most critically, it was in Chinese language translation that the scriptures of Buddhism spread to both Korea and Japan, in conjunction with the introduction of writing itself.

In Korea, it apparently took some time for Buddhism to diffuse from the level of the elite to ordinary people. The known sites of Buddhist temples within the Paekche kingdom, for example, are concentrated in a limited area around its successive capitals and not in outlying regions of the realm. Meanwhile, it was from Korea, especially Paekche, that Buddhism was introduced into Japan.

The earliest Japanese Buddhist temples were constructed in Korean style, and actual Korean monks played a leading role in early Japanese Buddhism. The Hōkōji (a temple also known as Asukadera), for example, was completed in 596 by craftsmen and priests from Paekche. The first official head (*sōjō*) of the Japanese Buddhist church, in 623, was an immigrant priest from Korea. Although it is impossible to say with any certainty when the first person with knowledge of Buddhism actually landed in the Japanese islands, the dates conventionally given for the introduction of Buddhism are either 552 or 538. Interestingly, one of the earliest native Japanese histories presents the court debate that supposedly ensued in 552 over whether to accept Buddhism precisely in terms of foreign versus native, one minister arguing that because "all the Western frontier lands without exception" worship the Buddha, Japan should not alone refuse to join them, while others replied that if the Japanese began now to worship "foreign Deities, it may be feared that we should incur the wrath of our National Gods."[28]

Because this book of history was not actually compiled until 720, long after the events it describes, and because the account may be colored by special interests, it should be read with caution. There can be little doubt, however, that Buddhism was the cutting edge of a powerful wave of continental influences that swept across Japan in these centuries. These influences came most immediately from Korea, but ultimately, they were more broadly East Asian. Beyond East Asia, some degree of Indian, Persian, and even Mediterranean influences have also been claimed for Japanese art of the seventh and eighth centuries. An actual person from India supposedly officiated at the ceremony "opening the eyes" of an enormous bronze statue of the Buddha that was cast in Japan in 752.

At the same time, early Japanese Buddhism also retained aspects of local native culture. For example, many of the first Buddhist professionals in sixth-century Japan were unmarried young ladies, reflecting the indigenous tradition of shrine maidens (*miko*) in pre-Buddhist Japanese religion. Many early Japanese temples were also clan temples (*ujidera*), reflecting the importance of the clan in pre-Buddhist Japanese society and religion. And many local pre-Buddhist spirits (*kami*) were absorbed into Japanese Buddhism – a phenomenon that may also be observed everywhere the Buddhist religion spread, beginning in India itself.

By 623, there were reportedly forty-six Buddhist temples in Japan, all clustered in the vicinity of the capital. With the turn into the eighth century, a newly

systematized Japanese imperial government began vigorously promoting Buddhism throughout the islands. In 741, for example, the central government ordered the construction of a Buddhist monastery and a nunnery in every province. Japan became a quite thoroughly Buddhist land – in some ways arguably eventually even more so than either China or Korea. Yet despite this important early transplantation and flourishing of Buddhism in Japan, it has been suggested that it was not until as late as the fifteenth century that Buddhism was finally domesticated to the level of the ordinary daily life of commoners, as Buddhism came to monopolize funeral services and ancestral sacrifice in Japan.

The Emergence of Korean Kingdoms

Early Korea (ca. 2000 BCE–313 CE)

By the seventh century, as Buddhism was taking firm root in Japan, the great Age of Division had finally ended in China. This Chinese Age of Division coincides with the dawn of recorded history for both Korea and Japan, and the first stirrings of a culturally coherent East Asian region. Long before this time, however, for many thousands of years human beings had already inhabited both the Korean peninsula and the Japanese islands. Both Korea and Japan enjoyed lengthy and culturally rich prehistoric eras. Pottery, for example, was being made on the Korean peninsula as early as 10,000 BCE.

In Korea, an age of megalithic (large stone) monuments, strikingly reminiscent of the dolmens of prehistoric Europe, began around 2000 BCE. Northern-style dolmens in Korea were typically formed by four upright stone slabs capped by an overhanging horizontal lid, roughly in the shape of a stone table. Some of these are very large. Though dolmens in the southern style, which did not have the large, uplifting vertical side pieces, are associated with burials, the purpose for the table-shaped dolmens is less clear. Estimates of the total number of prehistoric stone monuments in Korea range as high as an astonishing one hundred thousand.[29] While dolmens can also be found in adjacent regions beyond the Korean peninsula, they are concentrated in Korea and were evidently an indigenous development.

By the last millennium BCE, rice farming and bronze metalworking had been added to the prehistoric cultural complex in Korea. Rice cultivation probably originated in what is now southern China, but rice was little grown in the Chinese cultural heartland in the north, where the staple grain was millet (and later wheat). Bronze, meanwhile, may have been an influence from north China, but there is a notable lack of the characteristic Chinese-style bronze ritual vessels in Korea, where bronze was commonly used, instead, for daggers and mirrors. In a number of ways, therefore, late prehistoric culture in Korea was distinct from that of the Central Plain in China. Korea (which can be viewed in some ways as a peninsular extension of Manchuria, and which was closely associated with Manchuria in early times) may have also been exposed to wider influences from the Eurasian steppe, possibly including the craft of making wrought iron (in contrast to Chinese-style cast iron).

The first written accounts of what we now call Korea, however, come from Chinese sources. Little was recorded until the wars surrounding the collapse of the Qin Empire and the founding of the Han Dynasty, shortly after which a refugee named Wiman from an unstable peripheral Han client kingdom (called Yan) located in southeastern Manchuria fled to northern Korea and established a small kingdom there in 195 BCE. Wiman's new kingdom was called Chosŏn, and he ruled over a mixed population of natives and refugees (themselves probably better understood as "Yan people" than as "Han Chinese"). Over three generations, friction developed between this Chosŏn kingdom and the Han Dynasty, and in 108 BCE, Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty invaded and conquered Chosŏn. After the Han conquest, at its peak, roughly the northern half of the Korean peninsula may have been directly incorporated into the Han Empire.

At least a portion of northern Korea would remain under Chinese rule for some four centuries, until the late third or early fourth century CE. The principal seat of Chinese rule was called Lelang (in Korean, Nangnang), an administrative city located near modern P'yŏngyang. Archeological evidence makes it clear that local cultures in the area of Korea remained distinct from the standards of the Chinese Central Plain (see Figure 3.3), but Han Dynasty Chinese administration in Korea was not necessarily any more (though also certainly no less) a matter of foreign imperial colonial rule than it was in a number of other parts of the still quite multiethnic Han Empire. Under the early Chinese Empire, it was not uncommon for local culture to vary from metropolitan imperial standards. As late as the Han Dynasty, it has even been suggested that the language spoken near what is now Beijing may have been "still foreign to the Chinese ear and rather close to the languages spoken in the northern part of the Korean peninsula."[30]

If the native populations under Han Dynasty rule in Korea remained culturally distinct from the Chinese imperial metropolitan elite, they also did not yet constitute a single unified and homogeneous Korean people either. Internally, there remained a surprising variety of different ethnic groups, and externally, the borders of anything that might be called "Korea" had yet even to be imagined. Although, as a peninsula, the geographic map of Korea might appear to have been drawn by the very hand of nature itself, the modern land border in the north, which now follows the line of the Yalu and Tumen rivers, was not actually fixed until as late as the fifteenth century CE. An influential Korean book written in 1784 could still claim that the peninsula was really only the southern part of a Korean identity that more properly extended well north into Manchuria.[31] In the south, even the water's edge was not necessarily an inevitable end point. On a clear day, the Japanese island of Tsushima can be seen from the coast of Korea, and in the third century, this appears to have been "an area connected by water" rather than separated by it, across which "one of the most common scenes must have been people going back and forth in their boats."[32]

A third-century Chinese history (the *Sanguo zhi*, or *Chronicles of the Three Kingdoms*) describes several different peoples occupying the general area that we now call Korea. The Puyŏ lived well north of the peninsula, in central Manchuria, and might not seem relevant, except that according to Korean legend the Puyŏ

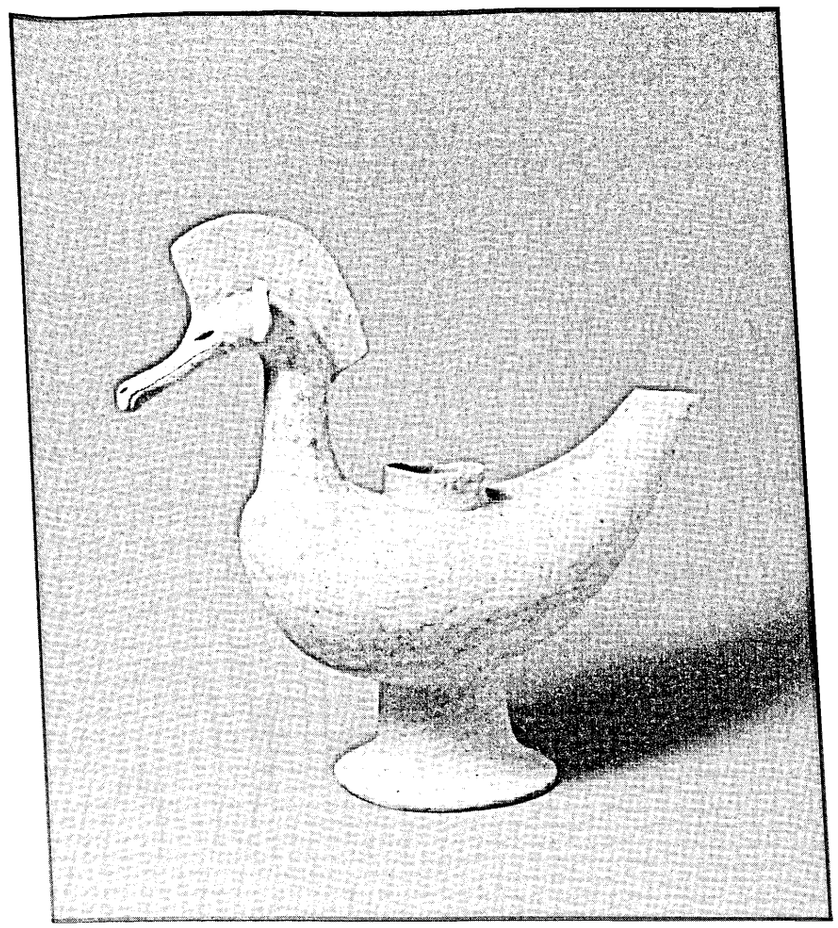


Figure 3.3. A bird-shaped earthenware vessel from Korea, ca. late second–third centuries. Purchase, Lila Acheson Wallace Gifts, 1997 (1997.34.1). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource, New York.

were directly ancestral to other more obviously Korean peoples such as Koguryŏ. To the south of the Puyŏ, in southern Manchuria and in the Chinese Han Dynasty-administered area of northern Korea, the kingdom of Koguryŏ was emerging. Koguryŏ had completely replaced Chinese government in northern Korea by the early fourth century. Koguryŏ was said to be a splinter group of the Puyŏ and resembled the Puyŏ in language and culture. East of Koguryŏ, bordering on the ocean, were the Okchŏ people, whose language was said to be slightly different from that of Koguryŏ. South of the Okchŏ were the Yemaek (or Ye) people, living along the eastern seaboard of the Korean peninsula. In the southern half of the peninsula, beyond the maximum zone of Han Dynasty Chinese administration,

were the Three (Korean) Han peoples. (Despite the similarity of pronunciation, the Korean name Han is written with an entirely different character from the name of the Chinese Han Dynasty.)

These Three Han (*Samhan*) peoples were probably linguistically and culturally most directly ancestral to modern Koreans, since the eventual unification of the Korean peninsula was achieved by a kingdom that emerged from one of them, in the southeast. In the third century, however, they were themselves still far from unified. The three were called Mahan in the southwest, Pyŏnhan in the center, and Chinhan in the southeast. According to the Chinese account, Chinhan and Mahan did not speak the same language. Mahan, by itself, was described as a collection of over fifty so-called countries (*guo*) in the third century. These countries were apparently small agricultural communities, scattered between the mountains and the sea, without walled cities. The largest reportedly contained over ten thousand households and the smallest only a few thousand. Pyŏnhan and Chinhan were both less populous, each having only a dozen somewhat smaller countries. In Pyŏnhan and Chinhan especially, people tattooed their bodies and used stones to compress the heads of newborn babies into an artificially narrow shape. Pyŏnhan was also notable as a major producer of iron for the entire region.

The people of Koguryŏ, in the north, were highlanders who occupied rugged mountainous terrain and lacked any very satisfactory agricultural base. In the third century, their population was reported at thirty thousand households. They were allegedly warlike and rode small ponies that were adept at clambering over the mountains. Koguryŏ is known for its hill forts, and its capitals typically combined a mountain citadel with a residential city on the plain. In striking contrast to the most typical Chinese marriage practice, in which the bride moves in with her husband's parents, in Koguryŏ it was said that the husband moved into a smaller son-in-law's house constructed behind the bride's parents' home, and the newly married couple continued to live there until their own children were adults.

Three Kingdoms Korea (313–668)

Koguryŏ, which seems to have originally coalesced just north of the Yalu River, was the first of the communities in Korea to form an organized territorial kingdom – the first of the formative Korean "Three Kingdoms" (Samguk) (see Map 3.2). In the year 32 CE, the Koguryŏ leader for the first time supposedly took the Chinese title king (*wang*). With the gradual weakening of the Chinese Han Dynasty, Koguryŏ began raiding the Han borders in the early second century. After the total collapse of the Han Dynasty by 220, southern Manchuria (not to mention northern Korea) was left a political vacuum that was filled by the rise of various non-Chinese Xianbei regimes, and Koguryŏ.

In the early third century, a subgroup of the Xianbei called the Murong moved into southwestern Manchuria (probably coming from further west), where they assisted the Chinese Three Kingdoms state of Wei in subduing local independent Chinese warlords, and began to build a Murong state. The Murong would eventually generate five different Sixteen Kingdoms-era states, all called Yan (the ruling

family of the last one, Northern Yan, is said to have been of Chinese rather than Murong descent, but even it was culturally Xianbei-influenced). Despite the rise of the Murong, until as late as 353 the Murong chieftains accepted titles from the Chinese Western and Eastern Jin dynasties, thus preserving a thin pretense of continued Chinese rule in the area long after it had ceased to have much reality. Eventually, however, the Murong leaders took the (Chinese) imperial title for themselves, and for a few years the Murong-ruled Former Yan dynasty (349–370) even conquered and ruled most of northeast China.

These Murong Xianbei also interacted extensively with proto-Korean Koguryŏ, at one point reducing Koguryŏ to a vassal state. In 342, the Murong sacked Koguryŏ's capital, capturing more than fifty thousand of its people. A few years earlier, in 336, meanwhile, a man named Dong Shou (d. 357) had escaped from a factional dispute in the Murong state in southern Manchuria by fleeing to Koguryŏ, where he apparently became locally prominent. He died in 357, and was buried some distance southwest of the current North Korean capital. His impressive tomb contains an inscription written in Chinese and claiming Chinese official titles, and murals depicting, among other things, the new style of heavily armored cavalry. This tomb is a fascinating example of the complicated patterns of cultural exchange and ambiguous identity in this period. Dong Shou may (perhaps) have been of Chinese descent, and was clearly a participant in Chinese-style literate high culture, but he was probably also culturally somewhat mixed: his tomb is in the Koguryŏ style, and he had lived as an accepted member of the elite among both the non-Chinese Murong Xianbei and proto-Korean Koguryŏans.[33]

The Murong Xianbei were eventually conquered and absorbed by the Tuoba Xianbei, while Koguryŏ recovered from its setbacks and grew stronger. By the mid-fifth century, the chaos of the age of the Sixteen Kingdoms (304–439) had stabilized into two large and powerful states in northern East Asia: the Tuoba Xianbei-ruled Northern Wei Dynasty in north China, and Koguryŏ in southern Manchuria and northern Korea. Both states had non-Chinese rulers (although Northern Wei presumably had a Chinese majority subject population), but both Northern Wei and Koguryŏ had also, by this time, absorbed a substantial amount of Chinese culture, helping to convert the Tuoba Xianbei Northern Wei into a reasonable facsimile of a legitimate Chinese dynasty and touching off a process of secondary state formation in East Asia that would eventually extend the length of the Korean peninsula and across the sea to Japan.

In 372, Koguryŏ established an academy for the study of the Chinese classics, and in 373, Koguryŏ promulgated its first Chinese-style law codes. In 427, Koguryŏ moved its capital from what is today the Chinese side of the Yalu River in Manchuria to the vicinity of modern P'yŏngyang in northern Korea. The focus of Koguryŏ's attention by this time was increasingly directed toward domination of the Korean peninsula.

The second of the Korean Three Kingdoms, Paekche, was founded, according to Korean legend, by a son of the founder of Koguryŏ. Like Koguryŏ, therefore, the Paekche royal line claimed Puyŏ descent. Paekche was initially only one of the more than fifty small countries in the Mahan region of southwestern Korea, and it took shape out of the gradual consolidation of those Mahan communities, with a

presumably predominantly Mahan population (whether or not its rulers really were of Puyŏ descent). Contact between Paekche and a Chinese dynasty was first recorded in 372, and by 386, the Paekche ruler had been invested with such Chinese titles as "General Garrisoning the East" and "King of Paekche." The keeping of written records also reportedly first began in Paekche around the mid-fourth century. In the fifth and sixth centuries, Paekche would enjoy particularly close relations with Southern dynasty China, becoming a highly sophisticated Chinese-style kingdom. At the same time, Paekche also had important ties with the newly emerging state in Japan.

The third Korean kingdom, Silla, developed out of a community called Saro in the Chinhan region of southeastern Korea. This was the most remote, and the slowest to develop, of all the Korean Three Kingdoms. It was not until 503 that Sillan leaders finally abandoned native titles such as *maripkan* and took the Chinese title "king" (see Figure 3.4). It was also in 503 that "Silla" was first standardized as the name of the country. In 520, Silla promulgated its first Chinese-style law codes. By around 535, opposition to Buddhism was overcome, and Buddhism was officially endorsed in Silla. In 545, by royal command, Silla began the compilation of a written history of the kingdom.

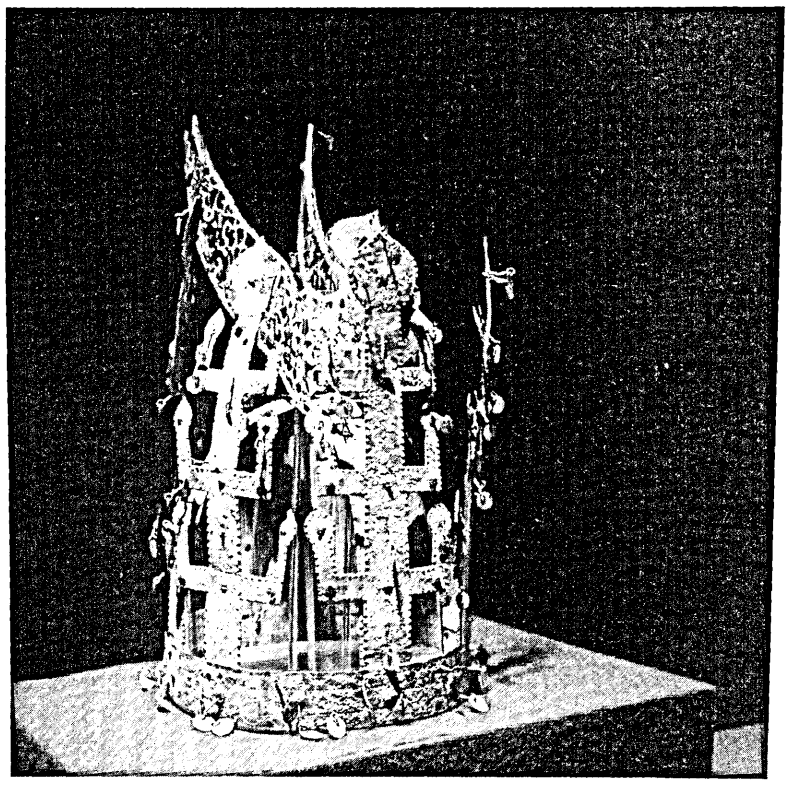
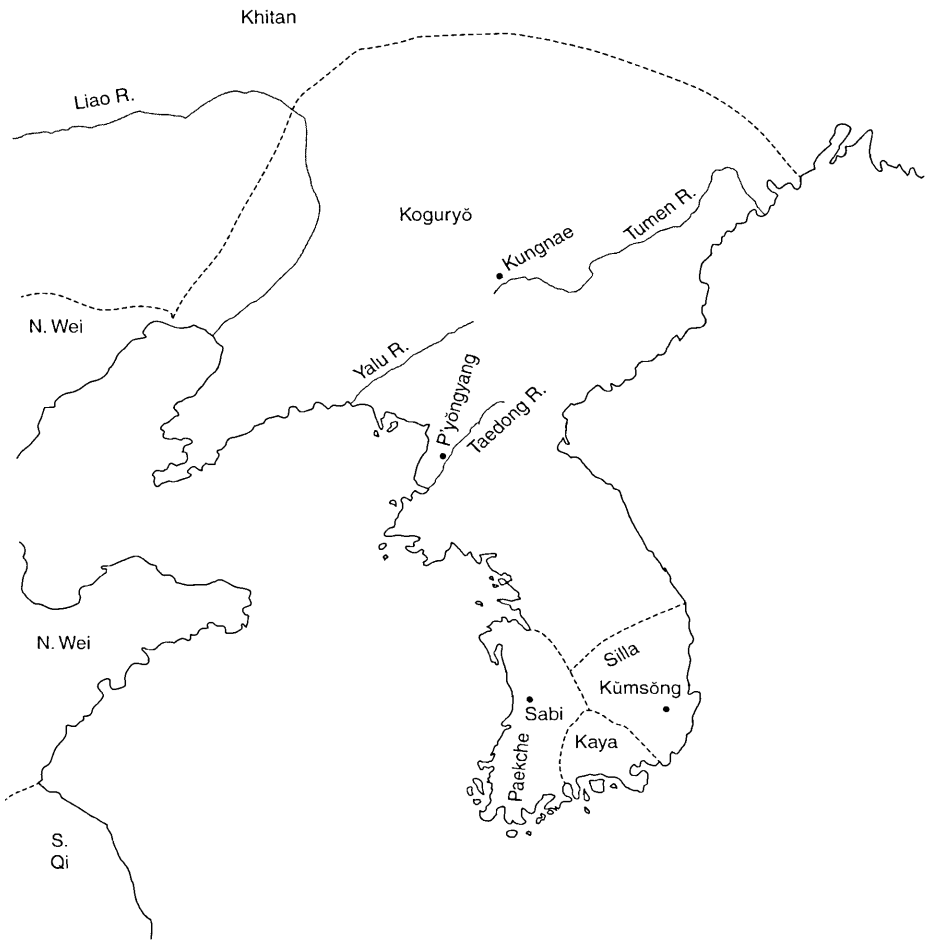


Figure 3.4. Silla period Korean silver crown, sixth century. Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. Werner Forman/Art Resource, New York.



Map 3.2 Three Kingdoms Korea, ca. 500 CE

What the Koreans were learning from China in these centuries were the institutions and techniques of state building. Despite the spread of Chinese influences, notably including writing, it should be emphasized that the Korean Three Kingdoms were all characterized by warrior aristocracies quite distinct from the Chinese literati elite, and many aspects of traditional native culture survived. Most people in Koguryŏ continued to live in simple thatched huts, with only royal palaces, government offices, and Buddhist temples adopting heavy Chinese-style tiled roofs. Simultaneously, there may have also been some even wider connections: the gold crowns and jewelry of fifth-century Silla suggest northern links with not just Koguryŏ and the Xianbei but beyond to Siberia and Afghanistan, and also exchanges with maritime South Asia.[34]

Aside from their obvious distinctions from the Chinese, these three early Korean kingdoms were also somewhat different from each other in both language and

custom. Each had, for example, their own distinctive ceramic traditions.[35] The monumental tumuli called old tombs (*kobun*) that appeared in each of the Three Kingdoms between the fourth and seventh centuries had somewhat different regional styles: stone burial chambers with painted murals in Koguryŏ, arched brick chambers in Paekche, and wooden coffins piled over with stone in Silla. The Three Kingdoms were also more or less constantly at war with each other. At the same time, though, they were also continuously exchanging influences. In the seventh century, they would finally be unified for the first time in what could even be called the birth of Korea.

Yamato Japan (ca. 300–645)

Some of the earliest known pottery in the world has been found in the Japanese islands. These early ceramics mark the beginning, around 11,000 BCE, of what archeologists call the Jōmon period of Japanese prehistory. The word *jōmon* literally means "cord pattern" in Japanese. It refers to a characteristic decorative pattern produced by making impressions in the wet clay with cords. Despite Japan's remarkably early breakthrough to ceramic culture, however, the prehistoric inhabitants of Japan long remained primarily hunter-gatherers. The total population also remained quite sparse, probably never exceeding roughly a quarter million. Nevertheless, despite the fact that agriculture was little developed, Jōmon period people did eventually settle into permanent villages of perhaps thirty to fifty persons, who caught their food with bows and traps and by riding dugout canoes to fish with harpoons, hooks, and nets. They consumed so much seafood that the sites of their villages are often still marked by piles of discarded shellfish.

Certain tantalizing hints of southern cultural influences on Japan – resemblances to prehistoric southeast China and later Southeast Asia – have been observed. These include such things as the custom of building homes of wood elevated above the ground on posts. Some of these southern traits, such as rice cultivation, did not appear in Japan until the very end of the Jōmon period, and others cannot be verified until relatively late, such as the practice of tattooing the body. Some, however, can be detected already in Jōmon times, such as ritual tooth extraction (of canines or incisors), perhaps to celebrate rites of passage to puberty or marriage; a fascination with comma-shaped decorative beads (called *magatama*); and a fondness for boats and seamanship.

Japan's prehistoric culture then underwent some fairly dramatic changes beginning around 300 BCE, when the predominant direction of influence also shifted to the north – coming especially now from the Korean peninsula. These influences included significant new genetic contributions to the population of the islands, sufficient to indicate either very large numbers of new immigrants (some estimates reach as high as a million) or a relatively small group that succeeded in reproducing itself disproportionately after arrival. Other new introductions included wet-field rice cultivation and metallurgy, and possibly even the Japanese language itself, which is thought to be distantly related to Korean. This new phase of prehistoric culture is called Yayoi (roughly third century BCE–third century CE).

It was at the end of the Yayoi period that the oldest written description of Japan finally appears. As with the case of Korea, this is found in a Chinese source. The Chinese *Chronicles of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo zhi*), which was compiled in the late third century, contains a fascinating brief account of Japan based on diplomatic contact. It describes a land called Yamatai, formed from a coalition of some thirty smaller entities and ruled by a princess named Himiko who excelled at magic and lived in a fortified palace with a thousand female attendants, but who was rarely seen in public. A younger brother assisted in her rule.

In modern Japan, there has been intense historical controversy over whether Himiko's realm of Yamatai was located in northern Kyūshū, the southwestern-most of Japan's four largest islands and the point of nearest approach to the Korean peninsula, or on the large plain at the eastern end of the Inland Sea on the main island. This plain has traditionally been known as the Yamato Plain, and it was home to the imperial capital for most of recorded Japanese history. The obvious similarity between the names Yamatai and Yamato is tantalizingly suggestive.[36] So, too, is mention of a great earthen tomb raised for Princess Himiko after her death, since just such tumuli began to appear roughly at this time, concentrated in the area of the Yamato Plain. The exact location of Himiko's kingdom of Yamatai remains uncertain, however. It is clear, moreover, that as of the third century, Japan was still divided among multiple small communities, although the Himiko story also indicates that some consolidation of authority was already being attempted. It may also be observed that the Yamatai described in this third-century Chinese account is in some ways already recognizably Japanese in culture.

Archeologists speak of an old tomb (*kofun*) period in Japan, covering roughly the years 250–552 CE (see Figure 3.5). The largest of these massive, earthen, old tombs is a hundred feet high and covers eighty acres. It is interesting that the exact same term, *old tomb*, is also used for the tumuli of roughly contemporary Three Kingdoms Korea. Though the word is pronounced *kofun* in Japanese and *kobun* in Korean, both are written with the same two Chinese characters. To some extent, of course, the creation of tumuli for deceased great leaders may have merely been a general phenomenon. The First Emperor of China (Qin Shi Huangdi) and other Chinese emperors also had large earthen mounds heaped over their graves. Many of the Japanese tombs, furthermore, have a unique keyhole shape – round at one end and square at the other – which distinguishes them from the Korean old tombs. Still, fourteen of these distinctively Japanese-style keyhole-shaped tombs have also been found in extreme southwestern Korea, and fairly frequent contact between the islands and the peninsula in these centuries is beyond doubt.[37]

Fierce modern nationalistic debates over whether Japan conquered Korea or Korea conquered Japan in this period are largely misguided and anachronistic, if only because neither Japan nor Korea really existed yet as a coherent identity. However, people from the Japanese islands apparently did have some presence on the Korean peninsula in these early centuries, and the Japanese islands clearly did absorb a number of highly critical influences from the peninsula, including



Figure 3.5. Female *Haniwa* earthenware figurine, fifth–sixth centuries, Kofun (Tumulus) period, Japan. Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC: Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn to the Smithsonian Institution, S1986.518.

such technologies as stirrups and armor. By the fifth century, Northern Wei (Xianbei or Chinese) and Koguryŏ-style heavily armored cavalry had appeared in Japan. There were also a significant number of actual immigrant persons from the continent. In early historical Japan, this was still openly acknowledged. In a record of 1,059 prominent families living in the capital region that was compiled in 815, for example, some 30 percent were explicitly said to be of foreign descent.[38] In these critical centuries, at the dawn of Japanese history, immigrants played a vital role in shaping the emerging Japanese state.

Japan's mountainous terrain tends to naturally divide the islands into separate local communities, but the main island of Honshū is also blessed with two significantly large plains. The largest of these, the Kantō Plain in the east, around modern Tōkyō, was too remote from continental influences to figure significantly in early state formation, but the Yamato Plain in the west (at the eastern end of the Inland Sea) was well situated to become the heart of a major agricultural civilization. By contrast, Korea's relative lack of comparably large, flat land areas may have constrained Korea's premodern development somewhat.[39] Because of the critical importance of imported continental technologies such as ironworking and

wet-field rice cultivation on early Japan, the regions closest to and most accessible from the continent (northern Kyūshū and the Inland Sea area, including the Yamato Plain) quickly became the most developed areas. Archeological evidence suggests that by the 400s, the Yamato Plain had already to some degree been brought under consolidated rule.

Newly emergent East Asian rulers in Manchuria, Korea, and Japan all at various times tried to buttress their positions against possible rivals by offering tribute to Chinese dynasties and being invested in return with prestigious Chinese titles. Himiko had already been proclaimed "Queen of Wa" (the earliest written name for Japan) in 238 by the Three Kingdoms Chinese state of Wei. Between the years 413 and 502, no fewer than thirteen Japanese tribute missions are mentioned in Chinese dynastic histories. One of the titles the Chinese Southern dynasties bestowed on fifth-century Japanese rulers was "Great General Pacifying the East." This originally Chinese title "general" (*jiangjun*) is pronounced *shōgun* in Japanese, and it is a word that would have a prominent future in Japan. Even in this early period when emerging Japanese leaders were still actively seeking titles from China, however, an inscription on a sword that was buried in western Kyūshū in the late fifth or early sixth century already speaks of a Japanese Great King "ruling All Under Heaven," revealing that the Japanese were already beginning to adapt and apply continental ideas of supreme sovereignty to themselves.[40]

The rise of centralized royal authority in Yamato Japan, especially in the period from the fifth through the early seventh centuries, owed much to the court's ability to control and monopolize the distribution of imported foreign prestige goods such as iron – which was imported from Korea in the earliest period – bronze mirrors, and swords. This included also control over groups of immigrant people who possessed useful specialized skills such as writing. By the fifth century, record keeping was beginning at the Japanese court, with immigrants forming the nucleus of a literate scribal class. Immigrant artisans were often organized into special hereditary production units called *be*. Besides writing, other key crafts that tended to be dominated by immigrants in the fifth and sixth centuries included silk weaving, metalworking, and architecture.

The Yamato court also attempted to gain leverage over the major native Japanese descent groups, called *uji*, which were the primary organizational units of early Japanese society, by conferring new titles as surnames on their leaders and converting these leaders into orientations of dependency on the Yamato court. These *uji* often claimed descent from deities (called *kami* in Japanese) and cohered around shared worship of those deities. What became the Japanese imperial line, in particular, claimed descent from the sun goddess Amaterasu. Over time, the ascent of this sun goddess to the top of the religious hierarchy was successfully engineered. To a degree that is relatively unique in East Asia, politics and religion were closely interrelated in early Japan. One Japanese word for government, *matsurigoto*, actually derives from a word meaning "matters of religious ritual."[41]

Throughout this entire early phase, not only did the Yamato ruler not yet style himself (or herself – there were a striking number of female rulers in early Japan) "emperor," but even the posthumous names by which the early Japanese rulers are known today had not been conceived yet. Contemporaries apparently merely referred to the earliest Japanese rulers by the names of the palaces where they lived. By the sixth century, however, Yamato leaders had begun proclaiming themselves "true sovereigns" (*sumera mikoto*).

In 587, one Yamato ruler supposedly indicated a willingness to accept the foreign, continental, religious doctrines of Buddhism. Political opposition stiffened, and when the ruler died later that same year a coalition of five royal princes, together with the head of the powerful Soga family, marched against the leaders of the opposition and annihilated them. The Soga family had been early supporters of Buddhism and had risen to great power through attaching themselves closely to the service of the throne, eventually attaining the title of "senior minister." After their victory in this swift civil war of 587, the Soga family head emerged as the dominant personality in Japan.

In 592, the Soga leader even audaciously arranged the assassination of the reigning monarch and the installation of his own niece, who is known to history as Empress Suiko (r. 592–628), on the throne – now located in a new palace in the heart of the Soga family stronghold near Asuka, in the Yamato region. Empress Suiko, together with her renowned regent Prince Shōtoku (Shōtoku Taishi, 574–622), then became associated with a range of extremely important innovations that helped transform Yamato into a more continental-style centralized state. These new developments may have included the adoption, for the first time, of such Chinese titles as "emperor" (written with two characters that are pronounced *kōtei* in Japanese and *huangdi* in Chinese), although what would become the distinctively Japanese variant of this East Asian imperial title, "Heavenly Sovereign" (*tennō*), was not definitely first used until the end of the seventh century.[42] In 604, Prince Shōtoku also supposedly issued a landmark Seventeen-Article Constitution that outlined a new vision of an ethical and political order based on a combination of Confucian and Buddhist ideals, and asserted an unprecedented royal monopoly on ultimate authority throughout Japan, stating flatly that "in a country there are not two lords; the people have not two masters."[43]

Although Japan's two earliest native histories, the *Record of Ancient Matters* (*Kojiki*, completed in 712) and the *Chronicles of Japan* (*Nihon shoki*, also known as the *Nihongi*, completed in 720) purport to describe Japanese history from the primordial creation of the islands, and date the beginning of the alleged first Japanese emperor's reign to 660 BCE, much of this early material is clearly legendary. It is only now, roughly around the time of Empress Suiko, that we can begin to read these accounts as reasonably reliable history. Even at this time, much of the northern part of the main island of Honshū, southern Kyūshū, and other outlying islands were still largely outside the pale of Japanese civilization. In important senses, however, it may be said that in this era, Japan was born.

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4 The Creation of a Community

China, Korea, and Japan (Seventh–Tenth Centuries)

Chinese Imperial Restoration: The Sui (581–618) and Tang (618–907) Dynasties

The Sui Reunification (589) and the Founding of the Tang

In 581, a palace coup brought a new dynasty, called Sui, to power in the history-haunted region "Within the Passes" in northwest China. The founder of this dynasty was a man named Yang Jian (541–604). As emperor, he is known as Sui Wendi (the "Cultured Emperor of the Sui"). His father had been a high official, ennobled as the Duke of Sui, under the last Xianbei-ruled regime in northwest China (the Northern Zhou Dynasty). Yang Jian inherited his father's title as Duke of Sui, and his daughter was selected to be a consort for the imperial crown prince. When this crown prince, in due course, inherited the throne in 578, it made Yang Jian the father-in-law of the reigning emperor – always a potentially influential position. Because this emperor only lived two more years and was succeeded by a young boy, Yang Jian was then well placed to step in and grab supreme power for himself. After eliminating all potential legitimate heirs to the throne, and quelling a certain amount of armed opposition, Yang Jian usurped the throne outright, founding the Sui Dynasty.

A few years earlier, in 577, the last independent Xianbei-ruled dynasty in northeast China (the Northern Qi) had already been conquered by the predecessor of the Sui Dynasty in the northwest (that is, Northern Zhou), accomplishing the reunification of north China. The new Sui Dynasty now aspired to conquer the south too, and complete the reunification of a Chinese world that had been divided (with one brief exception) ever since the disintegration of the Han Dynasty that began in 184. The south, meanwhile, had never recovered from a devastating mid-century rebellion (548–552), which had severely diminished Southern dynasty imperial resources. In particular, control over the strategic upper (western) reaches of the Yangzi River had now passed from the south to the north. During the centuries of division, the north had frequently been able to field superior cavalry-based armies, but the south had always been protected, when all else failed, by the