

清  
麗  
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業

# 中國

## THE MIDDLE KINGDOM

### THREE JOURNEYS TO CHINA

CHARLES GANNON

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# THE MIDDLE KINGDOM

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(1977, 1987 and 1989)

My thanks to Andrew Robinson for being my proofreader.

## INTRODUCTION



Zhōng Guó  
Middle Kingdom

China is one of the world's oldest civilizations, stretching back to about 2070 B.C. with the semi-legendary Xia dynasty. Like many other civilizations, the Chinese believed that their nation was situated in the centre of the world, and so they named it *Zhōng Guó* – 'middle country' (or 'kingdom', as we have dubbed it). Those who lived beyond their borders were regarded as being barbarians or *wàiguó rén* ('outside-country people'). Although the country developed in isolation over the centuries, a certain amount of foreign influence from the West did manage to infiltrate, especially during the Tang dynasty (A.D. 618–902), when the growing empire's very cosmopolitan capital was situated in Chang'an (modern-day Xi'an). Whereas many great and ancient civilizations have flourished and crumbled, China is unique in that it has had thousands of years of continuous history as a single dominion.

Throughout this long period, the feudal society within the country has been ruled by emperors with unlimited powers, and as we know, this system of government more or less persists to this day, without any hint of democracy. When new dynasties were established, everybody connected with the previous rulers was put to the sword, including distant members of government officials' families. The most brutal regimes were the Qin (Ch'in) dynasty (221–206 B.C. – the word 'China' is derived from the name of this period) and the first three decades of the modern Communist period, which include the appalling 'Cultural Revolution' instigated by Chairman Mao Zedong (Mao Tse Tung) and his wife Jiang Qing (Chiang Ch'ing). Two of the dynasties were founded by northern 'barbarians': the Yuan dynasty (A.D. 1271–1368) by the Mongolians and the Qing dynasty (A.D. 1644–1912) by the Manchus. This was overthrown by the Nationalists 1912, and the country was named The Republic of China. Following World War II and the invasion of China by the Japanese, the Communists rose to power and took over in 1949, whereupon the Nationalists and their followers fled to Taiwan.

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The elegant Chinese script, originally written from top to bottom and from right to left, began as pictures and symbols that slowly developed into the characters that are used today. No attempt was made to create an alphabet that could indicate the sound of the words until the modern era. As a result, people needed to remember thousands of characters in order to read. Hints of the original pictures still remain in the classical and modern versions of the script; for example, 人 (*rén*), which means ‘man’, depicts just two legs of a standing figure. 日 (*rì*), meaning ‘sun’, bears a vague resemblance to the original circle with a dot in the centre, and 月 (*yuè*), meaning ‘moon’, started life as a crescent facing left. When these two characters are combined – 明 (*míng*) – the newly-formed character represents an abstract concept: ‘brightness’ or ‘bright’. ‘Middle’, as we have already seen, is represented by the character 中 (*zhōng*): a rectangle with a line down its centre. The two characters used for the word ‘China’ (中國), which can be seen on the cover and at the start of this Introduction, are traditional characters, now used mainly in Hong Kong and Taiwan; in the People’s Republic of China, a simplified version of the characters is used and ‘China’ now looks like this: 中国.

Mandarin Chinese (spoken in the north) and Cantonese (spoken in the south) are the two best-known dialects spoken in China, but there are many more; Mandarin is now the official language of the whole country. With the exception of the languages of certain ‘ethnic minorities’, the main dialects of Chinese are classified as ‘tonal’, which means that the pitch inflection of a word is just as important as its consonants and vowels. Many words have the same basic sound, but are distinguished by their intonation. The following example illustrates four completely different Mandarin words, all pronounced ‘ma’.

1	2	3	4
妈	麻	马	骂
<i>mā</i>	<i>má</i>	<i>mǎ</i>	<i>mà</i>
mother	linen	horse	scold

The first word, *mā*, is pronounced at a high steady pitch, the second, *má*, with a rising pitch from low to high, the third, *mǎ*, with a low pitch dipping and rising, and the final word, *mà*, with a falling pitch from high to low. All these variations of one sound with different ‘tones’ sound confusingly alike to Western ears, but are easily differentiated by the Chinese, who distinguish them in writing by using characters, which depict the meanings of the words.

The observant reader will wonder why the symbol for ‘horse’ (马) appears in the character for ‘mother’ (妈). This character has been created by combining two components: 女 (*nǚ*, meaning ‘female’ – using a little bit of imagination, one can discern two female breasts) and 马 (*mǎ*, ‘horse’). The

purpose of the 'horse' component is simply to serve as a rough guide to the pronunciation of the character as a whole. Characters can have any number of components; a close look at 麻 (*má*, linen) will reveal that it has three.

The importance of getting the intonation of Chinese words correct can be illustrated with an anecdote. Many years ago I attempted to inform a Chinese friend and her mother that I had caught a cold by saying, 'wǒ gǎn mǎo'. Much to my surprise, the mother got into such a fit of laughter that she had to wipe tears from her eyes. I asked her daughter why she was laughing. She replied, 'Because what you said was, "I'm chasing the cat!"' The situation was made more ludicrous by the fact that we did not have a cat. What I should have said was, 'wó gǎn mào'.

In Chinese there are many other words that share the same pronunciation *and* intonation, but again are distinguished by their different characters. The reason for this is the limited amount of words available in Mandarin Chinese, as native words consist of only one syllable; they either end in a vowel, a diphthong, -n or -ng. New words, however, can be formed by using two or more words; for example, 汽车 (*qì chē*) 'steam vehicle' – car, 火车 (*huǒ chē*) 'fire vehicle' – train, 飞机 (*fēi jī*) 'flying machine' – aeroplane. Foreign words and names of countries pose a problem because of their pronunciation and the fact that most Chinese people cannot get their tongues around many of our words. The usual solution is to find Chinese words that bear a vague resemblance to the names and words in other languages, and the meanings are disregarded. For example, David is rendered 大卫 (*Dà Wèi*) and Ireland is known as 爱尔兰 (*Ài Ěr Lán*); however 大卫 means 'Big Guard' and 爱尔兰 means 'Love You Orchid'.

The main advantage of using what seems to us a very clumsy form of writing, which puts a terrific strain on the memory, is that it can be read by people who speak different dialects of the language – and indeed by outsiders who cannot speak Chinese at all. Many Western scholars, like Arthur Waley, who have translated classical Chinese texts, may have had very little knowledge of the spoken language. Nearly all television programmes and films made in China nowadays have subtitles added so that those who do not understand Mandarin Chinese are able to follow what is being said.

In order to facilitate outsiders who wish to learn the language, spelling systems have been devised. Up until the 1970s, the most common one was the Wade-Giles system, which used numbers to indicate the four tones. Thus, the capital of China would have been rendered as *Pei<sup>3</sup> Ching<sup>1</sup>*. However, a new system devised by the Chinese began to appear during this period, known as 'Pīnyīn' (literally 'Spelling'), which is now currently in use. Using this system, the capital's name is now spelt *Běijīng*. Its one disadvantage, however, is its unusual use of certain letters of the alphabet,

which can cause a great deal of confusion for outsiders. Rather than provide a long, complicated guide to the pronunciation of Chinese words and place names, the following few examples may help the reader to get a rough idea of some of the more unusual uses of our letters.

C is pronounced like the *ts* of 'let's'.

CH is pronounced like the *ch* in 'chin'.

E has a rather 'dull' sound, rather like the *e* in 'err'.

G is always hard, as in 'go'.

I, after most consonants, is pronounced like the *ee* in 'see'; after

C, CH, R, S, SH, Z and ZH it is pronounced like the *ir* in 'irritable'.

J is pronounced like the *j* in 'jam' – never like the *s* in 'pleasure'.

U is pronounced like the *oo* in 'food'; however, after J, Q and X it is pronounced like the French *u* in 'tu' or the German *ü* in 'über'.

Ü is pronounced like the French *u* in 'tu' or the German *ü* in 'über'.

Q is pronounced like the *ch* in 'chin'.

X is pronounced like the *sh* in 'shin'.

Z is pronounced like the *dz* in 'adze'.

ZH is pronounced like the *j* in 'jam'.

AI is pronounced *ai*, as in 'eye'; -AO rhymes with 'cow'.

EI rhymes with 'day'; -ENG rhymes with 'lung'.

-IA as in 'yak'; -IAN rhymes with 'yen'; -IE as in 'yes'; -LONG as in 'young';

-IU rhymes with 'you'.

OU rhymes with 'dough'.

-UAN: depending on the first letter, either 'ü-en' or 'oo-an',

e.g., *xuan* ('shü-en'); *zhuan* ('joo-an').

-UE is pronounced 'ü-eh', the 'eh' as in 'wet', e.g., *yue* ('yü-eh').

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My interest in China began with its language. A course entitled 'Starting Chinese', broadcast on BBC radio, began in March 1976. Vaguely interested, I taped the lessons and sent off a postal order for 77p in order to purchase the book that went with the series of weekly programmes. However, I did not pay too much attention to the lessons or the book until after I had attended a music course in Termonfechin, near Drogheda in Ireland, a little while later. One evening, for something different, a Mr Whitfield from the UK gave a slide show of a trip that he had made to China, which quite captured my imagination. I wrote in my diary, 'The photographs had been excellently taken, and the commentary was most informative and enjoyable'. A day or two later I found Mr Whitfield on the landing of the old house

where we were staying, writing Chinese calligraphy with a traditional brush pen. I was so captivated by what I saw that I asked him if I could take one of the large sheets of paper on which he already had written some text, but on which there were some minor mistakes. I brought this home and stuck it on the wall of my bedroom.

I then began to study a little of the language and read about Chinese art. On 29 October, I discovered a small advertisement on the back page of *The Irish Times* for a three-week trip to China. I rang Shamrock Travel, which was not far from where I worked in Dublin's city centre, and asked them to send me some more details. They arrived in the post on the following morning. My father opened the envelope, quickly glanced at the document, handed it to me, and said in a voice heavy with sarcasm, 'There you are – it'll only cost you £900!' Aged 21 and working for only three years on a small wage, I was shocked. However, when I studied the details closely with my mother, we agreed that it seemed to be fairly good value, for everything was included: flights, accommodation, food, sightseeing tours, a day in Karachi on the way to China, and a day in Hong Kong and another in Singapore on the way back. The trip would be in May of 1977, by which time (I calculated) I might just have enough money to pay for this holiday of a lifetime, for I had learned that it would be the first proper tourist trip from Ireland to China after the chaos of the Cultural Revolution – by this stage Chairman Mao had died and things were slowly returning to normal.

Having made up my mind to join this tour, come what may, I began buying more books about ancient and modern China, which I read avidly. The official brochure for the holiday arrived in the post on the morning of 13 November, 1976 – a Saturday. By now the price had risen to £985. Undeterred, I finished my breakfast and cycled to Shamrock Travel on Eden Quay, where I booked to go on the trip and gave the young lady a deposit of £100. After I had been given printed instructions for the writing of a CV, which was necessary to obtain a visa application form, I left and returned home to resume my study of the language – this time in earnest. On the Monday I returned to Shamrock Travel, where I handed in my typed CV which, I was told, would be posted to China.

By January of the following year I had learned of a Chinese language course in University College Dublin, at its premises in Earlsfort Terrace, and wondered if I could join it, even though it had started the previous year. I wrote to the teacher, Professor Tao Kiang, asking if it was possible to go to his class, and his answer was yes; it turned out that he had heard of my father and his harpsichords, and lived near us in Castleknock. Managing to circumvent officialdom, I attended my first class with him towards the end of the month and, much to my surprise, discovered that I had made more progress following the BBC course than most of the students, who were

having great difficulty in grappling with the strange sounds and tones of the language.

At the beginning of February I applied for a new passport and made appointments for my obligatory injections: yellow fever and cholera first, then the second cholera injection and another for smallpox. By this time I had been told about the Irish Chinese Cultural Society and attended a lecture given by Jan Chapman in Carrolls Theatre. I was introduced to the secretary, Kevin Quinn, who promised to send me a student membership form, the fee for which would just be £1.

The official visa form arrived by post on my birthday, 8 February 1977. When my new passport arrived four days later, I was able to fill in the visa form and deliver it to the travel agent. During the following week I had a look at cine cameras for sale and bought a Nizo Braun S8T Super 8 camera in a shop on the quays, close to the travel agent. Shortly afterwards I paid the balance for the holiday, and on the following day visited the Chester Beatty Library in Shrewsbury Road, where I was able to feast my eyes on some fine items in the Chinese collection. Around the same time, a friend of my father lent me his copy of Mao's 'Little Red Book', which I read with interest, though I found it rather idealistic. Had I known fully about the chaos and suffering imposed on the Chinese by Mao during the appalling Cultural Revolution, I would have thrown the book to one side in disgust. Although the world knew about this terrible period of modern Chinese history, it would be several years before the entire truth, facts and figures concerning the destruction and carnage would finally emerge.

On 18 April 1977, everyone who had booked on the tour was invited to a get-together by Maurice O'Connor (the manager of Shamrock Travel) in Sachs Hotel near the city centre. Speeches were made by Mr O'Connor and the two female members of his staff who would come with us to China, and a buffet supper was laid on for us. It proved to be an excellent opportunity to hear about what would happen during the tour and to meet the people with whom we would be travelling in just sixteen days' time.