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A History of Shanghai

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Introduction

Shanghai, perhaps more than any other city in China, embodies the complex interplay of tradition and modernity, of isolation and cosmopolitanism, of adversity and resilience. Its evocative skyline—where historic shikumen townhouses sit in the shadow of glass-and-steel towers—tells a story not only of rapid urbanization but also of deep-rooted historical layers, each shaped by forces both internal and external. This book traces the city's arc from its obscure origins on the muddy banks of the Yangtze Delta to its current status as a vital node in the global economy and a paragon of Chinese transformation.

The earliest traces of human habitation in what would become Shanghai stretch back thousands of years, rooted in Neolithic cultures that first took advantage of the resources offered by this frequently shifting estuarine landscape. For centuries, Shanghai languished as a small and vulnerable settlement at the edge of empires, its development shaped by its geography and by the tides of imperial fortune. Only with the flourishing trade of the Song and subsequent dynasties did Shanghai begin to gain the economic and strategic profile that would set the stage for later, far more dramatic events.

Imperial expansion, and later, confrontation with the Western world during the 19th century, propelled Shanghai onto the international stage. The city's transformation into a treaty port exposed it to unparalleled outside influences: British merchants, French urban planners, American evangelists, Russian émigrés, and Japanese industrialists all left their mark. Shanghai's unique blend of East and West, its innovations in modern commerce, governance, and society, and the tensions that arose from these novelties, are legacies of an era when it stood at the threshold between worlds.

But Shanghai's history is not simply one of commerce, glamour, or cosmopolitanism. The city has been a theater of conflict—of class, ideology, and empire. It witnessed the birth pangs of Chinese communism, the violent purges of competing visions for China's future, and the grinding hardships of foreign occupation and civil war. The story of Shanghai during the republican and wartime eras is one of both remarkable flourishing and of searing tragedy.

The city's journey through the tumultuous decades of the 20th century—from the uncertainties of Communist takeover and Maoist experimentation to post-1978 reforms—mirrors the larger Chinese national story of upheaval and reinvention. In recent times, Shanghai has undergone yet another astonishing transformation, reclaiming its cosmopolitan mantle while navigating the problems and promises of

global integration: urbanization, environmental challenge, economic dynamism, and cultural renewal.

A History of Shanghai seeks to explore these transformations in detail, illuminating the vibrant and sometimes turbulent path that has made Shanghai not just a city of China, but a city of the world. Each chapter delves into the forces, people, and moments that defined an era, helping us to understand how a humble river town became one of the planet's great metropolises—an enduring symbol of China's capacity for change.

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CHAPTER ONE: Where Land Meets Sea

Shanghai's story begins not with grand imperial decrees or bustling markets, but with the slow, patient work of rivers and tides. The very ground upon which this colossal city stands is a relatively recent creation, a testament to the immense power of the Yangtze River and the dynamic nature of the East China Sea coastline. Imagine, if you will, a vast, shallow bay, gradually being filled over millennia by the colossal amounts of sediment carried downstream by the Yangtze, China's longest and most vital waterway. This process of lacustrine silting, particularly from the ancient expanse of Lake Tai, and the constant deposition at the river's delta, laid the foundation for the land that would one day host tens of millions.

Around six thousand years before the common era, the geography of the region looked markedly different from today. The areas that now constitute Shanghai's western districts, such as Qingpu, Songjiang, and Jinshan, were among the first to emerge as dry land, formed by this relentless accumulation of silt. The heart of what is modern downtown Shanghai, however, remained submerged beneath the waves, a watery expanse that would require considerable further geological action and eventually human intervention to become habitable. The coastline was a fluid, ever-changing boundary, dictated by the rhythm of deposition and the forces of the sea.

The formation of the Yangtze River Delta is a fascinating geological narrative in itself. It's a slow-growing strand plain, built by a series of chenier ridges - earthen ridges embedded with shells - that gradually pushed the deltaic plain eastward into the sea. This natural process, advancing the coastline by roughly a mile every seventy years, created a complex landscape of higher ground, wetlands, and waterways. These emerging features, though perhaps insignificant on a grand geological timescale, would prove crucial for early human habitation, offering slightly elevated, drier locations in an otherwise low-lying and often waterlogged environment.

Despite the challenging, dynamic environment, early humans were drawn to the resources the delta offered. The wetlands, rivers, and nearby sea provided sustenance, and the gradually forming land offered potential for settlement. Archaeological evidence suggests that people began to inhabit the higher ground in the region thousands of years ago, adapting their lives to this amphibious world. Their existence was intimately tied to the water, relying on fishing, gathering, and eventually, rudimentary forms of agriculture as the land became more stable.

The earliest clear signs of organized human settlement in the Shanghai area belong to the Neolithic period, specifically the Majiabang culture. Dating back to around 5000 to 3300 BCE, the Majiabang culture flourished in the Yangtze River Delta, particularly

around the vast freshwater expanse of Lake Tai, which played a significant role in the region's formation. These were not just transient groups; they established settled communities, leaving behind a material record of their lives and practices.

Archaeological sites attributed to the Majiabang culture reveal a people who were developing sophisticated ways of life. They crafted pottery, often red in colour, which provides valuable insights into their daily activities and artistic sensibilities. Evidence suggests they engaged in early forms of agriculture, including the cultivation of rice, a crop that would become central to the identity and sustenance of the wider Jiangnan region ("south of the river"). They also domesticated animals, with findings of domesticated pigs at Majiabang sites indicating a mixed economy that supplemented hunting and fishing.

Following and overlapping with the Majiabang culture was the Songze culture, which existed in the Lake Tai area between approximately 3800 and 3300 BCE. The Songze culture is considered a successor phase to the Majiabang, showing continuity in some traditions while also developing its own distinct characteristics. The Songze archaeological site in modern-day Qingpu District has been particularly significant, offering a stratified view of these early cultures.

Excavations at the Songze site have unearthed a wealth of artifacts, including pottery that shows advancements from the Majiabang period, with a greater variety of types and styles, and the increasing use of fast potter's wheels. The discovery of a large prehistoric cemetery at Songze, containing over a hundred burials, has provided invaluable information about their social structures and burial customs. One notable find was the nearly complete skull of a male, estimated to be between 25 and 30 years old, providing a rare glimpse of one of Shanghai's earliest inhabitants.

The Songze site is sometimes referred to as the "source of Shanghai" due to the significance of the discoveries made there, including what have been termed the "first person in Shanghai" and the "first rice in Shanghai," highlighting the deep roots of human activity and agriculture in the area. These findings underscore that while Shanghai's dramatic rise is a relatively recent phenomenon, the land has been home to human communities for millennia, long before it bore the name Shanghai.

Despite the presence of these Neolithic cultures, the Shanghai area remained a relatively undeveloped and sparsely populated corner of China for a considerable time. Its exposed position on the delta, vulnerable to the whims of the sea and the constant shifts of the river, presented significant challenges to large-scale, permanent settlement. Compared to areas further inland with more stable geography, this coastal frontier was a tougher place to establish a lasting foothold.

By the time of the Eastern Jin dynasty (317–420 CE), centuries after the decline of the Songze culture, the area that would become Shanghai was known by names such as

Shen or Hudu. These names hint at the geography and the primary economic activity. "Hu" is believed to have originated from the name of the Song River (now Suzhou Creek), a tributary of the Huangpu River, and referred to a type of fishing trap used by the inhabitants. This enduring name, still used as an abbreviation for the city today, speaks to the long-standing importance of fishing in the local economy.

The Song River, or Suzhou Creek as it is now known, played a crucial role in the early development of the area. It was along this waterway that a thriving fishing industry began to take shape during the Tang and Song dynasties. The creek's connection to the larger waterway system of the Yangtze Delta provided a lifeline for trade and transportation, albeit on a modest scale compared to the future. It was a natural artery in a landscape defined by water.

Life in these early centuries was undoubtedly shaped by the ebb and flow of the tides and the seasonal rhythms of the river. The inhabitants would have possessed an intimate understanding of their watery environment, navigating its channels, harvesting its bounty, and adapting to its unpredictable nature. Their settlements were likely modest, perhaps clustered along the slightly higher ground or natural levees that offered some protection from flooding.

The challenging environment meant that growth was slow. While other parts of China were developing complex societies and urban centers, the Shanghai area remained a backwater, its potential constrained by its deltaic position. Its economy was subsistence-based, centered around the readily available resources of the rivers and wetlands. The idea of a major city arising in this location would have seemed far-fetched to the people who lived here during this early period.

Yet, the seeds of future greatness were inadvertently being sown. The very geological processes that made early life difficult were also creating a potentially valuable asset: a deepwater port. As coastal and inland shipping began to expand in later centuries, the natural advantages of Shanghai's location at the mouth of the Yangtze River, where it met the sea, would gradually become apparent. This geographical destiny, however, was still a long way off.

For now, the story of Shanghai was one of small communities living in harmony with a powerful and often challenging natural world. They were the inheritors of the Majiabang and Songze cultures, carrying on traditions of fishing, farming, and pottery-making that had been established thousands of years before. Their existence was a quiet prelude to the dramatic transformation that awaited this corner of the Yangtze Delta. They were the first chapter in a history that would eventually ripple across the globe.

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