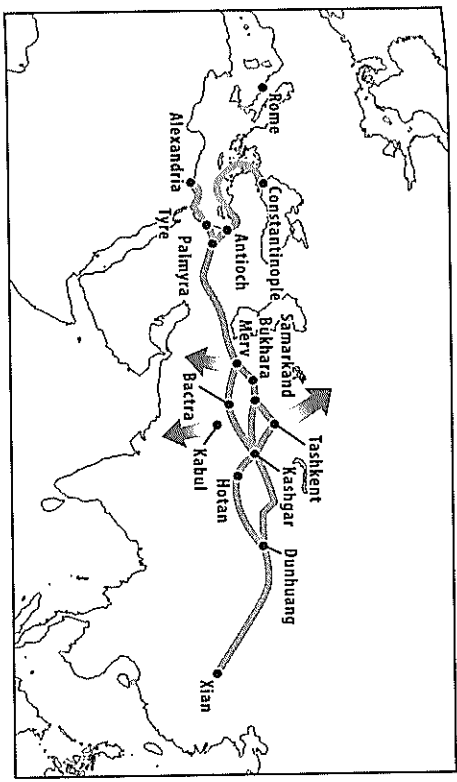


China's Population Density

twelfth century—and it has rarely extended its power beyond its present borders. China is not historically aggressive and has only intermittently involved itself with the rest of the world. It must be remembered that China has not always engaged in international trade, periodically closing itself off and avoiding contact with foreigners. When it does engage in trade, it does so using overland routes like the Silk Road through Central Asia and merchant ships sailing from its eastern ports (see map, page 91). The Europeans encountered a China in the mid-nineteenth century that was going through one of its isolationist periods. It was united but relatively poor. The Europeans forced their way in, engaging coastal China in intense trade. This had two effects. The first was the dramatic increase in wealth in the coastal areas that were engaged in trade. The second was the massive increase in inequality between China's coast and the poor interior regions. This disparity also led to the weakening of the central government's control over the coastal regions, and to increased instability and chaos. The coastal regions preferred close ties to (and even domination by) the Europeans.



Silk Road

The period of chaos lasted from the mid-nineteenth century until the Communists took power in 1949. Mao had tried to foment a revolution in coastal cities like Shanghai. Having failed, he took the famous long march into the interior, where he raised an army of poor peasants, fought a civil war, and retook the coast. He then returned China to its pre-European enclosure. From 1949 until Mao's death, China was united and dominated by a strong government, but was isolated and poor.

CHINA'S GAMBLE

Mao's death led his successors to try once more for the historic Chinese dream. They wanted a China that was wealthy from international trade but united under a single powerful government. Deng Xiaoping, Mao's successor, knew that China could not remain isolated permanently and still be secure. Someone would take advantage of China's economic weakness. Deng therefore gambled. He bet that this time China could open its borders, engage in international trade, and not be torn apart by internal conflict.