

Imperial China

CHINA: HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND



The Chinese people have shared a common culture and history longer than any other group on Earth. A 4,000 year old writing system has enabled the Chinese people, who speak a wide variety of dialects, to communicate with each other and maintain a cultural identity. Although individual Chinese dynasties were overturned, the dynastic system established in 221 BC survived until 1911.

Changing dynasties and even foreign invaders and rulers were all absorbed into the Chinese cultural system. To be comparable, the Roman Empire would have lasted into the 20th century with its culture and written language being shared by all of Europe.

Although Chinese cultural history is primarily based on a sedentary agricultural lifestyle, the nomadic cattle-raisers of the grasslands and deserts and the mixed agricultural and livestock raising peoples of the mountain and tropical zones all contributed to Chinese civilization. The nomadic livestock-raisers of the steppe lived in mobile dwellings (yurts), constantly moving between summer and winter pastures. Animal products and the raiding of sedentary peoples formed the basis of their economy. They were a tribal society whose leadership was based on strength and the skills of horsemanship and hunting. In many ways, the nomads were in constant training for war. China's dynasties were continually threatened by these nomadic invaders and the success of an emperor very often rested on how effectively he dealt with them. Although Imperial China was ruled by all powerful emperors, the survival of China depended on agriculture and the vast majority of the Chinese people who worked the fields. Eventually, greed, corruption, famine, natural disasters, and nomadic invasions contributed to the fall of even the most powerful dynasties.

China's geography has also determined its history. China is a very large and varied country. It is composed of many different climates, geographic features, and racial origins. The area, 2000 kilometers from east to west and north to south, includes sub-arctic, sub-tropical, arid, semi arid, seacoast, mountain ranges, valleys and river basins. China's natural products are largely dependant on rainfall. Wheat, millet and barley are grown in the northern provinces and rice in the southern. Hemp was the main source of textiles until the introduction of cotton in the tenth century. Since 1000 BC, mulberry orchards have been kept to raise silkworms. Vegetables, fruits, and tea bushes (introduced in the fourth century) are grown in the coastal southeast and central Yangtze areas.

THE BEGINNING

Archaeological finds in China have given the world important knowledge of early man. The earliest evidence of man in China, Java Man, dates back to 600,000 BC. Later Peking Man, dating back to 400,000 BC, lived during what is known as the Old Stone Age. Artifacts found in China from Stone Age man (50,000-35,000 BC), correspond to those of Cro-Magnon in Europe. These Stone Age people made tools out of bones and stones, clothes out of hides, and knew how to make fire.

During the New Stone Age (4000-3000 BC), cultural changes occurred in ancient China. People began living together in settled places. They cultivated the land and domesticated animals. They made polished stone tools and built shelters-pit dwellings and beehive huts. Their villages have been found in the great bend of the Huang He (Yellow River) on the North China Plain. This area

closely resembles the cradles of other ancient civilizations such as the valley of the Nile in Egypt. From 3000-2000 BC, these people also developed the art of making pottery for storing food and drink. They had the wheel, but had not yet discovered writing or the uses of metals.

SHANG DYNASTY (ca.1600 - ca. 1100 BC)

This is the first documented era of ancient China. The Shang had a highly developed hierarchy consisting of a king, nobles, commoners, and slaves. The aristocracy hunted for sport and fought from horse drawn chariots. They were supported by the village peasants who lived in pit dwellings. The Shang capital was Anyang, in north Henan Province. The Shang peoples were known for their use of jade, bronze, ancestor worship and highly organized armies. The technology of making bronze brought radical changes in the Chinese way of life. Better tools and weapons accelerated the tendency to settle and farm rather than lead a nomadic lifestyle. A material lifestyle began to develop. Ceremonies using ornate and beautiful bronze sacred vessels led to the need for organization and leadership to protect and care for this new material culture. About 2000 BC, a need for record keeping led to the development of an early writing system. Inscriptions have been found on animal bones (known as oracle bones) and tortoise shells. A complex system of picture writing composed of ideograms, pictograms, and phonograms developed. These characters have evolved and remain the basis of China's written language. This system of writing is understood by all Chinese, regardless of what dialect they speak, and through the ages it has enabled a cultural unity of the Chinese people.

ZHOU DYNASTY (ca. 1100 - 256 BC)

The Zhou dynasty lasted for almost nine centuries, longer than any other. The kings, whose chief deity was heaven, called themselves "Sons of Heaven." Their conquest of the Shang was seen as a "mandate of heaven." During the dynasty, great advances were made. A middle class developed, iron was introduced, and Confucius (551-479 BC) proposed the code of ethics that dominated Chinese thought and culture for the next 25 centuries. The Zhou dynasty is divided into two periods: Western (Early) and Eastern (Later) Zhou, named for the locations of the capitals.

Western Zhou(ca. 1100 -771 BC)

Western Zhou territory covered most of the North China Plain. The early Zhou political system, though often compared to the medieval feudal system in Europe, was actually an advanced version of earlier tribal organization under which control was based on family ties. City states became progressively centralized. Western Zhou was a slave state whose people farmed, hunted, fished, and raised livestock. Their economy was based on the barter system. The Zhou dynasty, like the Shang, is known for its beautiful bronze objects in the form of food containers, wine cups, and kitchen utensils. These vessels attest to the importance of food during this period. Worshipping gods and ancestors was considered essential for the well being of the country.

Eastern Zhou (770 - 256 BC)

Spring and Autumn Period (770 - 476 BC), Warring States Period (475 -221 BC)

The Zhou were invaded by militaristic nomads from the northwest in 771 BC. This caused the Zhou to move their capital eastward to Luoyang (Henan Province). Nomadic people from the northern steppe invaded settled agricultural communities, in part to solve food shortages. Conflicts between nomadic peoples and settled Chinese would be a continuing part of China's history. The Chinese called the nomads "barbarians," a term applied to all non-Chinese peoples until the 20th century. China considered itself to be the center of the civilized world-all others were outsiders or barbarians. During the Spring and Autumn Period (named for a book credited to Confucius) iron replaced bronze for tools and weapons. The use of iron led to increased agricultural output, growth of population and cities, and intensified warfare among the states within China. By the 4th century, only seven states remained-the strongest was the Qin (Ch'in). During this prolonged period of warfare a new social group of scholars (shi) arose. The shi often worked as tutors to the children of princes and as advisers to the various state governments. The most famous of the shi was Confucius. The shi were the forerunners of the scholar-officials in future Chinese Empires. Although this was a period of conflict and civil strife within, it was also an era marked by prosperity and intellectual advancement. Called the "golden age," this was a time of reform and new ideas. The introduction of coinage stimulated commerce. Iron tools enabled public works projects such as flood control, irrigation, and canal digging. High walls were built around cities and along the northern frontier. During this time, the philosophies of Confucianism, Taoism (Daoism), Yin & Yang, and Moism, were formed. They would become the basis of Chinese thought and practice for the next two and one-half millennia.

QIN DYNASTY (221 - 207 BC)

In 221 BC the state of Qin took over or annexed the lands of its six rivals and a new epoch began for China. The first empire was established and the king of Qin took the title of first emperor. The Qin (Ch'in) most likely gave China its name. Though the Qin dynasty did not last long, its heritage continued for more than 2,000 years. The Qin instituted a centralized bureaucracy. Hereditary rule was abolished and members of the aristocracy were forced to live in the capital of Xianyang. Centrally appointed governors and magistrates governed the provinces and counties. The empire which stretched from the Mongolian plateau to Vietnam had to be protected against northern nomads. Walls built along the border by former states were connected to form the Great Wall-- "Ten Thousand Li Wall." (Today's wall dates mainly from the Ming Dynasty.) The emperor's actions created opposition and many enemies, especially among the aristocracy. Scholars were put to death or exiled and books were burned. In the end, living under guard and in seclusion, Emperor Qin Shih Huang became occupied with immortality and the preparation of his tomb.

HAN DYNASTY (206 BC-AD 220)

Western (Earlier) Han (202 BC-AD 8) and Eastern (Later) Han (AD 25 - AD 220)

Regarded as China's first successful dynasty, the Han continued as a central bureaucracy but lifted the ban on scholars. Confucian ideals were adopted and a civil service examination system was instituted to select men of talent to serve in the government. The Han expanded the empire and secured a caravan route (Silk Route) across Central Asia to Antioch, Baghdad, and Alexandria. They developed ties with neighboring non-Chinese states through intermarriages and exchanges of gifts and goods. Long and costly campaigns were carried out to secure the empire from the threatening Huns. The Chinese show their pride in Han accomplishments by calling themselves the Han people. The Han were advanced in astronomy, inventing the sundial and water clock. They also devised the lunar calendar and recorded sunspots. In mathematics, they were the first to use the place value system. They invented the wheelbarrow, locks to control water levels, and the compass. Art and writing flourished during the Han. Large landowning families became very powerful during this time. The merchant class grew in importance, and social status was gained by those who did well on the civil exams. In the end, however, destructive conflicts arose between the large number of ambitious court eunuchs and the landlord officials. Peasant rebellions and the rise of powerful generals all contributed to the fall of the empire. After the failure of the Han dynasty China was repeatedly invaded from the north. For many years northern China was governed by non-Chinese emperors and native Chinese officials. It was during this time that the religion of Buddha took hold in China.

TANG DYNASTY (618-907)

The Tang dynasty had its capital at Chang'an (Xi'an). During the Tang, the emperor was supreme. A census taken every three years enforced the taxation system and the drafting of people to do labor. An agricultural surplus and the development of a uniform value for commodities enabled the growth of commerce and cities. This was also a period of imperial expansion. Chinese control was recognized by Tibet and Central Asia west to Mongolia, by Manchuria and Korea in the north, and by Annam in the south. Considered a high point in Chinese civilization, the Tang dynasty is sometimes referred to as China's golden age of literature and art. Contacts with non-Chinese peoples enriched cultural life. Art and poetry flourished. With the invention of block printing and improvements in papermaking, Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist teachings were printed. This was a time when China led the world in shipbuilding and firearms development.

During the last century of Tang rule, peasant uprisings left much of central China in ruins. Unable to pay exorbitant taxes, peasants were forced to place themselves under the protection of landlords or become bandits. China was left divided between north and south, with five dynasties in the north and ten kingdoms in the south.

SONG DYNASTY (960 - 1279)

Song history is divided into two periods, Northern and Southern Song. Under the Northern Song, the military lost prestige. Unfortunately the weakening of the military coincided with the rise of strong nomad nations on China's borders. The Song were forced by nomadic invaders to abandon north China in 1127. The Southern Song settled at Hangzhou and ruled south of the Huai River.

Though politically weak, this was a time of philosophical and intellectual initiative and technological creations. Education spread. The Song period was noted for its historical writings, landscape painting, calligraphy, and hard-glazed porcelain. Cities developed as centers of trade, industry, and maritime commerce. A new mercantile class arose made up of wealthy commoners. Unfortunately, urbanization brought about a decline in the status of women of the upper classes. Women's work was now less essential than it had been in rural areas. The practices of concubinage

and of binding girls' feet took root. The Song staffed their centralized bureaucracy with civilian scholar-officials and military governors were replaced by appointed officials. These moves gave greater power to the emperor. While the Southern Song ruling class and many city residents enjoyed a luxurious life, there was widespread poverty. People in the countryside had to deal with absentee landlordism. At the end of its rule, the great nomad empire in the north, the Mongols, descended on the Southern Song.

YUAN (MONGOL) DYNASTY (1279 - 1368)

Kublai Khan, a grandson of Genghis Khan established the first non-Chinese dynasty to rule all of China. The Mongols became the most hated of the barbarian rulers because they did not allow the Chinese to hold government positions. They refused to adapt to Chinese culture and kept their own language and customs. This was a period of extensive contact with the West. Although Westerners feared the Mongols, the European Crusaders attempted to use them as allies in their fight against the Muslims. Venetian adventurer, Marco Polo, became a favorite of Kublai Khan.

Cultural exchanges with West Asia and Europe led to diversity during the Yuan dynasty. Sorghum became a major new food crop. Islam and Roman Catholicism were introduced to China as Chinese printing techniques, porcelain production, and medical literature were introduced in Europe. Other major cultural achievements in China were the development of drama and the novel. The Mongols improved road and water communications and built granaries to ward off famine. The capital city of Beijing was rebuilt. However, Kublia Khan's extravagant administration slowly impoverished China. His inept successors, natural disasters, and peasant uprisings eventually led to the collapse of the Yuan dynasty.

MING DYNASTY (1368 - 1644)

The Ming dynasty was founded by a Han Chinese and former Buddhist monk. It was a period of restoration and reorganization. The practices of Confucianism were restored and the trend of concentrating power in the imperial government and the emperor continued. The central bureaucracy was again filled by officials selected by the examination system. In 1421 the capital was moved to Peking (Beijing) and the imperial palace, the Forbidden City, was built. During the 15th century, the Ming undertook extensive maritime expeditions. They sailed the South Pacific, Indian Ocean, Red Sea, Persian Gulf, and as far west as eastern Africa. Early in the 16th century European expansion reached China. These first Sino-Western relations were culturally oriented and mutually respectful. But by the end of the 16th century, official corruption, taxation of the poor, famine, weak and inattentive emperors, and wars with the Mongols and Japanese weakened the dynasty and paved the way for a Manchus take over.

QING DYNASTY (1644 - 1911)

The Manchus were nomads who, like the Mongols, succeeded in ruling all of China. The Manchus recognized that to rule China they had to adopt much of the Chinese culture and its practices. However, the Manchus feared being absorbed by the more numerous Han Chinese. To prevent this, the Han were forbidden to engage in trade, intermarry, or move to the Manchu homeland. The Manchus expanded the empire to include Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet. Taiwan became a part of China for the first time. More than a century of peace and prosperity followed.

By the end of the 18th century, a population increase from 100 to 300 million resulted in a shortage of land. Corruption spread in the imperial court and the military deteriorated. The 19th century in China was mark by internal rebellions and Western conflicts. The West, led by Britain, wanted free trade in China. Foreign conflicts, beginning with the Opium Wars, led to humiliation and the impairment of China's sovereignty. Britain gained control of Hong Kong in 1842. Territory was lost to France and Japan. Great internal disturbances took place in China between 1850 and 1873. In one of the worst civil wars in history, the Taiping Rebellion, more than 20 million (possibly more than 30 million) died. The Qing dynasty was seriously weakened and the way was paved for the revolutions of the 20th century.

Kentucky Horse Park
International Museum of the Horse



**Kentucky Horse Park
Interneational Museum of the Horse
4089 Iron Works Parkway
Lexington, KY 40511**

Phone: (800) 568-8813
(c) Copyright 1999, The Kentucky Horse Park