

CHINESE CIVILIZATION

The Chinese people developed a dynamic and rich civilization at the eastern end of Eurasia. Geographically and politically united by Emperor Huang Di in the 200's BC, China's civilization has alternated between times of political centralization with rule from a capital city and times of fragmentation when local warlords dominated. Confucianism, a belief system which supported centralized political power, a professional bureaucracy, and a hierarchy of social relationships has remained influential in China for 2500 years. With a dense population from early times (50 million by 750 AD), the Chinese have achieved high levels of productivity and exported many sought-after goods such as iron, porcelain, and silk. With a common language, paper to print it on, and a varied and distinctive cuisine, the people have been rightfully proud of their cohesive and distinctive culture. They have traditionally viewed themselves as living in "The Middle Kingdom" - that is, the center of the known world, but have sometimes seen neighbors and outsiders as "barbarians" from whom they demanded tribute.

GEOGRAPHY

Eastern China is a vast watershed drained by 2 large river systems which rise on the Tibetan plateau and Kunlun Mountains and flow eastward to the Pacific. The Yellow river traverses the north China plain. The Yangtze and its valley lie to the south. Smaller rivers and valleys converge on present-day Canton. The climate in the south is semi-tropical and monsoon-drenched.

China has been protected by the Gobi Desert in the north, the Tibetan plateau, and Pamir and Himalaya mountains in the west, the jungles of Southeast Asia in the South, and the Pacific Ocean in the east.

CHINESE POLITICAL HISTORY

From the Shang Dynasty in 1700 BC to the Ching (Qing) Dynasty (1644-1912 AD) there were 24 dynasties. When the Ching Dynasty fell in 1912 AD, China established a republic.

What were the main dynasties, what were their principal achievements, and how did these dynasties affect people's lives?

SHANG DYNASTY (1700-1000 BC) - 700 Years

Shang rule began about 1700 BC in the Yellow River Valley. A confederation of clans, each headed by a nobleman, acknowledged the Shang dynasty's king. An ancient chronicler complained that “the big affairs of state consist of sacrifice and soldiery.” The aristocratic classes’ major occupation was warfare. Armies of as many as 13,000 men wore mass-produced uniforms and used mass-produced weapons. Combat was carried on by means of two-horse chariots, a custom which may have been adopted from peoples of neighboring regions. (Archeologists have found corpses of Indo-Europeans living in western China who may have brought two-horse chariots with them. Spoked chariot wheels buried in graves in Ukraine date back to 2,000 BC proving that the expertise for bronze chariots far predates the Shang dynasty.)

The Shang king ruled with his own army and bureaucracy from the capital city of Anyang. These kings believed in the existence of supernatural forces that would help them in their endeavors. Excavations have yielded thousands of oracle bones which were bones of oxen and chickens poked with hot sticks so lines would appear and fortunes could be told. The Chinese had a clear belief in an afterlife. Hundreds of slaves, prisoners of war, and attendants who had served the king would be buried with him in rituals of human sacrifice. The people who were sacrificed would accompany the King on the journey to the next world. These rituals were part of the belief in venerating ancestors. A modern-day practice of burning replicas of objects to bring good luck to the departed on their journey to the next world continues to this day.

Social classes were evident in the Shang era with kings and warrior aristocrats owning land, peasants obliged to farm the land, a small number of merchants and artisans, and slaves taken prisoner in battle. The Shang period is distinguished for two high arts: bronze vessels made by artisans who had mastered the art of bronze casting and a pictographic writing system made by scribes who refined this system.

CHOU (ZHOU) DYNASTY (1000-221 BC) - 800 years

Western Chou leaders defeated the Shang thus beginning an 800-year rule. The King’s land was in the middle surrounded by terrain occupied by his appointed vassals. The vassals eventually ascended and became so strong, they forced the relocation of the capital to Lo-Yang and formation of Eastern Chou rule.

According to The Rites of Chou, an ancient document on statecraft, rulers of the Chou dynasty asserted they possessed a "Mandate of Heaven" to rule. (Heaven was viewed as an impersonal law of nature rather than an anthropomorphic deity). This

meant the ruler governed with the approval of the heavens - a theory similar to the western concept of the divine right of kings. The divine right of kings was, in fact, a belief prevalent in all ancient civilizations. The mandate from heaven could be taken away, however, if the ruler became corrupt and unjust. The people would have the "right of revolt" against an evil ruler. Because this mandate gave **the people** the right to revolt, it can be considered an early form of democracy. It means the ruler's power was limited.

Trade expanded during the Chou dynasty's rule, and new technologies included production of cast iron, use of the iron-tipped plow, and irrigation of larger farms. As happened in other eras of history in other places, agricultural improvements brought an increase in population. Chinese population was estimated to be about 20 million by 200 BC. This led to a boom in commerce, manufacturing, and trade. Seashells were used as the first money (they were also used as currency in many other parts of the world). Round metal coins with a hole in the middle were also used as currency by some merchants, but the average person still relied on a system of barter and paid for taxes, rents, and salaries with grain.

During most of this period, although a dynasty was officially in power, China was essentially a feudal state with over 100 independent domains headed by nobles living on their own tracts of land. The abundance of wars between these nobles caused it to be called a time of "warring states." In reaction to these wars, three Chinese scholars searched for answers as to how they could create a society in which people could get along with each other. This led to the birth of Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism. Confucius established Confucianism; Lao Tzu, established Taoism, and Han Fei Tzu established Legalism. A wide-ranging debate followed, a debate called the "hundred schools" on the nature of human nature, society, and the universe.

Severe conflicts between the Mongols and the Chinese broke out. The northern warriors on horseback posed a serious threat and Chinese nobles who lived in this area began to build walls to keep them out.

CHIN (QIN) DYNASTY (221-202 BC) - 20 years

Toward the end of the Chou Dynasty the authority of the King was increasingly challenged. An ambitious young soldier in the principality of Chin, Huang Di, emerged from mountains in the west, subdued rivals, and eventually took over China.

Described by Han dynasty historian, Sima Qian, as having “the chest of a bird of prey, the voice of a jackal, and the heart of a tiger,” Huang Di united the first empire imposing central authority on all regions. He ruled using the philosophy of Legalism implementing tough, authoritarian control and strict punishments. He abolished feudalism and set up a centralized bureaucracy which administered 36 districts each with a military and civilian governor. He standardized weights and measures, coinage, and writing, and built roads, canals, elaborate palaces and the Great Wall of China (1500 miles long, 25 feet high).

His rule was so authoritarian that dissidents were executed, books were burned, heavy taxes were levied, and people were forced to work for the state. He reportedly killed 460 scholars because they couldn't find the secret of immortality. He forced 700,000 men to labor on his tomb discovered in the 1970's and currently a major tourist attraction. It contains over 7,000 life-size clay soldiers.

Another incident, which also shows how despotic his rule was, occurred when a meteor fell on China. He executed everyone living near it because he thought it was a sign of the division of the Empire.

Huang Di's advisor, Li Si, oversaw the Draconian centralization of power during the Qin Dynasty. He advocated destroying anything that would stand in the way of absolute power including getting rid of clans and burning books.

Although Huang Di was brutally authoritarian, his ideals of unity, order, and centralized authority, once achieved, were never forgotten in Chinese civilization.

HAN DYNASTY (202 BC-220 AD) - 400 years

In the aftermath of Huang Di's reign, court intrigue, peasant rebellion, and rival warlords tore his empire apart. From the Great Wall in the north to the typhoon swept south, China was tumbled into chaos once more. But, unlike in India when the Maurya's succumbed and the people experienced hundreds of years of chaos, the disorder in China lasted only 20 years. A new dynasty, the Hans, took up the task of unification and became one of the most admired houses in Chinese history.

This Classical Era dynasty saw a revival of Confucian teachings at the same time as Hinduism flourished again in India and Christianity took root in Europe. In a widespread phenomenon people in the Classical era sought to deepen their spiritual spirituality.

Han Emperors used the concept of the Mandate of Heaven to build a powerful, centralized monarchy. The scholar-civil servant system with exams on Confucian principles allowed successful candidates to enter into this elite group. The system favored candidates from wealthy families who could afford tutors for their children.

The life story of the founder of the Han Dynasty is a favorite of the Chinese. Liu Bang (later given an exalted title Han Gaozu) was a strong, capable peasant, a former bandit turned rebel general, who founded the Dynasty. He unified China in an enlightened way reminiscent of Asoka and Augustus. Ruling from the capital city of Chang'an (modern Xian), he presided over a golden age. His widow, Empress Lu, ruled after him and they named the river which flows through his birthplace the Han River.

When the western Han empire disintegrated due to conflicts between lords, the Eastern Han emerged about 25 AD. They established trade routes out from Canton and exported silk to as far away as the Roman Empire. Paper was invented by Ts'ai Lun in 105 AD. Internal struggles caused a popular rebellion by the Yellow Turbans and the last Han emperor was forced to resign in 220 AD.

NEXT 400 YEARS (220-580 AD)

Although political fragmentation and civil war befell China, this turmoil was not accompanied by moral decay. On the contrary, Buddhism was introduced in China and people's beliefs turned toward the promise of earthly and heavenly salvation. People also found emotional satisfaction in Taoism (a religion which emphasized living in harmony with nature) and turned away from strict Confucianism. Local culture was enriched by these belief systems.

One of the most significant developments during this time was the creation of a system of martial arts called Kung Fu. Buddhist monks at Shao Lin monastery in the forest near Luoyang, the capital city of Henan Province, refined a system of self-defense and meditation. It helped people achieve a balance between intellect, body, and emotion. Later Japanese who visited Shao Lin adopted this system which came to be called Zen Buddhism in Japan.

Buddhists and Taoists later evolved variations of Kung Fu with different philosophies and techniques. These differences became the source of competition and rivalries as time went on. From time to time, Buddhist and Taoist groups also revolted against foreigners living in China.

SUI DYNASTY (580-618 AD) – 38 Years

General Yang Chien rose to power and reunited China under Emperor Weng, the first emperor of the Sui dynasty. Emperor Weng reduced taxes by taking a careful census which placed many more people previously omitted on the tax register, lightened military service requirements, and abolished extreme punishments in the penal code.

Under the second Sui emperor, Yang Ti, a written exam system for choosing government officials was updated and introduced in 606. This system was still being used in the 20th century. The Grand Canal utilizing the labor of 2 million workers was built linking 3 rivers, Yellow, Yangtze, and Huai. Yang Ti undertook a series of disastrous wars against neighboring states and subsequent peasant uprisings led to social and economic disorder. Yang Ti was assassinated when the army turned against him. One of the successful army officers, Li Shih Min installed his father as emperor founding the Tang Dynasty.

TANG DYNASTY (618-907) - 300 Years

After installing his father, Li Yuan, in power for ten years and further eliminating rivals, Li Shih-Min assumed the throne. He acquired an emperor's name, Tang Tsai Tsung. With a capital at Chang-an, the Tang Dynasty secured China's borders placing military districts along frontier areas, introduced agrarian and judicial reforms, built canals, and improved communications. It is perhaps most famous for the flowering of the arts particularly lyric poetry. This dynasty implemented the "equal lands" policy distributing land to peasants; they also subdued northern steppe nomads and controlled Tibet. They demanded tribute from Koreans, Japanese, and Vietnamese and then extended the benefit of cultural and technological achievements to them.

The Chinese look back with fondness at Tang Tai Zong, the Grand Ancestor of the Tang, who reunified China. His concubine Wu Zetian ruled after him as one of the few females to rule China. Although under Confucian beliefs having a woman rule would be like "a hen crowing like a rooster at daybreak", Wu Zetian tried to elevate the status of women. She commissioned scholars to write the biographies of women and appointed women to high government positions. She said the ideal ruler would rule like the mother of a family. She fostered Buddhism which in turn influenced sculpture, painting, and literature. She reduced the military, was fair to peasants, and lowered taxes.

By the 800's AD internal uprisings and invasions weakened China. Warlords vied for land and power. Court intrigue and official corruption caused decadence and finally northern nomads overthrew Tang rule.

SUNG DYNASTY (960-1279 AD) - 300 years

The Sung dynasty brought another Golden Age to China's history. It saw improved administration, civil service exams, and the scholar-civil service system bringing professionalism. By the time of the Sung Dynasty China's technological achievements were second to none with paper, advanced printing techniques, gunpowder, porcelain, compass, ships' rudders and sea anchors among the numerous inventions of these resourceful people.

MONGOL RULE (1275-1368) - 93 Years

Genghis Khan's armies first swept down and conquered N. China in 1215 AD; by 1279 his grandson Kublai Khan overpowered the Sung Dynasty and occupied all of China. Kublai Khan moved the capitol to Peking, named his dynasty Yuan, and continued to conquer new lands such as part of Vietnam. In ruling China, the Mongols retained Chinese administration but made sure Mongols and hired foreigners held the highest positions. Because they conquered nearly all of Eurasia, trade flourished, and China experienced economic prosperity, stability, and unity. Marco Polo wrote glowingly of the court at Peking. The Mongols finally fell due to bankruptcy, corruption at the court, and instability brought about by a famine in the 1340's.

MING DYNASTY (1368-1644) – 276 YEARS

WHEN CHINA RULED THE SEAS - VOYAGES OF 1405-1433

Under the Ming Emperor YongLe (Yung Lo) who came to power in 1402, the Chinese made 7 voyages to the Great Western Sea (the Indian Ocean). Commanded by Admiral Zheng He, a Moslem eunuch at the Ming court, these 317 ships were large - 400' long, 160' wide and carried in all 28,000 men. By contrast Columbus' ships were smaller, about 100' in length and he had only 120 men. A Chinese voyage lasted 2 years. The 4th voyage reached the Persian Gulf, the 7th went to Mecca and over to Kenya where the Chinese presented lavish gifts to local rulers. Journals kept by the Chinese show

their great interest in dress, food, language, landscape, and marriage ceremonies of the native peoples where they traveled. These voyages were undertaken to show power, they were "tribute missions" for establishing diplomatic ties and trade. They also searched for medicinal herbs and spices. By the 4th voyage Zheng He was bringing back to China envoys of 30 states to pay homage to the Chinese emperor. He also brought back a giraffe and zebra considered good luck. These voyages were abruptly halted and never resumed. Zheng He died on the last voyage and was buried at sea. By 1525 it was an offense to build an ocean-going ship and in 1525 an edict ordered the destruction of all ocean-going vessels. The voyages had no religious aims, but in 1409 a plaque placed in Ceylon honored Buddha, Allah and Vishnu written in Chinese, Persian and Tamil.

In conclusion, that were the main political characteristics of Chinese civilization?

- Pervasiveness of authoritarian rule and hierarchy.
- Pattern of decentralized domains ruled by lords alternating with centralized rule by an emperor in a capital city.
- Political centralization made legitimate by the theory that the Emperor had the Mandate of Heaven to rule;
- A scholar-civil servant class who took a rigorous exam which tested, among other things, knowledge of Confucian classics;
- A system of relationships established by Confucianism where the nation was pictured as a family with the father, or Emperor, at its head. Social harmony meant centralized rule with a strong father-figure at the top.

The Situation for Women in China

The tradition of male superiority in China was part of Confucian belief, and it continued from ancient times to the 20th century. The eldest male in the family ruled as an autocrat. Women were expected to be devoted to parents in their youth and to husbands and husband's families thereafter. Fidelity, chastity, and modesty were ideal feminine qualities. A woman's family provided a dowry to her husband's family when they married. Female infanticide was common in times of famine.

In 960 AD during the Sung Dynasty the practice of footbinding

began. A young girl's arches were broken at the age of 6 in a ritualized ceremony. Her feet were soaked in a solution which softened the bones before breaking the arch. Then her feet were bandaged so that when they healed they couldn't grow to normal size; they remained tiny, about 3 inches long. This meant a woman would have an odd, stilted walk and a minced gait which men found attractive.

In addition to footbinding, another sign of double standards could be seen with emperor's possessing concubines, sometimes hundreds of them.

What were the main beliefs of Confucianism and why were these beliefs so successful in China?

Confucius was a reformer born in China at a time of civil war, the "warring states period". Because conditions he saw in his lifetime were so distressing to him, he tried to seek ways people could live together without violent conflict. He felt society should be structured, orderly, and stable. He reasoned there had to be a clearly defined code of behavior which established how each person should behave. Each person must understand his or her situation and obligations toward others.

Confucius formulated 5 sacred relationships in society: wife must obey husband, children obey parents, younger children obey older children, all the people obey the Emperor, and friend be loyal to friend. These relationships weren't simply social relationships - they were sacred, moral relationships. Absolute obedience was common because it was thought whoever does not obey isn't human.

Moral conduct also extended to neighbors and other people. People were supposed to avoid friction by being sensitive to other people's feelings and never causing others to lose face. Courtesy was valued more than any other virtue. In business relations haste was to be avoided and compromise was valued. Chinese were taught to put on a good face even if someone in the family had died. This was to avoid bothering others with negative emotions.

Confucius also set forth views on how the Emperor and government officials should behave. The Emperor was seen as the father of the society and should govern by moral example with benevolence, humanity, and respect for others. The Chinese believed the Emperor ruled with a Mandate from Heaven, and because of this important role he should have wisdom and fatherly care for all his subjects. The Emperor lived and reigned in the capital city where all forces of nature were in

harmony. The Chinese considered the capital city the heart of the universe and the center of their country called the Middle Kingdom.

Many members of the Chinese elite took Confucianism seriously and tried to cultivate proper behavior in themselves. They respected patience, compromise, and moderation. They worked hard to emulate role models, sages, and superior men. Because they were judged by their behavior, they felt responsible and could not lose face.

What other beliefs did the Chinese people espouse besides Confucianism?

Taoism

This was a belief system also founded around 500 BC as a response to the chaos in China at that time. Lao Tzu, the founder of Taoism, taught people could learn to live together by following the ways of Nature. If people studied nature closely and observed her ways, they could then try to live spontaneously and naturally within Nature. They thought they should bend like a stalk of bamboo before the wind.

Taoists believed there was a balance in nature evident in the continual interaction of elemental powers - light/dark, winter/summer, good/evil. Taoists thought life energy lay in the continual interaction these forces. The concept of yin/yang was an elaborate explanation of these forces. The Chinese didn't see these forces as opposite, but rather complimentary.

Taoists believed in all sorts of potions to be used as aphrodisiacs, tranquilizers, and longevity potions. This was an elaborate system of cures and beliefs about healing. They ground rhino horns or bear gall bladders into powders and put them into their drinks for potency and stamina.

Taoist beliefs led to an emphasis on food for enjoyment and good health. This emphasis led to the culinary art for which the Chinese are famous. The thousands of dishes full of herbs and spices, cooked energy efficiently with great skill, have delighted generations of people all over the world.

Legalism

This philosophy, also created around 500 BC by Han Fei Tzu as a response to the chaos in China at the time, was a belief that the country had to have a

lot of power in the central government to establish strict laws, strict punishments, and suppress the rebellious. They favored an authoritarian state which had enough power to maintain unity, stability and order. They believed all the people should submit to authority and considered political dissent a high crime.

Folk Religion

The Chinese also have many popular spirits which they value. These are: The Jade emperor, princess of colored clowns, the God of the 5th Hell. They pray to these gods for good health, longevity and happiness. They light candles, visit shrines, make pilgrimages, and honor these gods with many rituals.

Buddhism

Buddhism came from India into China about 400 AD. Merchants along the trade routes sold Buddhist statues and amulets and the Chinese became very interested in adopting Buddhist beliefs. Buddhism introduced monasteries and convents, meditation, yoga, and belief in a cycle of reincarnations until united with Nirvana, the universal soul.

What were the patterns of Chinese trade with peoples of other cultures?

It is known that trade began as early as the Shang dynasty because sea shells from the south China coast and the Malay peninsula have been found in tombs.

The Chinese transported goods across the Silk Road in a relay trade conducted by middlemen who bought and resold goods in a series of short stages without going too far from home. Goods moved through the rugged Kunlun Shan and Tian Shan, mountains and through deserts like the Takla Makan and Gobi. Merchants sold silk lacquer ware, ironware, and spices and the Europeans sold woolen and linen textiles, coral, pearls, statuettes, amber, glass and precious gems. Han China and the Roman Empire were two of the most commercially active empires in the ancient world. The Parthians in-between took a large share as middlemen in the trade. They exported fruit, rare birds, and ostrich eggs.

The Mongols to the north of China were steppe nomads who often plundered China. This forced the Chinese to spend a lot of money and effort protecting their northern border. During the Han dynasty the Chinese began to pay the Mongols to

prevent them from invading. If the nomads invaded anyway, as was often the case, then the Chinese would fight them. If the Chinese won, they would demand payment from the Mongols. Thus arose a system of 2-way payments back and forth – a kind of marketless trade across the frontier. This lasted until the 1800's AD.

What were China's main inventions and contributions to humankind?

Silk, tea, porcelain, paper, printing processes, gunpowder, mariner's compass, playing cards, dominoes, dice, kites, shadow puppets, wall paper, folding umbrella, lacquerware.

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