

China
AP World History
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Recorded history in China begins with the Shang dynasty, in their capital, Anyang. It was during the Shang dynasty that bronze working became common. Thousands of artifacts from the ruins of Yin, the last capital of the Shang, were unearthed in the late 1920s and '30s. Bronze vessels for drinking were used in ritual ceremonies, while bronze chariots and axes were used in battle. As the metal was associated with royalty, the tombs of Shang kings contained hundreds of small bronze objects, even including hairpins.

In addition to bronze, examples of the early Chinese writing system can be found on oracle bones, another type of artifact characteristic to the Shang dynasty. The Chinese script is one of the oldest and most widely used writing systems in the world. It has a history of five or six thousand years, and is used by about one fourth of the total population on earth. Chinese was originally developed as pictographic writing, using pictures for ideas or words. Ancient Chinese priests commonly used tortoise shells and cattle bones to answer questions about the future. They interpreted the cracks formed by holes punched in the bones. Oracle bones also served as a way for the priests to write down the history of the dynasty and the timeline of kings. Oracles written on tortoise shells serve as the earliest evidence of the development of a writing system in China. The use of oracle bones was evidence that the Chinese traditionally believed in divination, which is the art or practice that seeks to foresee or foretell future events or discover hidden knowledge usually by the interpretation of omens or by the aid of supernatural powers, such as consulting your gods or ancestors. Human beings have always looked for the answers to life's great mysteries. Why are we here? Who or what controls our destiny? How does life work? What does the future hold? There is archeological evidence that a need to know and deep spiritual seeking are universal human traits, and that some form of divination has been used since the earliest times, to support this quest. Many cultures, including Chinese, Mayan, Mesopotamian and Indian, looked upwards to heavenly bodies— stars, planets, constellations, eclipses, and comets—not only to tell time and understand the seasons, but also for signs of portent or to decipher divine will. Others paid special attention to terrestrial omens such as animal migrations, weather patterns, and forms of tossed sticks, bones, amulets, or rocks. African tribes have used bones in divination rituals for many thousands of years.

To guard against flooding by the Yangtze and Yellow Rivers, the ancient Shang developed complex forms of irrigation and flood control. The farming of millet, wheat, rice, and barley crops provided the major sources of food, but hunting was not uncommon. Domesticated animals raised by the Shang included pigs, dogs, sheep, oxen, and even silkworms. In order to create irrigation and flood control, a strong centralized government was necessary.

Like many other ancient cultures, the Shang created a social pyramid, with the king at the top, followed by the military nobility, priests, merchants, and farmers. Burials were one way in which the social classes were distinguished. The elite were buried in elaborate pit tombs with various objects of wealth for a possible use in the afterlife. Even an elephant was found among the ruins of an ancient tomb. The people who built these tombs were sometimes buried alive with the dead

royalty. The lesser classes were buried in pits of varying size based on status, while people of the lowest classes were sometimes even tossed down wells.

All of the classes however had one thing in common — religion. The major philosophies to later shape China — Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism — had not yet been formed. Folk religion during the Shang dynasty was polytheistic, meaning the people worshipped many gods.

Ancestor worship was also very important to the Shang. It was thought that the success of crops and the health and well being of people were based on the happiness of dead ancestors. If the ancestors of a family were pleased, life for that family would be prosperous. If the spirits were not pleased however, great tragedies could occur.

The Shang dynasty was conquered by the people of Zhou, who came from farther up the Yellow River in the area of Xi'an in Shaanxi Province. Xi'an eventually became the capital of the Zhou. In the first years of the Zhou dynasty (ca. 1046–256 B.C.E), known as the Western Zhou (ca. 1046–771 B.C.E), the ruling house of Zhou exercised a certain degree of "imperial" power over most of central China. Zhou rulers maintained their power through use of a concept called the "Mandate of Heaven." Zhou kings maintained that the gods gave them the right to rule. This belief was problematic because many also believed that when disaster struck, the disaster was a reflection that the leader had displeased the gods and needed to be replaced. The loss of the Mandate of Heaven was often used as an excuse for other nobles to overthrow the leader. With the move of the capital to Luoyang in 771 B.C.E the power of the Zhou rulers declined and the country divided into a number of nearly autonomous feudal states with nominal allegiance to the emperor. The second phase of the Zhou dynasty, known as the Eastern Zhou (771–256 B.C.E), is subdivided into two periods, the Spring and Autumn period (770–ca. 475 B.C.E) and the Warring States period (ca. 475–221 B.C.E). During the Warring States period, seven major states contended for supreme control of the country, ending with the unification of China under the Qin in 221 B.C.E

Much of what came to constitute China proper was unified for the first time in 221 BCE. In that year the western frontier state of Qin, the most aggressive of the Warring States, subjugated the last of its rival states (Qin is pronounced Ch'in, from which the English China probably derived).

Once the king of Qin consolidated his power, he took the title Shi Huangdi or First Emperor, a formulation previously reserved for deities and the mythological sage-emperors and imposed Qin's centralized, nonhereditary bureaucratic system on his new empire. In subjugating the six other major states of Eastern Zhou, the Qin kings had relied heavily on Legalist scholar-advisers. Centralization, achieved by ruthless methods, was focused on standardizing legal codes and bureaucratic procedures, the forms of writing and coinage and the pattern of thought and scholarship.

To silence criticism of imperial rule, the kings banished, or put to death, many dissenting Confucian scholars confiscating and burning their books. To fend off barbarian intrusion, the fortification walls built by various warring states were connected to make a 5,000-kilometer long wall. What is commonly referred to as the Great Wall is actually four great walls rebuilt or extended during the Western Han, Sui, Jin, and Ming periods rather than a single, continuous wall.

To achieve eternal peace, the emperor started the construction of his tomb, presently known as Terra Cotta Soldiers Tomb, before his death.

A number of public works projects were also undertaken to consolidate and strengthen imperial rule. These activities required enormous levies of manpower and resources, not to mention repressive measures. Revolts broke out as soon as the first Qin emperor died in 210 BCE. His dynasty was extinguished less than twenty years after its triumph.

The imperial system initiated during the Qin dynasty, however, set a pattern that was developed over the next two millennia. The period from 221 BCE to 207 BCE is known as the Qin Dynasty. This dynasty was vigorous but short-lived. It was the first emperor of the dynasty, Qin Shi Huangdi who united the Warring States into an empire.

The outstanding achievement of the Qin was the centralization of Chinese government in a non-feudal, nonhereditary, bureaucratic administration which established a pattern of free farmers throughout China. Weights and measures, coinage, and script were standardized throughout the country. Efforts to control society led to strict censorship and the persecution of philosophers and scholars. The power of the throne was visible in the building of grand palaces and large scale construction projects such as roads, waterways, and the beginning of the Great Wall. Such vast projects were made possible largely through the forced labor of hundreds of thousands of subjects who had been convicted and sentenced for not adhering to the strict rules set forth by the ruling powers. Great armies were built to enforce the policies of centralization.

After a short civil war, a new dynasty, called Han (206 BCE-CE 220), emerged with its capital at Chang'an. The new empire retained much of the Qin administrative structure but retreated a bit from centralized rule by establishing local control in some areas for the sake of political convenience. The Han rulers modified some of the harsher aspects of the previous dynasty;

Confucian ideals of government, out of favor during the Qin period, were adopted by the Han Empire, and Confucian scholars gained prominent status as the core of the civil service.

The most truly unique aspect of Han Chinese culture, and the one with the most powerful legacy, is the Confucian examination system which lasted over two millennia. In order to gain a government position, a person had to take a series of rigorous exams to prove that they were competent to rule. The Chinese examination system, archaic, laborious and daunting as it may have been, was nevertheless, a glorious attempt at intellectual meritocracy or the belief that intellect and ability should qualify people for positions.

The origins of the exam system lie in the Han period, but the early scholarly examinations were consolidated during the Sui period, and began to be truly effective under the Tang Dynasty. Between the Tang period and the late Qing, the civil service examinations dropped out of use for short periods and underwent occasional reform. But the content remained remarkably constant. The core texts consisted of the Four Books and the Five Classics, works attributed to Confucius and certain of his disciples, along with a number of approved commentaries.

Until 1898, the notorious “eight-legged” essay, a rigid traditional format, was the mainstay of the exam papers. Rote learning of the Confucian classics was fundamental to success in the exams. Texts of a total of over 400,000 characters had to be thoroughly memorized if a candidate was to

have any hope of progressing to a civil service position, and even at the district level, the pass rate was only 1 or 2%.

To obtain a government post, a candidate had to pass through several stages, starting with preliminary local exams, and progressing, if successful, through to district, provincial and palace examinations. Exams were held every three years. To obtain a civil service position, a scholar generally required years of study, and could not reasonably expect to do so before he was thirty.

Aristocracy-by-examination had far-reaching consequences. A high degree of national stability was ensured despite changes of emperor and dynasty because the civil service, fueled by the exam system, could continue independently of the imperial regime. The civil examinations provided a conduit for the aspirations of able men from almost any social stratum. While there are a few famous literary instances of women dressing up as men to take the exams, in practice, women were entirely excluded from the system. But amongst men, the exams were generally open to all, with the exception of a few classes.

Under the Han rulers, science and technology made remarkable strides; paper, the compass, and the seismograph were invented; and steel was manufactured. The empire expanded into southern China, northern Vietnam and parts of Korea, and forged trade routes through Central Asia to India and Persia. Confucianism was reinterpreted and adopted as the official state ideology, and a national university was established for the training of Confucian officials. The political unity of the Qin was preserved, but sanctioned by Confucianism so that Chinese of today still look back on this epoch with pride and call themselves "men of Han." Diversity developed within the culture: native and foreign, Confucian and Taoist, courtly and popular.

The Han Dynasty, after which the members of the ethnic majority in China, the "people of Han," are named, was notable also for its military prowess. The empire expanded westward as far as central Asia, making possible relatively secure caravan traffic across Central Asia to Antioch, Baghdad, and Alexandria. The paths of caravan traffic are often called the "silk route" because the route was used to export Chinese silk to the Roman Empire. Chinese armies also invaded and annexed parts of northern Vietnam and northern Korea toward the end of the second century BCE. Han control of peripheral regions was generally insecure, however. To ensure peace with non-Chinese local powers, the Han court developed a mutually beneficial "tributary system". Non-Chinese states were allowed to remain autonomous in exchange for symbolic acceptance of Han overlordship. Tributary ties were confirmed and strengthened through intermarriages at the ruling level and periodic exchanges of gifts and goods.

Disputes among factions, including the families of imperial consorts, contributed to the dissolution of the Western Han empire. A generation later, China flourished again under the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220 CE), which ruled from Luoyang, a new capital farther east in present-day Henan Province. Organized around a north-south axis and covering an area of approximately four square miles, the city was dominated by two enormous palace complexes, each 125 acres and linked by a covered pathway. Ban Chao (32–102 CE), a member of an illustrious literary family, reasserted Chinese control of Central Asia from 73 to 94 CE. Trade, less rigorously controlled than in the first part of the dynasty, expanded, with caravans reaching Luoyang every month.

The Han Dynasty lasted four hundred years. The term "The Han people" comes from the name of this dynasty. (The English term for "China" comes from the name of the previous dynasty Ch'in). The Han dynasty is the East Asian counterpart of and contemporary with Rome in its golden age. During this dynasty, China officially became a Confucian state, prospered domestically, and extended its political and cultural influence over Vietnam, Central Asia, Mongolia, and Korea before finally collapsing under a mixture of domestic and external pressures.