

History

According to Chinese tradition, the Chinese people originated in the Huang He (Hwang Ho or Yellow River) valley. The legends tell of a creator, P'an Ku, who was succeeded by a series of heavenly, terrestrial, and human sovereigns. Archaeological evidence is scant, although remains of *Homo erectus*, found near Beijing, have been dated back 460,000 years. Rice was grown in eastern China circa 5500 bc, and about five centuries later an agricultural society developed in the Huang He valley. There is strong evidence of two so-called pottery cultures, the Yang-shao culture (circa 3950- circa 1700 bc), and the Lung-shan culture (circa 2000- circa 1850 bc).

The Earliest Dynasties

Tradition names the Hsia (circa 1994- circa 1766 bc) as the first hereditary Chinese dynasty, which ended only when a Hsia ruler fell into debauchery, mistreated his people, and was overthrown. However, there is no archaeological record to confirm this story; the Shang is the earliest dynasty for which reliable historical evidence exists.

The Shang Dynasty (C. 1766-c. 1027 BC)

The Shang dynasty ruled the territory of the present-day north-central Chinese provinces of Henan (Ho-nan), Hubei (Hupeh), and Shandong (Shantung) and the northern part of Anhui (An-hui). The capital, from about 1384 bc on, was situated at Anyang near the northern border of Henan. The economy was based on agriculture. Millet, wheat, barley, and, possibly, some rice were grown. Silkworms were cultivated, and pigs, dogs, sheep, and oxen were raised. The Shang was an aristocratic society. At the head was a king who presided over a military nobility. Territorial rulers were appointed by him and compelled to support him in military endeavors. Between this aristocratic class and the commoners was a literate priestly class that kept the records of government and was responsible for divination. Shang people worshiped their ancestors and a multitude of gods, the principal of whom was known as Shang Ti, the Lord on High.

The account of the fall of the Shang dynasty that appears in traditional Chinese histories follows closely the story of the fall of the Hsia. The last Shang monarch, a cruel and debauched tyrant, was overthrown by a vigorous king of Chou, a state in the Wei River valley. Situated on the northwestern fringes of the Shang domain, the culture of Chou was a blend of the basic elements of Shang civilization and certain of the martial traditions characteristic of the non-Chinese peoples to the north and west.

The Chou Dynasty (C. 1027-256 BC)

Chinese civilization was gradually extended over most of China proper north of and including the Yangtze Valley under the Chou dynasty. The broad expanse of this area and the primitive state of overland communications made it impossible for the Chou to exercise direct control over the entire region. They therefore delegated authority to vassals, each of whom ordinarily ruled a walled town and the territory surrounding it. The hierarchy of these feudal-like states was headed by the lord, whose position was hereditary. Below him were hereditary fighting men, and, lowest in the social scale, the peasants and domestic slaves. In time these vassal states became more and more autonomous.

Chou society was organized around agricultural production. The land was ideally divided into square tracts, each of which was subdivided into nine square plots forming an equilateral grid. The eight outer plots were assigned to eight peasant families, who pooled their efforts and resources to cultivate the center plot for the support of the ruling class. The extent to which this system of land distribution was employed is uncertain, but later dynasties thought it the most equitable manner of apportioning land.

Religious practices corresponded to the hierarchical social system. The Chou believed that heaven gave a mandate to rule, which sanctioned the political authority of the kings. The Chou kings sacrificed to the Lord on High, now called T'ien ("Heaven"), and to their ancestors. The lords of the states sacrificed to local nature and agricultural deities, as well as to their ancestors. Individual families offered sacrifices to their ancestors. If sacrifices were neglected, misfortunes and calamities were expected to result.

The Eastern Chou

The Chou kings were able to maintain effective control over their domain until finally, in 770 bc, several of the states rebelled and together with non-Chinese forces routed the Chou from their capital near the site of present-day Xi'an (Sian). Subsequently, the Chou established a new capital to the east, at Loyang. Although they were now safer from barbarian attack, the Eastern Chou could no longer exercise much political or military authority over the vassal states, many of which had grown larger and stronger than the Chou. As custodians of the mandate of heaven, however, the Chou continued the practice of confirming the right of new lords to rule their lands and thus remained titular overlords until the 3d century bc. From the 8th to the 3d century bc rapid economic growth and social change took place against a background of extreme political instability and nearly incessant warfare. During these years China entered the Iron Age. The iron-tipped, ox-drawn plow, together with improved irrigation techniques, brought higher agricultural yields, which, in turn, supported a steady rise in population. The growth in population was accompanied by the production of much new wealth, and a new class of merchants and traders arose. Communication was improved by an increase in horseback riding.

Economic integration enabled rulers to exercise control over greater expanses of territory. States situated on the outer fringes of the Chinese cultural zone expanded at the expense of their less advanced non-Chinese neighbors, and, in expanding, invigorated and diversified their own cultures through selective borrowing from the non-Chinese civilizations. It was from non-Chinese in the northwest, for example, that the Chinese of the border areas first adopted the use of mounted cavalry units. For the states in the heartland of the North China Plain, expansion meant aggression against other states that shared the same basic civilization, and the uniformity of culture among the states tended to promote cultural stagnation. By the 6th century bc seven powerful states surrounded the few smaller, relatively weak ones on the North China Plain.

With the decline of the political authority of the Chou dynasty and the emergence of the powerful peripheral states, interstate relations became increasingly unstable. During the 7th and 6th centuries bc, brief periods of stability were achieved by organizing interstate alliances under the hegemony of the strongest member. By the late 5th century bc, however, the system of alliances had proved untenable, and Chou China was plunged into a condition of interstate anarchy. The era is known as the Period of the Warring States (403-221 bc).

The Golden Age of Chinese Philosophy

The intellectual response to the extreme instability and insecurity produced the political formulas and philosophies that shaped the growth of the Chinese state and civilization during the next two millennia. The earliest and by far the most influential of the philosophers of the period was K'ung Fu-tzu, or Confucius, as he is known in the West. The educated son of a minor aristocratic family of the state of Lu (in present-day Shandong), Confucius represented the emergent class of administrators and advisers that now were needed to help the ruling aristocracy deal with the complicated problems of domestic administration and interstate relations. In essence, Confucius's proposals called for a restoration of the political and social institutions of the early Chou. He believed that the sage rulers of that period had worked to create an ideal society by the example of great personal virtue. Therefore he attempted to create a class of virtuous and cultivated gentlemen who could take over the high positions of government and lead the people through their personal example.

The doctrines of Taoism, the second great school of philosophy during the Period of the Warring States, are set forth in the *Tao-te Ching* (Classic of the Way and Its Virtue), which is attributed to the semihistorical figure Lao-tzu, and in the works of Chuang-tzu (flourished 4th century bc). The Taoists disdained the intricately structured system that the Confucians favored for the cultivation of human virtue and establishment of social order. At the political level Taoism advocated a return to primitive agricultural communities, in which life could follow the most natural course. Government policy should be one of extreme *laissez-faire*, permitting a spontaneous response to nature by the people.

A third school of political thought that flourished during the same period and subsequently exercised a lasting influence on Chinese civilization was legalism. Reasoning that the extreme disorders of their day called for new and drastic measures, the legalists advocated the establishment of a social order based on strict and impersonal laws governing every aspect of human activity. To enforce such a system they desired the establishment of a powerful and wealthy state, in which the ruler would have unquestioned authority. The legalists urged the socialization of capital, establishment of government monopolies, and other economic measures designed to enrich the state, strengthen its military power, and centralize administrative control.

Creation of the Empire

During the 4th century bc, the state of Ch'in, one of the newly emergent peripheral states of the northwest, embarked on a program of administrative, economic, and military reform suggested by a leading legalist theoretician. At the same time the vestigial power of the Chou grew ever weaker until the regime collapsed in 256 bc. A generation later, the Ch'in had subjugated the other warring states.

The Ch'in Dynasty

(221-206 bc). In 221 bc, the king of Ch'in proclaimed himself Shih Huang Ti, or first emperor of the Ch'in dynasty. The name China is derived from this dynasty.

With the assistance of a shrewd legalist minister, the First Emperor welded the loose configuration of quasi-feudal states into an administratively centralized and culturally unified empire. The hereditary aristocracies were abolished and their territories divided into provinces governed by bureaucrats appointed by the emperor. The Ch'in capital, near the present-day city of Xi'an, became the first seat of imperial China. A standardized system of written characters was adopted, and its use was made compulsory throughout the empire. To promote internal trade and economic integration the Ch'in standardized weights and measures, coinage, and axle widths. Private landholding was adopted, and laws and taxation were enforced equally and impersonally. The quest for cultural uniformity led the Ch'in to outlaw the many contending schools of philosophy that had flourished during the late Chou. Only legalism was given official sanction, and in 213 bc the books of all other schools were burned, except for copies held by the Ch'in imperial library.

Shih Huang Ti also attempted to push the perimeter of Chinese civilization far beyond the outer boundaries of the Chou dynasty. In the south his armies marched to the delta of the Red River, in what is now Vietnam. In the southwest the realm was extended to include most of the present-day provinces of Yunnan, Guizhou (Kweichow), and Sichuan (Szechwan). In the northwest his conquests reached as far as Lanzhou (Lanchow) in present-day Gansu (Kansu) Province; and in the

northeast, a portion of what today is Korea acknowledged the superiority of the Ch'in. The center of Chinese civilization, however, remained in the Huang He valley. Aside from the unification and expansion of China, the best-known achievement of the Ch'in was the completion of the Great Wall.

The foreign conquests of the Ch'in and the wall building and other public works were accomplished at an enormous cost of wealth and human life. The ever increasing burden of taxation, military service, and forced labor bred a deep-seated resentment against the Ch'in rule among the common people of the new empire. In addition, the literate classes were alienated by government policies of thought control, particularly the burning of books. The successor of Shih Huang Ti came under the domination of a wily palace eunuch. A power struggle ensued, crippling the central administration, and the indignant population rose in rebellion.

The Earlier Han Dynasty

(206 bc-ad 8). From the turbulence and warfare that marked the last years of the Ch'in dynasty, there arose a rebel leader of humble origin, Liu Pang (see Kao Tsu). Crushing other contenders for the throne, Liu Pang proclaimed himself emperor in 206 bc. The Han dynasty, which he established, was the most durable of the imperial age. The Han built on the unified foundation laid by the Ch'in, modifying the policies that had resulted in the downfall of the Ch'in. Burdensome laws were abrogated, taxes were sharply reduced, and a policy of laissez-faire was adopted in an effort to promote economic recovery. At first Liu Pang granted hereditary kingdoms to some of his allies and relatives, but by the middle of the 2d century bc most of these kingdoms had been eliminated, and almost all Han territory was under direct imperial rule.

One of the most important contributions of the Han was the establishment of Confucianism as the official ideology. In an attempt to provide an all-inclusive ideology of empire, however, the Han incorporated ideas from many other philosophical schools into Confucianism, and employed popular superstitions to augment and elaborate the sparse teachings of Confucius. In staffing the administrative hierarchy inherited from the Ch'in, the Han emperors followed the Confucian principle of appointing men on the basis of merit rather than birth. Written examinations were adopted as a means of determining the best qualified people. In the late 2d century bc an imperial university was established, in which prospective bureaucrats were trained in the five classics of the Confucian school.

The Earlier Han reached the zenith of its power under Emperor Wu Ti, who reigned from 140 to 87 bc. Almost all of what today constitutes China was brought under imperial rule, although many areas, particularly south of the Yangtze, were not thoroughly assimilated. Chinese authority was established in southern Manchuria and northern Korea. In the west, the armies of Wu Ti battled a tribe known as the Hsiung-nu, who were possibly related to the Huns, and penetrated to the valley of

the Jaxartes River (the present-day Syr Darya in Kazakhstan). In the south the island of Hainan was brought under Han control, and colonies were established around the Xi Jiang (Hsi Chiang) delta and in Annam and Korea.

Wu Ti's expansionist policies consumed the financial surpluses that had been accumulated during the laissez-faire administrations of his predecessors and necessitated a restoration of legalist policies to replenish the state treasuries. Taxes were increased, government monopolies revived, and the currency debased. Hardships suffered by the peasants were aggravated by the growth in population, which reduced the size of individual landholdings at a time when taxes were increasing. During the 1st century bc, conditions worsened further. On several occasions the throne was inherited by infants, whose mothers often filled government posts with unqualified members of their own family. Factionalism and incompetence weakened the imperial government. Great landholding families in the provinces challenged the tax-collecting authority of the central government and acquired a kind of tax-exempt status. As the number of tax-free estates grew, the tax base of the government shrank, and the burden borne by the taxpaying peasants became more and more onerous. Agrarian uprisings and banditry reflected popular discontentment.

The Hsin Dynasty

(ad 8-23). During this period of disorder an ambitious courtier, Wang Mang, deposed an infant emperor, for whom he had been acting as regent, and established the short-lived Hsin dynasty. Wang Mang attempted to revitalize the imperial government and relieve the plight of the peasant. He moved against the big tax-free estates by nationalizing all land and redistributing it among the actual cultivators. Slavery was abolished. Imperial monopolies on salt, iron, and coinage were strengthened, and new monopolies were established. The state fixed prices to protect the peasants from unscrupulous merchants and provided low-interest state loans to those needing capital to begin productive enterprises. So great was the resistance of the powerful propertied classes, however, that Wang Mang was forced to repeal his land legislation. The agrarian crisis intensified, and matters were made worse by the breakdown of major North China water-control systems that had been neglected by the fiscally weakened government. A large-scale rebellion broke out in northern China under the leadership of a group known as the Red Eyebrows. They were soon joined by the large landholding families, who finally succeeded in killing Wang Mang and reestablishing the rule of the Han dynasty.

The Later Han

(25-220). Administrative weakness and inefficiency plagued the Later Han dynasty from the very beginning. As under the Earlier Han, the central government became demoralized by the appointment of incompetent maternal relatives of infant emperors. With the help of court eunuchs, subsequent emperors were able to get

rid of these incompetents, but only at the cost of granting equally great influence to the eunuchs. As a result, the government was again torn by factionalism. Between 168 and 170 warfare erupted between the eunuchs and the bureaucrats, who felt that the eunuchs had usurped their rightful position of influence in government. By 184 two great rebellions, led by Taoist religious groups, had also broken out. For two decades the Yellow Turbans, as one of the sects was called, ravaged Shandong and adjacent areas, and not until 215 was the great Han general Ts'ao Ts'ao (155-220) able to pacify the other group, the Five Pecks of Rice Society in Sichuan.

Period of Disunion

The Han Empire began to fall apart as the large landholding families, taking advantage of the weakness of the imperial government, established their own private armies. Finally, in 220 the son of Ts'ao Ts'ao seized the throne and established the Wei dynasty (220-65). Soon, however, leaders with dynastic aspirations sprang up in other parts of the country. The Shu dynasty (221-63) was established in southwestern China, and the Wu dynasty (222-80) in the southeast. The three kingdoms waged incessant warfare against one another. In 265 Ssu-ma Yen (died 290), a powerful general of the Wei dynasty, usurped that throne and established the Western Tsin, or Chin, dynasty (265-317) in North China. By 280 he had reunited the north and south under his rule. Soon after his death in 290, however, the empire began to crumble. One important reason for this internal weakness was the influence of the principal landholding families. They made their power felt through the nine-grade controller system, by which prominent individuals in each administrative area were given the authority to rank local families and individuals in nine grades according to their potential for government service. Because the ranking was arbitrarily decided by a few important persons, it frequently reflected the wishes of the leading families in the area rather than the merit of those being ranked.

The non-Chinese tribes of the north, which the Han had fought to a standstill along the border, seized the opportunity afforded by the weakness of the government to extend their search for pastoral lands into the fertile North China Plain. Invasions began in 304, and by 317 the tribes had wrested North China from the Tsin dynasty. For almost three centuries North China was ruled by one or more non-Chinese dynasties, while the south was ruled by a sequence of four Chinese dynasties, all of which were centered in the area of the present-day city of Nanjing (Nanking). None of the non-Chinese dynasties was able to extend control over the entire North China Plain until 420, when the Northern Wei dynasty (386-534) did so.

During the second half of the 5th century the Northern Wei adopted a policy of Sinification. The agricultural area of North China was administered bureaucratically, as it had been by earlier Chinese dynasties, and military service was imposed on the tribesmen. Chinese-style clothing and customs were adopted, and Chinese was made the official language of the court. The tribal chieftains, pushed beyond their endurance by the Sinification policies, rebelled, and in 534 the dynasty toppled. For

the next 50 years, North China was again ruled by non-Chinese dynasties.

The Reestablished Empire

China was reunited under the rule of the Sui dynasty (589-618). The first Sui emperor was Yang Chien (541-604), a military servant who usurped the throne of the non-Chinese Northern Chou in 581. During the next eight years he completed the conquest of South China and established his capital at Changan (now Xi'an). The Sui revived the centralized administrative system of the Han and reinstated competitive examinations for the selection of officials. Although Confucianism was officially endorsed, Taoism and Buddhism were also acknowledged in formulating a new ideology for the empire. Buddhism, which had been brought to China from India during the Later Han dynasty and the ensuing period of disunion, flourished, as did foreign religious groups such as the Nestorian Christians.

The brief Sui reign was a time of great activity. The Great Wall was repaired at an enormous cost in human life. A canal system, which later formed the Grand Canal, was constructed to carry the rich agricultural produce of the Yangtze delta to Loyang and the north. Chinese control was reasserted over northern Vietnam and, to a limited degree, over the Central Asian tribes to the north and west. A prolonged and costly campaign against a kingdom in southern Manchuria and northern Korea, however, ended in defeat. With its prestige seriously tarnished and its population impoverished, the Sui dynasty fell in 618 to domestic rebels led by Li Yuan (reigned 618-26).

The T'ang Dynasty

(618-906). Founded by Li Yuan, the T'ang dynasty was an era of strength and brilliance unprecedented in the history of Chinese civilization. The system of civil service examinations for recruitment of the bureaucracy was so well refined at that time that its basic form survived into the 20th century. The organs of the imperial and local governments were restructured and amplified to provide a centralized administration, and an elaborate code of administrative and penal law was enacted. The T'ang capital at Changan was a center of culture and religious toleration. Foreign trade was conducted with Central Asia and the West over the caravan routes, and merchants from the Middle East plied their seaborne trade through the port of Guangzhou. Under the T'ang, Chinese influence was extended over Korea, southern Manchuria, and northern Vietnam. In the west, by means of alliances with Central Asian tribes, the T'ang controlled the Tarim Basin and eventually made their influence felt as far as present-day Afghanistan.

Administrative System

The economic and military strength of the T'ang Empire was founded on a system of equal land allotments made to the adult male population. The per capita

agricultural tax paid by the allotment holders was the greatest source of government income, and the periodic militia service required of them was the basis of T'ang military power. Difficulties arose, however, for the government continued to honor tax-free estates and made large grants of land to those whom it favored. As a result of population growth, by the 8th century individual allotment holders inherited greatly reduced plots of land, but the annual per capita tax remained the same. Peasants fled their allotments, thereby reducing government income and depleting the armed forces. Frontier areas could no longer be protected by militia forces. A system of commanderies was established along the borders, and defense was entrusted to non-Chinese troops and commanders.

An Lu-shan's Rebellion

The early T'ang rulers, including the Empress Wu (reigned 683-705), a former imperial concubine, were generally able monarchs. The brilliant emperor Hsüan Tsung (reigned 712-56), however, became enamored of the courtesan Yang Kuei-fei (died 756), a woman much younger than he, and neglected his duties. Yang was allowed to place her friends and relatives in important positions in the government. One of Yang's favorites was the able general An Lu-shan, who quarreled with Yang's brother over control of the government, precipitating a revolt in 755. Peace was not restored until 763 and then only by means of alliances that the T'ang formed with Central Asian tribes. After the rebellion of An Lu-shan, the central government was never again able to control the military commanderies on the frontiers. Some commanderies became hereditary kingdoms and regularly withheld tax returns from the central government. The commandery system spread to other areas of China proper, and by the 9th century the area effectively under central government control was limited to Shaanxi (Shensi) Province.

A great cultural flowering occurred during the later years of the T'ang. The poets Li Po, Tu Fu, and Po Chü-i and the prose master Han Yü (768-824) appeared at a time when the process of political decline had already begun. The printing of books promoted cultural unity.

Back to China

Back to Asia

Problems or comments please email to:
Dr. Robert Crowley (Don Roberto)
Michael Lewis
Juanca Dangond