5 Ancient China to 221 B.C.E.

The people of our race were created by Heaven / Having from the beginning distinctions and rules
Our people cling to customs / And what they admire is seemly behavior. —THE ZHOU BOOK OF SONGS

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Earliest China: The Shang Dynasty (c. 1700–1045 B.C.E.)

The Zhou Dynasty (1045–256 B.C.E.)
- Writing
- Culture and Daily Life Under the Zhou
- Metals, Salt, and Silk

The Confucian and Daoist Philosophies
- Confucianism
- Daoism

Other Rivals
- Legalism
- Moism

The British Library/Heritage-Images/Glow Images, Inc.

ORACLE BONE. Next to agriculture and metallurgy, the development of writing had the greatest impact on the early development of civilizations in Africa, Asia, and southern Europe. In China, on the flat surfaces of bones like this, Shang sages incised the earliest surviving examples of Chinese ideographs. The messages were questions addressed to the gods, and the priests read the answers by examining the patterns of cracks in the bones after hot stones or bronze wands had been pressed against them.

The most stable and in many ways the most successful civilization in history began in China in the second millennium B.C.E. It continued with its essential characteristics intact through many changes in political leadership, meanwhile subjecting an enormous region and many different peoples to "the Chinese way." The Chinese educated classes, who considered themselves the hub of the universe, formed the most cohesive ruling group the world has ever seen. They combined scholarship and artistic sensitivity with great administrative abilities. Most of the classic elements of China's culture were firmly established by about 500 B.C.E.; thereafter they changed only very slowly.

EARLIEST CHINA: THE SHANG DYNASTY (1700–1045 B.C.E.)

Of all the ancient civilizations, China was the most isolated from outside influences—even more so than Egypt. However, Chinese civilization had features that were typical of other early civilizations we have encountered: it rested on an agrarian foundation; it produced a long series of dynastic monarchies; and, bordered by deserts and steppe lands, it endured episodic warfare and invasion from nomadic Turco-Mongolian tribes who inhabited the dry steppe lands to the west and northwest.

The Chinese heartland was divided between the dry Yellow River plain, the western steppe lands, and the better-watered southern valleys. Late Paleolithic Chinese roamed the grasslands of the great Northern Plain, gathering wild varieties of millet. Around 7000–6000 B.C.E. they began creating a village culture along the Yellow River, elevating their villages above the floodplain, often

CHRONOLOGY

c. 2200–c. 1700 B.C.E.
Xia Dynasty

c. 1700–1045 B.C.E.
Shang Dynasty

1045–771 B.C.E.
Western Zhou Dynasty: unified empire, capital at Xian

771–256 B.C.E.
Eastern Zhou Dynasty: new capital at Loyang

551–479 B.C.E.
Life of Confucius

c. 400–221 B.C.E.
Era of the Warring States

enclosing them with ditches or wooden palisades. They developed terracing and irrigation techniques to grow millet, barley, soy, and hemp in the yellow, wind-blown soils called *loess* (LOW-us). Several centers of Neolithic culture would later coalesce to become what we know as Chinese civilization.

Another river basin would play almost as important a role in China's later history: the Yangzi (yahng-tsuh). This great river is much tamer than the Yellow River and runs far to the south, through a warmer and wetter landscape. The exact time and place in which agriculture first appeared in the Far East is disputable, agriculture seems to have appeared earliest in a vast region that spanned most of southern China and Southeast Asia; both agriculture and metalworking apparently originated independently in China. There, non-Chinese peoples hunted pigs and gathered wild varieties of rice that grew in swamplands along the Yangzi and the other rivers that drained the region. Between 10,000 and 7000 B.C.E., settled farm life appeared, and it became the center of wet rice culture in southern China and Southeast Asia. Eventually, the northern Chinese (called the *Han*) conquered the south, and the rice grown along the Yangzi became even more important to their food supply than the millet cultivated in the areas drained by the Yellow River.

Much as in Mesopotamia and the Indus River Valley, the Yellow River's floods were tremendously damaging and had to be controlled by extensive levees, painstakingly erected and maintained. Perhaps, as in these other early civilizations, it was this need to control the floods and to coordinate the labor of thousands in vast construction projects that contributed most toward political unification.

The worship of clan ancestors and nature spirits seems to have been an early feature of Chinese religion. It was this—particularly the need for the ritual appeasement of the ancestors of landowning senior lineages—that ensured that unification and dynastic rule went hand in hand in Neolithic and Bronze Age China. Around 2200 B.C.E., several of the Neolithic cultures along the central course of the Yellow River were drawn into an organized state for the first time (see the inset in Map 5.1). This state was the product of both military conquest and convergence through trade among Bronze Age peoples who came to be ruled by a dynastic monarchy called the *Xia* (shah), about whom little is known.

Following the Xia, around 1700 B.C.E., the **Shang** (shahng) **Dynasty** replaced the villagers' previous political overseers, and its emergence gave rise to two important innovations: more sophisticated bronze casting and the development of writing. Most of what we know of ancient China comes from archaeology rather than from history because Shang writings were limited. Since the 1920s, Chinese and foreign archaeologists have been excavating many rich gravesites. From the elaborate order found among the tomb remains and their contents, we can infer that Shang society was strictly hierarchical. At the top was a powerful king with his warrior court. War was commonplace, and warriors were favored in every way, much as in feudal Europe. Below the warriors were many skilled artisans and a growing class of small traders in the towns. In the countryside lived the great majority—the peasants in their villages.

The early Chinese believed in deities and ancestor spirits who controlled natural forces. Scholars know precious little about the actual gods in whom the peasant classes believed and about their religious activities, but most believed that nature was controllable by the ruler's royal ancestors. Therefore, the key to everyone's welfare was the king's ability to discern his ancestors' will and appease them. To accomplish this, they used *oracle bones*, which provide us with some of the earliest examples of Chinese writing. Questions were written on tortoise shells or the shoulder blades of cattle, and then a heated rod was applied to produce cracks. Ritual specialists known as diviners interpreted their patterns as answers (see p. 54.).

Several fundamental aspects of Chinese life were already visible in the Shang Epoch. Some of these resemble traits that are typical of all early agrarian societies (Chapter 1):

- *The supreme importance of the family; the reverence shown to ancestors and the aged by the young.* The Chinese believe that experience is far more important than theory and that the young must learn from the aged if harmony is to be preserved and progress achieved.
- *The salient responsibility for ensuring general prosperity belongs to the ruler and his household.* The ruler enacts this by performing critical functions of both a secular and a religious nature that are essential to prosperity.

IMAGES OF HISTORY

Early Bronze Ceremonial Ware

This covered "Fangyi" wine vessel from the Shang era (twelfth century B.C.E.) is in several respects typical of articles that were manufactured for ceremonial use. First, such vessels were cast from bronze, and at the time it was made, the metal and the technology needed to make it were both rare and precious. As such, they were made exclusively for the king and members of the royal household, and only for ceremonial or military purposes. Although bronze was made in western and southern Asia, Chinese techniques were considerably more advanced, and articles like this one were of a much higher level of workmanship. There were also certain motifs that were typical of ceremonial containers. This one uses the "taotie," or mask, motif.

Covered ritual "Fang-yi" wine vessel with "Tao-tie" motif, Shang Dynasty (cast bronze with gray patina), Chinese School, (12th century BC) / Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, USA / Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop / Bridgeman Images

On the other hand, the legitimacy of the ruler and the ruling dynasty is tied to their effectiveness in performing these duties.

- *The emphasis on this world.* No other civilization of the ancient world was so secular as China in that the earthly, practical tasks performed by the kings and their government were at least as important as their religious roles.
- *The importance of education, particularly literacy.* No other culture has made the ability to read and write so critical for success. The ancient Chinese written language was extremely complex (it has since been simplified). Years of hard study were required to master it, but once acquired, the skill qualified one for service in the royal state bureaucracy. The production and maintenance of written records gave officials influence through their knowledge of past events and precedents. This would eventually make them both powerful and wealthy.

In the eleventh century B.C.E. the Shang rulers seem to have faced internal conflicts that weakened the dynasty. Somewhat later, they fell to the **Zhou** (joh) **Dynasty**, a related but alien group from farther west. The Zhou would be the longest lasting of all the Chinese ruling dynasties.

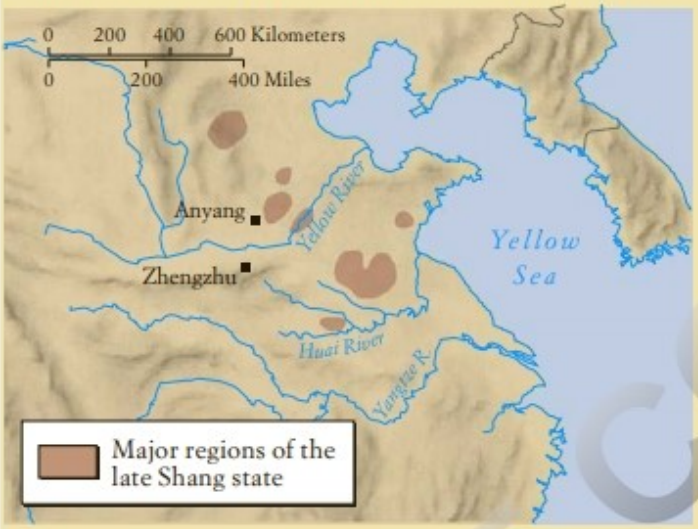
THE ZHOU DYNASTY (1045–256 B.C.E.)

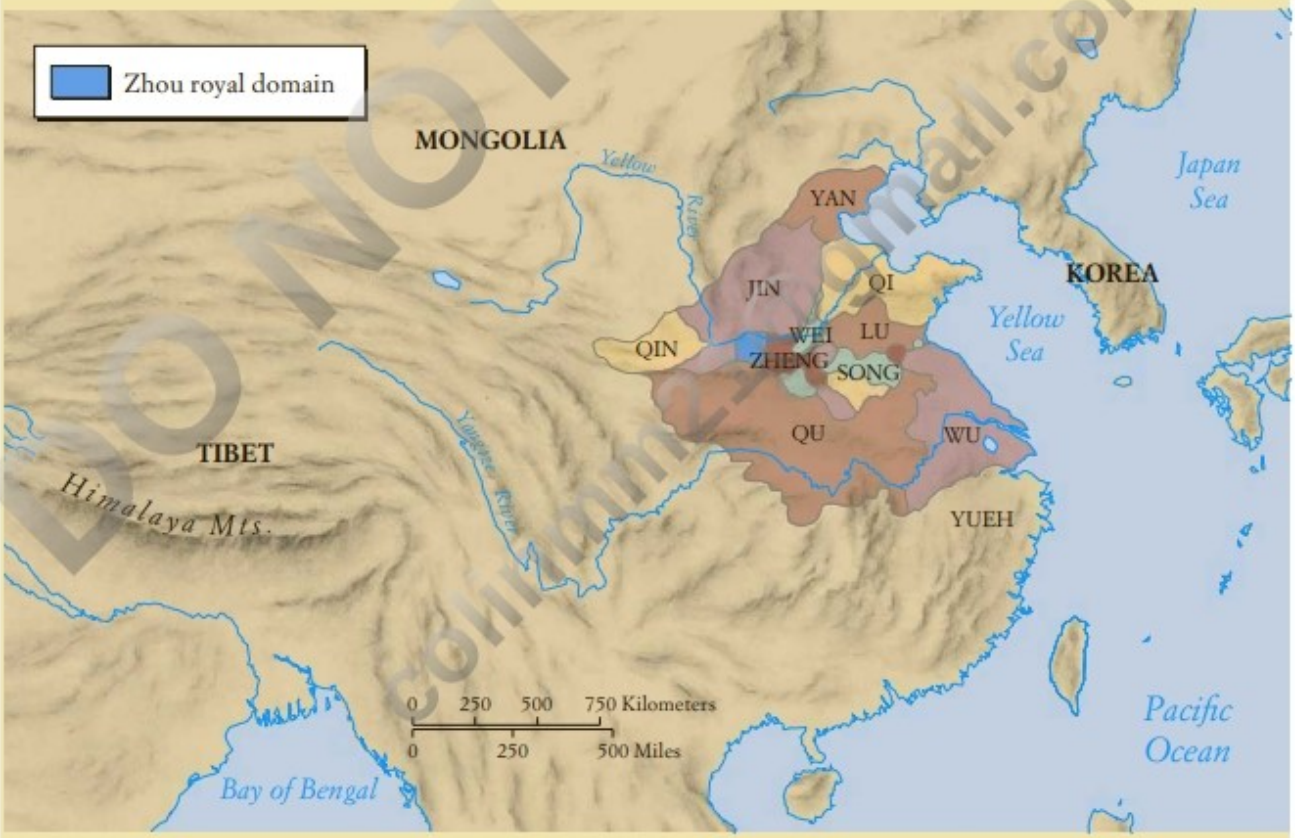
From time to time, pastoralist groups from the north or west succeeded in conquering China's ruling warlords and seating their own tribal leaders in power. The Zhou was the first of a series of ruling dynasties of nomadic origins that came from China's borderlands to the west.

During the eight hundred years that they ruled (at least in name), the Zhou Dynasty greatly extended China's borders. Where the Shang had been content to rule a relatively restricted segment of north-central China on either side of the Yellow River, the Zhou reached out almost to the sea in the east and well into Inner Mongolia in the west. We know much more about the Zhou era than the Shang because an extensive literature survives. Much history was written, and records of all types—from tax rolls to lists of imports and exports—have been found. The dynasty falls into two distinct phases: the unified empire, from 1045 to about 771 B.C.E., and the Later Zhou, from about 771 to 256 B.C.E. The earlier period was the more important. The Later Zhou Dynasty experienced a series of constant provincial revolts until the central government finally broke down altogether, and the last Zhou king was deposed (see Map 5.1).

MAP 5.1 Ancient China

The smaller map shows China during the Shang Dynasty, with the chief areas of Shang civilization located in the North China plain, on either side of the Yellow River. The larger map shows China in the Era of the Warring States. By the 500s B.C.E., the domain of the Zhou Dynasty had become only a minor state surrounded by autonomous principalities.





THINKING ABOUT THIS MAP

Trace the Yangzi and Yellow Rivers and comment on agriculture in the area defined by these waterways.

One of the novelties of the Zhou Period was the idea of the **Mandate of Heaven**. While the Shang kings had made their ancestral cult the focus of state religion, the Zhou worshiped an unchanging, cosmic entity called "Heaven," or **Tian**. In certain respects, Tian resembled the Hindu *karma*—that is, a universal principle of ethical cause and effect. Like karma, Tian functioned as an organic whole that was linked to earthly people and events. It was the "heavenly" vault that covered all things and all peoples of the world. To justify their forcible overthrow of the Shang, the first Zhou rulers developed the idea that heaven gave earthly rulers a mandate to rule justly and well. As long as they did so, they retained the mandate, but it would be taken from them if they betrayed the deities' trust. A king who ruled inefficiently, failed to protect his people from injustice or invaders, or failed to contain internal revolt had betrayed this trust. Thus, if a Chinese ruler fell to a superior force or a successful conspiracy, as did the Shang ruler, it was a sign that he had "lost the mandate" and had to be replaced. This marvelously self-serving theory was highly influential throughout Chinese history.

© China newsphoto/Reuters/Corbis

BATTLE CHARIOT. Horses were domesticated in Central Asia and chariots probably were invented there as well. Both came into use in China during the Shang period, greatly revolutionizing warfare. Chinese archaeologists at Anyang recently excavated burial sites that included both chariots and horses.

The first Zhou kings were powerful rulers who depended mainly on their swords. The royal court employed hundreds of skilled administrators, and here in the Zhou era we see the faint beginning of a professional bureaucracy. China led the world in this development, as in so many others. As the centuries passed, however, power slipped from the monarch's hands and a feudal society developed as the kings delegated more and more of their military and administrative duties to local strongmen. These men stood to gain from the acquisition of new territory, and they did so at every chance. As a result, China expanded, but at the same time the control of the royal government weakened.

By the 500s B.C.E., the local strongmen were in command of much of the empire, and by 400 the central power had broken down completely—one of the few times that has happened in China.

Writing

Like most languages, written Chinese was originally pictographic, but from its origins around 1250 B.C.E. it soon developed a huge vocabulary of signs that had no picture equivalents and were not at all related to the spoken word (that is, they were not alphabetic). These characters are called *logographs*, or "words in signs." Chinese spoken language is monosyllabic (each word has but one syllable), and a single logograph can take the place of as many as several words in other languages, conveying whole descriptions or actions with one sign. Some logographs were derived from common pictorial roots, but others were not connected in any way, which made learning them difficult. All in all, students had to memorize about 5000 logographs to be considered literate. Understandably, literacy was rare, and those who knew how to read and write entered a kind of elite club that carried tremendous prestige.

Although writing emerged considerably later in China than in Mesopotamia or Egypt, it developed quickly and had a richer vocabulary and more conceptual refinement than any other written language before the first century C.E. The earliest writing beyond pictography is found on oracle bones, but by the end of the Shang Period (1045 B.C.E.), histories and stories were being written, and some have been preserved.

Culture and Daily Life Under the Zhou

The greatest artistic achievement of the ancient Chinese was undoubtedly their bronze work. Craftsmen in the late Shang and early Zhou periods turned out a vast array of ritual vessels for use in royal divinations, along with drinking cups, vases, wine vessels, brooches, and medallions, whose technical excellence and artistic grace were stunning. Metal technology in general was advanced in early China. Besides bronze, cast iron and copper were widely used for both tools and weaponry.

The Shang buildings that have been partially unearthed by modern archaeologists are impressive in both size and design. The upper class built large palaces and strong forts around towns such as Anyang and Zhengzhou (juhng-joh), in the middle reaches of the Yellow River plain. The distinctive Chinese architectural style, with tiled, pagoda-type roof lines and diminishing upper stories, was developed at

this time, although it was applied much more elaborately later on. Most modern Chinese art forms have their roots in very early times.

The Zhou era also saw great advances in every area of arts and crafts. Silkworm cultivation and silk weaving have been demonstrated to be an important part of Shang and Zhou culture and trade with foreign states. The famous Silk Road (the caravan route to the Near East and the Black Sea; see Chapter 4) did not yet exist, but regional trade did, and goods flowed between China and its western neighbors. Along China's borders there was great demand for products such as metal and jade wares, salt, and above all, silk that issued from the shops of China's artisans. In exchange for these the Chinese rulers prized the sturdy horses supplied by nomads who wandered the Central Asian steppes.

With China's incessant need to defend itself against the nomads along its borders, the importation of the war chariot from Western Asia led to a technical breakthrough of the first rank: a harness or collar that allowed a horse to pull with the full strength of its shoulders and body without choking. This type of harness transformed the value of horses, not only in warfare but also as beasts of burden. Only much later did other civilizations recognize and copy this fundamental breakthrough.

As for living standards in Zhou China, the evidence we have suggests that peasants were moderately prosperous and rarely enslaved at this time. Although their life was undoubtedly difficult, it was not miserable. Zhou peasants were in more or less the same economic situation as Egyptian peasants: they were sharecropping tenants on the elite's land, with some rights, and at least in the early Zhou years were usually protected from the worst excesses of grasping landlords by a powerful and respected government. In the literary arts, many of the classics that have been taught to Chinese children through the centuries originated in the Zhou era. The earliest surviving books stem from the 800s B.C.E., much earlier than any from other civilized centers. They were written either on strips of specially prepared bamboo strung together with silken cord or on silk scrolls. Professional historians, employed by the court, wrote chronicles of the rulers and their achievements. Poetry made its first appearance in Chinese letters during the early Zhou period, beginning a tradition of sensitive, perceptive nature poetry that continues to the present day. The revered collection called "The Book of Songs" was produced by one or several people during this period and has remained a mainstay of Chinese education ever since. Calligraphy also began at this time, and officials were expected to master this art form as a qualification for office.

Metals, Salt, and Silk

Agriculture was the foundation of royal authority in China, but as elsewhere, manufacturing and trade played important supporting roles. There was little long-distance overland or oceanic trade during the Bronze Age—those materialized during the Qin (chin) and Han periods (Chapter 13)—but the governments of the Shang and Zhou kings tightly regulated or monopolized the manufacture of certain high-demand rare goods. Trade in these items took place throughout the territories over which their rule extended, and even beyond to the lands and peoples of the north and northwest.

Although bronze making had existed for at least 3500 years before 700 B.C.E., until then bronze was still rare enough that, for most practical applications, China retained many Neolithic technologies. Early dynasties like the Shang, the Zhou, and the Qin held sway because they monopolized warfare and public religion. They reached this position by strictly controlling access to the implements of warfare and public ritual—namely weapons (particularly bronze weapons) and ritual objects (see the illustrations of the battle chariot and ceremonial ware). Royal workshops turned out

© SEF/Art Resource, NY

SILK: A WOMAN'S BUSINESS. Throughout history, certain crafts have tended to be gender related. Silk weaving—one of China's most important industries—was women's work, as shown in this Ming-period vase.

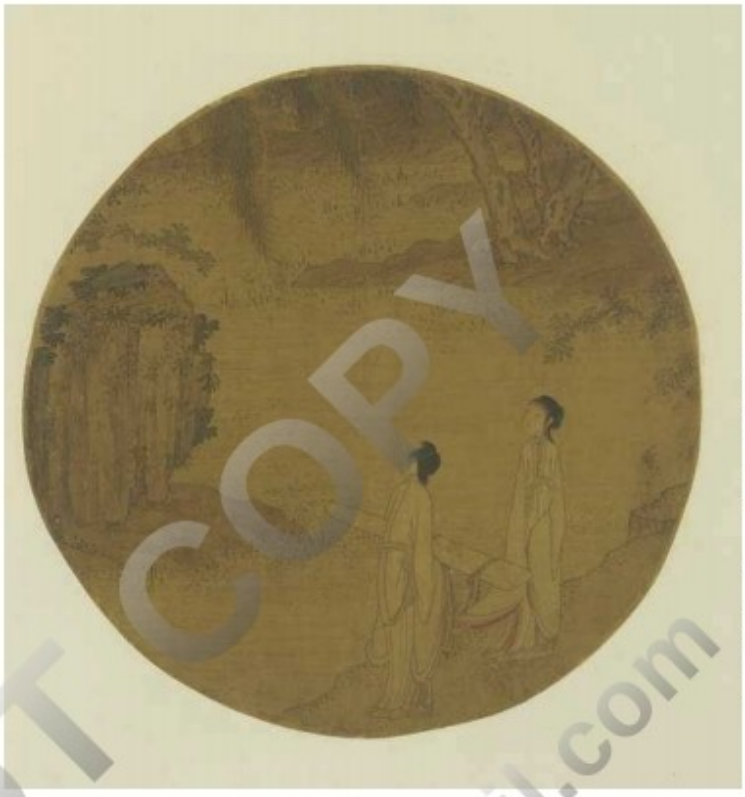
all manner of weaponry, vessels, and statues, and reached an apex of perfection in Shang times. Much of it was produced using the lost method of casting into wax molds, a technique that allowed greater production and more delicacy of form and design than that used in the West, where hammering and forging methods were practiced.

Starting in the sixth century B.C.E., iron came into common use for tools and utensils, as well as for weapons. Iron making produced stronger materials than bronze, but more importantly, once perfected, iron could be produced in far greater quantities than bronze and could be used for tools as well as sacred objects and weapons. The iron plowshare opened up huge areas of northern and central China to agriculture, enabling unprecedented growth—perhaps 400 percent—of both the economy and the population during the Zhou era.

Salt is so basic to modern diets that it is difficult to think of it as a valued commodity—which it was in the ancient world. The high demand for salt made it an obvious target for government control and an important source of revenue for the emperors, who needed the income to support their large armies. There have been estimates that 50 to 80 percent of the emperors' treasuries derived from the salt monopoly. Through China's long run of dynastic rulers, there were periods when the monopoly on salt and metals was relaxed, but so fundamental were these goods to royal authority that these rare exceptions proved the rule.

Yet as central as the place occupied by salt and iron was in its political economy, it is silk that comes to mind when thinking of Imperial China. Woodcarvings of silkworms and weaving apparatus have turned up in excavations of Chinese Neolithic sites, suggesting that the craft had prehistoric beginnings. From its inception it was a craft specifically associated with women: most silk deities were female, for example, and China's queens had the responsibility of successfully enacting state procedures in honor of the goddess of silk weaving. The critical importance of silk weaving is indicated by the fact that it was given ritual honors at the state level. Furthermore, silk itself played a critical role in all public rituals. In conjunction with bronze and jade objects, it was a ubiquitous key element of royal ancestral offerings.

More commonly, of course, silk was prized for its usefulness and beauty. It was an enormously strong, tough fabric that was superior to all others in its ability to hold dyes, so it far outshone all fabrics in popularity wherever it came to the attention of local elites. No Silk Road existed until imperial times (beginning with the First Emperor, Shi Huangdi; see Chapter 13), but by 1000 B.C.E. there already existed some trade with Central Asian nomads to the west. By 500 B.C.E. Central Asian elites were importing silk from China. Developments during the Eastern Zhou period—iron making, a dramatic increase in agricultural production and population, plus the introduction of patterned weaving—no doubt contributed to expanded trade both within China and with the western peoples.



Two women with a qin (zither) (ink and colour on silk), Chinese School, Qing Dynasty (1644–1912)/ Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, USA / Gift of Charles Lang Freer / Bridgeman Images

TWO WOMEN WITH A ZITHER. Before the invention of paper, very early Chinese painting and printing was done on silk.

Demand for silk also increased noticeably when new uses for it were identified during late Zhou times. Scribes and artists found it to be a useful medium for writing and painting, whereas government officials discovered that it was useful as currency to purchase warhorses from nomadic tribes and to pay them bribes when demanded. Kings collected taxes in the form of silk textiles and paid their officials with it. There was little state control over silk production before 221 B.C.E., but in many respects the steadily rising numbers of useful applications, demand, and trade in silk occurring after 1000 B.C.E. created opportunities that later emperors such as Shi Huangdi or Wudi were quick to use to their advantage.

THE CONFUCIAN AND DAOIST PHILOSOPHIES

Confucianism

China's greatest single cultural force, the historical figure Kong Fuzi (551–479 B.C.E.), or **Confucius** (con-FYOO-shus), appeared during the turmoil of the Warring States period,

when China was plagued by chronic conflict and insecurity. Though his teachings initially comprised one of many schools of thought, Confucius molded Chinese patterns of education and his ideas became the authority on what a true Chinese should and should not do. Confucius's interests were practical and centered on the hierarchy of ethical and political relations between individuals—especially between the citizenry and the governor. His ideas shaped China's culture for the next two millennia.

The great model for Confucius's politics was the Chinese family. Among the Chinese, the yin-yang principle identifies the female as the passive element and the male as the active, creative one. All phenomena are a dynamic blend of these two basic forces. Although all civilizations we have studied thus far gave pride of place to the father, none applied this principle so systematically as the Chinese. In ancient China children and grandchildren were meant to accord their fathers absolute obedience, and wives supposedly never raised their voices in contradiction to their husbands. A widow owed the same obedience to her father and sons. This arrangement remained the ideal in modern China before the Communist revolution, although one can question the degree to which it was a reality. (There is no scarcity of reports of independent Chinese wives within the four walls of the home in both traditional and modern times.) Without a doubt, however, the principle of male superiority and female inferiority was promoted and implemented systematically throughout Chinese history.

In Confucius's view the state and society should function like a harmonious family: The father was the undisputed head, each person had his or her special rights and duties, and the wisdom of the aged guided the young. The oldest male was responsible for protecting and guiding the others, who owed him absolute obedience even when he appeared to be wrong.

Confucius insisted on benevolence and righteousness (*ren* and *yi*) as the chief virtues of human society, especially for those serving in public roles. He taught that the rich and the strong should feel a sense of obligation toward the poor and the weak. A gentleman was made, not born. A man of wealth and power might not be a true gentleman, whereas a low-born person could learn to be one. The proper calling of a gentleman was government. He should advise the ruler and see to it that government policies were fair and promoted the general welfare. A ruler who followed the advice of his gentlemanly counselors would surely retain the mandate of Heaven. Confucius was himself a member of the emerging class of professional administrators that would become the true elite of imperial China.

This philosophy of public service by scholarly, virtuous officials was to have enormous influence on China. Rulers came to be judged according to whether they followed the Confucian prescriptions for good government. A corps of officials educated on Confucian principles, subscribing to his values and believing him to be the Great Teacher, came into existence. These *shi*—or **mandarins** (MAN-dah-rihns), as the West later called them—were the actual administrative class of China for 2000 years.

In Confucius's admonition that the state should resemble a well-run family, the rulers naturally tended to see a condemnation of revolt for any reason. In time, many Confucian-trained bureaucrats not only agreed but also came to believe that the status quo was the only natural and proper way of doing things. The insistence that harmony was the chief goal of politics and social policy sometimes led to an emphasis on stability over innovation. Also, like many Chinese, Confucius had a low opinion of people who lived by trade, so the Confucian notion of the ideal society placed merchants at the bottom of the social ladder. Both of these factors led to contempt for the new, a fear of change—however necessary—and a distrust of foreigners. From time to time in China's long history, these tendencies led to acute problems.

Daoism

Daoism (DOW-ism; also called Taoism) is a philosophy centered on nature and following the "Way" (Dao: "dauw"). It was supposedly the product of the teacher-sage **Laozi** (lauw-tsuh), who was purportedly a near contemporary and rival of Confucius but may be entirely legendary. ***Dao de Jing* (*The Way of the Dao*)**, was probably written by his followers much later.

If Confucius stood for the active principle in Chinese philosophy, Daoism is more passive, with a skeptical attitude toward knowledge that meant it was often best to do nothing rather than act on the basis of limited information, and seeing the best government as the least government—providing only a minimum of correction and guidance for those who are inherently unable and unwilling to govern themselves. In so doing the rulers should follow the Way of Nature as it is perceived through meditation and observation. An intelligent man seeks a lifestyle that is in tune with the natural world, a harmony of parts in a serene whole. The excerpt from the *Dao de Jing* in the Framing History: Patterns of Belief feature shows this harmony through paradoxical examples drawn from everyday life. All extremes should be avoided, even those meant to be benevolent. A truly good ruler does little except be; excessive action is as bad as no corrective action at all.

Daoism has taken so many forms through the centuries that it is almost impossible to provide a single description of it. Originally, it was a philosophy of the educated classes, but it eventually also developed as a popular religion with an emphasis on the quest for immortality. Yet for many centuries it was a serious rival of Confucius's ideas and was often adopted by Chinese seeking harmony with the natural world and escape from earthly conflicts. This dichotomy is summed up in the saying that the educated classes were "Confucian in office, Daoist at home." In their rational, public lives they abided by practical Confucian principles of conduct, but in the quiet of their homes, they sought immersion in mysterious, suprarational nature.

FRAMING HISTORY

LAW & GOVERNMENT

Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.)

The most revered of all Chinese statesmen and philosophers was Master Kong, known in the West as Confucius. As a lasting influence on a nation, he has no equal in world history. During his long lifetime, he acquired a devoted group of followers who gave educated Chinese their moral and ethical landmarks for 2000 years. Confucianism has, of course, evolved considerably over the centuries, and no one now knows precisely what the Master's original thoughts may have been. But by reading what his disciples said about him and about their own understanding of his message in ***The Analects***, we can appreciate his greatness and his importance in the life of the Chinese people.

Confucius was born into an impoverished but aristocratic family in the state of Lu at a time when the Zhou Empire was falling apart and the Era of the Warring States was beginning. Given a good education, the young man set out to find a suitable place for himself in the world. His ambition was to acquire a post in the government of his home state, which would allow him to exert a real influence for good and to assist the princely ruler in providing wise and benevolent rule.

Frustrated by the intrigues of his rivals in Lu, where he briefly obtained a post in the ministry of justice, Confucius was forced to seek a position elsewhere. But in the neighboring states, too, he was disappointed in his quest, never securing more than minor and temporary positions before running afoul of backbiting competitors or speaking his mind when doing so was dangerous. He had to return to Lu to earn a modest living as a teacher, and for the rest of his life he subsisted on only the tuition fees of his wealthier students.

Confucius accepted this fate with difficulty. For many years he continued to hope for appointment as an adviser to the prince and thus to translate his beliefs into government policy. Only gradually did he realize that through his teaching he could have more influence on the fate of his people than he might ever attain as a minister to a trivial and corrupt ruler. By the end of his life, his fame had already reached much of China's small educated class (*shi*), and his students were going out to found schools of their own, reflecting the principles the Master had taught them.

Confucius taught that all human affairs, public and private, were structured by the **Five Great Relationships**: father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger brother, ruler and subject, and friend and friend. The fact that three of these relationships are within the family circle shows the Confucian emphasis on the family. He believed it to be the model and building block of all other social or political arrangements. This emphasis continues in Chinese life to this day.

Confucius was not so much an original thinker as a man with a great ability to summarize and reformulate truths already embraced by his people. He did not attempt a complete philosophical system and was not at all interested in theology or what is now called *metaphysics*. Rather, his focus was always on the relationship of human being to human being, and especially of governor to governed. He was an eminently secular thinker, and this tradition, too, has continued among educated Chinese to the present.

Two of the sayings attributed to him in the collection of his teachings called *The Analects* give the flavor of his instruction:

> Ziguang [a disciple] asked about government.
>
> Confucius said: "Sufficient food, sufficient armament, and sufficient confidence of the people are the necessities." "Forced to give up one, which would you abandon first?" "I would abandon armament." "Forced to give up one of the remaining two, which would you abandon?" "I would abandon food. There has always been death from famine, but no state can exist without the confidence of its people."

The Master always emphasized the necessity of the ruler setting a good example:

> Replying to Ji Gangze who had asked him about the nature of good government, Confucius said, "To govern is to rectify. If you lead the people by virtue of rectifying yourself, who will dare not be rectified by you?"

FPG/The Image Bank/Getty Images

PORTRAIT OF CONFUCIUS. This undated illustration, much like other depictions of Confucius made after his death, was based on a relief from the stela in the Bei Lin (Forest of Stelae) in Xian.

ANALYZE AND INTERPRET

After a generation of contemptuous treatment and proscription, the Chinese Communist government has recently allowed the reintroduction of Confucian teaching and commentary in schools. Why do you think this has happened? Do you think Confucius has anything to say to modern people?

FRAMING HISTORY

PATTERNS OF BELIEF

Dao de Jing of Laozi

Confucian philosophy was by no means universally accepted in ancient China. It had to overcome several rival points of view among the educated class and was only partly successful in doing so. Among the ordinary people, Daoism was always stronger because it lent itself more readily to personal interpretation and to the rampant superstitions of the illiterate populace. It drew many of its principles from close observation of nature, emphasizing the necessity of bringing one's life into harmony with nature. Rather than the illusions of well-bred Confucians or the brutality of the Legalists, the followers of the Way sought serenity through acceptance of what is.

The *Dao de Jing*, or *The Way of the Dao*, is a collection of sayings attributed to Laozi, who supposedly lived in the sixth century B.C.E. Like much Chinese philosophy, the essence of the *Dao de Jing* is the search for balance between opposites, between the yin and yang principles. Unlike Confucianism, Daoism puts little faith in reason and foresight as the way to happiness. Instead, it urges its followers to accept the mystery of life and stop striving for a false mastery. It delights in formulating its truths as paradoxes.

Chapter II

It is because everyone under Heaven recognizes beauty as beauty that the idea of ugliness exists.

And equally, if everyone recognized virtue as virtue, this would create fresh conceptions of wickedness.

For truly Being and Non-Being grow out of one another; Difficult and Easy complete one another; Long and Short test one another; High and Low determine one another.

The sounds of instruments and voice give harmony to one another.

Front and Back give sequence to one another.

Therefore the Sage relies on actionless activity, Carries on wordless teaching....

Chapter IV

The Way is like an empty vessel, That yet may be drawn from Without ever needing to be filled.

It is bottomless; the very progenitor of all things in the world.

In it is all sharpness blunted, All tangles untied, All glare tempered, All dust smoothed.

It is like a deep pool that never dries.

Was it, too, the child of something else? We cannot tell.

Chapter IX

Stretch a bow to the very full, And you will wish you had stopped in time; Temper a sword edge to its very sharpest, And you will find that it soon grows dull.

When bronze and jade fill your halls It can no longer be guarded.

Wealth and position breed insolence That brings ruin in its train.

When your work is done, then withdraw!

Such is Heaven's Way.

Chapter XI

We put thirty spokes together and call it a wheel; But it is on the space where there is nothing that the utility of the wheel depends.

We turn clay to make a vessel; But it is on the space where there is nothing that the utility of the vessel depends.

We pierce doors and windows to make a house; But it is on these spaces where there is nothing that the utility of the house depends.

Therefore, just as we take advantage of what is, we should recognize the utility of what is not.

ANALYZE AND INTERPRET

What application of Daoist thought can you find in your own experiences? Does the paradox of saying that doors and windows can be appreciated only if one keeps in mind the walls of the house strike you as truthful? As memorable?

Source: *The Way and Its Power: A Study of the Dao de Qing*, ed. and trans. A. Waley. © 1934.

OTHER RIVALS

In the later Zhou Period, sometimes also called the **Hundred Schools Period**, many rival philosophies arose to challenge Confucian views. Only Daoism was as successful in capturing the permanent allegiance of the educated classes, but two others were repeatedly seized upon as alternatives or necessary additions to the teachings of the Great Teachers.

Legalism

Legalism was more a philosophy of government than a philosophy of private life. It was popularized during the **Era of the Warring States** (c. 400–221 B.C.E.), between the collapse of central Zhou dynastic authority (around 400 B.C.E.) and the rise of the Qin emperor in the 220s (see Chapter 13). The general breakdown of authority that characterized this period provided the motivation for Legalist ideas.

The Legalists believed that most people were inclined to evil selfishness and that it was the task of government to restrain them and simultaneously guide them toward a well-ordered society. This was to be accomplished through the use of a system of rewards and punishments, administered through a code of laws that were public and were to be impartially enforced for all subjects. Many aspects of legalist thought and practice were very modern and rational, but the system lacked a mechanism for restraining the actions of the ruler, and this eventually led to its eclipse by the ethical order of Confucianism. Legalist forms of administrative organization, however, persisted within the Imperial state throughout its long history.

Moism

For over two centuries, the philosophy taught by Mozi (moh-tsuh; c. 470–390 B.C.E.) was a serious rival to the other three major schools of Chinese thought. Mozi, after whom this school was named, propounded a doctrine of universal love as a solution to the chaos of the Warring States period. Mozi intended this as an intellectual repudiation of Confucius's ideas about the primacy of family relations—ideas that he thought undermined the ideal of social equality. Mozi instead expounded a doctrine that closely resembled the Judeo-Christian golden rule: that people should treat one another as they themselves wished to be treated. As a practical consequence, his followers developed a military science that emphasized the use of defensive tactics as a way of ending chronic warfare. For several centuries, such tactics were in high demand among smaller, weaker states that were threatened by more powerful neighbors, but once the First Qin ruler, Shi Huangdi, restored order and established the first empire, they and Moist philosophy quickly lost favor.

SUMMARY

The civilization of China originated in the Neolithic villages of the northern plains near the Yellow River late in the third millennium B.C.E. Under the first historical dynasties of the Xia, the Shang, and the Zhou, this agrarian civilization displayed certain characteristics that marked China for many centuries to come: reverence for ancestors, the tremendous importance of the family, and the prestige of the educated and of the written word. Fine arts and literature were cultivated in forms that persisted: bronze ware, ceramics, silk, historical literature, and nature poetry.

The Shang dynasts were a warrior elite who took over the village folk as their subjects in the eighteenth century B.C.E. What we know of them comes almost entirely from a smattering of oracular fragments and archaeology carried out in recent times. They were succeeded after several centuries by another warrior group called the Zhou, which established perhaps the most influential of all Chinese dynasties in the realm of culture. The arts flourished, and the limits of the state expanded greatly. Gradually, however, the power necessary to hold this vast realm together escaped from the dynastic rulers and flowed to the provincial strongmen.

The breakdown of central government that ended the long Zhou Dynasty and introduced the Era of the Warring States demanded further definition of basic values. In response, many schools of practical philosophy arose during the Warring States period, between 500 and 250 B.C.E. Most influential were Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism, whereas a fourth, Moism, quickly faded once order was restored. Of these, the most significant for Chinese history over the next 2000 years were the rationalist and pragmatic thought of Confucius and the passive, minimalist views of Laozi.

KEY TERMS

The Analects
Confucius
Dao de Jing (*The Way of the Dao*)
Era of the Warring States
Five Great Relationships
Hundred Schools Period
Laozi
Legalism
mandarins
Mandate of Heaven
Shang Dynasty
Tian
Zhou Dynasty

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. In what ways did the early development of Chinese civilization resemble those of other civilizations we have explored in this unit of the book? What seems to have been unique to early China?
2. How do you account for China's rapid development of new technologies? How did this compare with other civilizations?
3. Why do you suppose there was a particular emphasis on the worship of royal ancestors in the first two dynasties? What importance did these ancestors have for the average peasant farmer?
4. How do you think it is possible for many Chinese to adhere to the teachings of both Confucianism and Daoism?