

Chapter 5: Ancient China to 221 B.C.E.: 5-5 Chapter Review
Book Title: World Civilizations
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5-5 Chapter Review

5-5a 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.

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