

CHINESE DYNASTIES

Chinese history contains periods of growth and prosperity separated by violent revolution and ongoing warfare. Each dynasty has left its mark on the country and defines not just a particular time or a family of rulers, but a cultural period which affected all of Chinese life from art and philosophy to agriculture and the development of the feudal system. Even today, Chinese refer to historical events not by their date but by the dynasty in which they took place.

Dynasty

Characteristics and History

Xia or Hsia

c.2205–

c.1766 B.C.E.

Semi-legendary Emperor Yu built irrigation channels, reclaimed land. Bronze weapons, chariots, domestic animals used. Wheat, millet cultivated. First use of written symbols.

The Xia dynasty was essentially agrarian and pre-literary—still some debate about whether Xia can be regarded as a dynasty or as a bridge between China's neolithic cultures and the beginning of the Shang dynasty.

Shang

c.1766–

c.1122 B.C.E.

First historic dynasty. Complex agricultural society with a bureaucracy and defined social classes. Well-developed writing, first Chinese calendar. Great age of bronze casting.

Zhou

c.1100–256

B.C.E.

Classical age despite political disorder. Written laws, money economy.

Iron implements and ox-drawn plow in use. Leaders' authority derived from the 'mandate of heaven': as long as the ruler, the 'Son of Heaven,' was just and fulfilled his sacred duties, the mandate would be maintained; tyranny however would result in the mandate being withdrawn and the ruler overthrown.

It was during the Zhou dynasty that Chinese ideas of morality and just rule were first written. This was the period of Confucius and his follower Mencius, the rise of Daoism and the concept of harmony expressed in the balance of *yin* and *yang*.

Followed by Warring States period, 480–221 B.C.E.

Qin or Ch'in

221–206

B.C.E.

Zhou rulers had made it a policy to decentralize power, creating a network of powerful lords who first overthrew the Zhou ruler and then competed for the throne. The winner was Shi Huangdi. The self-proclaimed first emperor not only unified China, but went about standardizing writing, weights, and measures throughout his kingdom. This was used to promote internal trade among the newly acquired states.

During this time, many schools of thought were outlawed; only Legalism was given official sanction → The only way for emperor to keep his nation together was to have all his subjects think the same way. Any deviation would throw China back to the hundreds of years of warring.

The Qin empire was vast: pushed China's borders south to current-day Vietnam and north to current-day Korea. But the central kingdom was still in the Yellow River Valley. Regardless, of all the accomplishments of the Qin, the best known is the Great Wall of China.

Written language standardized.

Roads, canals, much of the [Great Wall](#) built.

<p>Han 202 B.C.E.– 220 C.E.</p>	<p>Unification furthered, but harshness lessened and Confucianism made basis for bureaucratic state. One of important contributions of the Han was the establishment of Confucianism as the official ideology over Legalism. Confucianism was not the pure studies of Confucius, but a conglomeration of various other philosophies and superstitions to augment the complex and sparse teachings of Confucius. This changed the way that the empire was run: Before, emperors appointed people to positions regardless of their competence. Now, the emperors chose the people they thought were the best suited for the job based on merit. Written examinations were used to identify the best qualified people for the job → an imperial university was established to teach students the five classics of the Confucian school to prepare them to become bureaucrats. Buddhism introduced. Encyclopedic history, dictionary compiled; porcelain produced.</p>
<p>Three Kingdoms 220–265</p>	<p>The end of the Han dynasty was marked by the separation of the large families of that dynasty. The families took advantage of the weakened state of the government and started to establish their own private armies. Division into three states: Wei, Shu, Wu. Wei gradually dominant. Confucianism eclipsed; increased importance of Taoism and Buddhism. Many scientific advances adopted from India.</p>
<p>Jin or Chin 265–420</p>	<p>Founded by a Wei general; gradual expansion to the southeast. Series of barbarian dynasties ruled N China. Continued growth of Buddhism.</p>
<p>Sui 581–618</p>	<p>Reunification; centralized government reestablished. Even though Confucianism was officially endorsed, Taoism and Buddhism were acknowledged in formulating a new ideology for the empire. During this time, Buddhism flourished. Great Wall refortified; canal system established.</p>
<p>Tang 618–907</p>	<p>The Tang dynasty is regarded as the highest point of Chinese civilization. The country was at its largest and wealthiest. Its new-found confidence was reflected particularly in its art and literature. Porcelain became more refined; poetry reached its peak and poems written during the period are still quoted by Chinese today. During the Tang dynasty, Buddhism declined, and Confucianism became more popular. Even though Buddhism was at its peak during the early Tang dynasty, many of the Tang officials were of the Confucian discipline and regarded Buddhism as a disruptive force in China. So, in 845, the Tang emperor started a full-scale persecution of Buddhists. More than 4600 monasteries and 40,000 temples and shrines were destroyed. Other religious groups were also brought under government control. Civil service examinations based on Confucianism.</p>
<p>Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms 907–960</p>	<p>Period of warfare, official corruption, general hardship. Widespread development of printing; paper money first printed.</p>

Song or Sung 960–1279	<p>Period of great social and intellectual change: Neo-Confucianism attains supremacy over Taoism and Buddhism; central bureaucracy reestablished.</p> <p>Widespread cultivation of tea and cotton; gunpowder first used militarily. This was also the golden age of Chinese painting.</p> <p>Militarily however, the Song empire remained weak, preferring diplomacy to warfare. In 1125, the empire was overrun by the Jin, forcing the emperor to flee south. In 1275, China fell to the Mongols.</p>
Yüan 1271–1368	<p><u>Mongol</u> dynasty founded by <u>Kublai Khan</u>.</p> <p>The Mongols brought China a very different culture. They excluded Chinese from government and placed restrictions on trade. Confucian ideals discouraged → Intellectuals who would previously have been called to the court or made officials turned to the arts and in particular to Chinese opera which flourished even under Mongol censorship. But while drama developed, China regressed. State revenues shrunk, canal building sucked up money and the country grew poorer. This was the China that Marco Polo found when he arrived on the Silk Road.</p> <p>Growing contact with West. Many missionaries and merchants influenced the Chinese. The most notable foreigner that visited during this time was Marco Polo.</p> <p>Revolts in Mongolia and S China end dynasty.</p>
Ming 1368–1644	<p>Mongols expelled.</p> <p>Confucianism, civil service examinations, reinstated.</p> <p>Ming power was great → started to re-establish a tribute among the non-Chinese states of East Asia. This tribute required that these states acknowledge the moral and cultural supremacy of the Chinese. In the first quarter of the 15th century, the Ming had decisively defeated the Mongol tribes.</p> <p>This was also a period of naval exploration, at least for a while. Chinese ships reached Africa and maritime Asian nations arrived with tribute. These foreign contacts however, were short-lived and China retreated into itself, convinced that it needed nothing from the outside world.</p> <p>Contact with European traders, missionaries: the Portuguese and Dutch had trading posts or settlements in China; Jesuit missionaries came to spread the Christian faith and western scientific knowledge. But the Jesuits were unable to implant either Christian thought or western scientific knowledge in the Chinese court.</p> <p>Porcelain, architecture, the novel and drama flourish (helped by the expansion of wood-block printing).</p>
Qing or Ch'ing or Manchu 1644–1912	<p>2nd foreign dynasty to rule China—Unlike the Mongols however, the Manchu adopted Chinese dress and customs. Neo-Confucianism was made the official doctrine, demanding loyalty to the emperor, but Chinese culture was preserved and Chinese were excluded only from the very senior court positions.</p> <p>Increasing European trade → foreign powers divide China into spheres of influence → <u>Opium War</u>; <u>Hong Kong</u> ceded; <u>Boxer Uprising</u> → Last Chinese monarchy.</p>