

## Classical China

Chinese history is divided into periods based on the dynasty, or ruling family, that controlled China at the time. Classical China is marked by 3 main dynasties.

### Zhou Dynasty: 1027BC -221BC

The major contribution of the Zhou Dynasty was the idea of “**The Mandate of Heaven**,” which they used to justify their rule over China. This idea is still an important part of Chinese ideas on government. The Zhou defined the king as the link between heaven and earth. You can see this idea in the Chinese character for lord:

主

This character consists of three horizontal lines joined by a vertical line. This represents the connection between heaven (at the top) and the earth (at the bottom). The emperor (the center horizontal line) connects them together. According to the Mandate of Heaven, Heaven desires that humans be provided for in all their needs, and the emperor is appointed by heaven to see to the welfare of the people. If the emperor or king becomes corrupt and fails to see to the welfare of the people, then heaven withdraws its mandate and sends floods, riots, and revolts to overthrow him. Heaven then chooses a morally pure ruler to take their place. The Mandate of Heaven supported the **dynastic cycle** in China. As dynasties fell and were replaced, the new dynasty always argued that they now possessed the Mandate of Heaven.

The Mandate of Heaven is probably the most important social and political concept in Chinese culture. It explains historical change, but also provides a profound moral theory of government that is based on the selfless dedication of the ruler to the benefit of the people. The concept also envisions Heaven as a force focused on morality. It is this moral aspect of Heaven and the "Mandate of Heaven," which was to affect the general tendency of Chinese culture and philosophy to focus on moral and social issues.

The final major achievement that happened during the Zhou Dynasty was a result of their decline. After 800 years of rule, the Zhou Dynasty began to face many upheavals and rebellions. During this chaos, China's major philosophies were created. Confucius created Confucianism as a way to restore order. Confucius believed that society revolved around 5 basic relationships people have with one another:

1. ruler and subject
2. parent and child
3. husband and wife
4. older sibling and younger sibling
5. older friend and younger friend.

All of these relationships involved a set of defined roles and mutual obligations that people should follow. Confucius believed these relationships would be harmonious if the lower person in each relationship were loyal, courteous, honest, faithful and obedient to those in authority above them. The higher person in each relationship had a duty to protect the lower person and show them how to live morally. Confucianism taught, for example that harmony in the family would result from a child showing absolute respect to the parent's authority. Confucius also believed that if the ruler lived according to strong virtues, then the ruler's subjects would follow his or her example and a harmonious, stable society would be possible. The Chinese practice **filial respect**, showing great obedience to one's parents, due to their Confucian culture.

## The Qin Dynasty: 221BC – 206BC

The next dynasty to rule over China was the Qin Dynasty. The Qin Dynasty developed the idea that countries needed a **VERY** strong central government. The Qin dynasty did not believe in Confucian ideas that people just needed a strong role model to follow. They followed a different philosophy called **Legalism**, which believed that people were selfish and cruel and needed a **POWERFUL** government with harsh laws and punishments to keep them in line. The penalty for any sort of corruption was death. Even people who taught outlawed ideas like Confucianism would be killed. Legalism also said that the government should have a strong military and tightly control the economy and the lives of the people. As a result, the Qin Dynasty grew powerful and wealthy in a very short time.

One of the Qin's major achievements was to begin the **Great Wall of China**. The Qin were wrestling with invasions from the north by nomadic peoples who were very good at fighting on horse. So the Qin emperor initiated a forced building project – where he required citizens to build a series of fortifications to defend against these invaders.

For all their power, the Qin Dynasty did not last too long. In addition to their forced labor to build the Great Wall, they also had many forced labor projects to build a network of roads and canals to unite China closer together. All this forced labor in addition to the harsh laws influenced by **Legalism** led to many rebellions. Although the Qin had united China under one government more strongly than it had ever been, it lasted barely a generation.

## The Han Dynasty: 206BC – 220AD

The last dynasty to unite China during the Classical time period was the Han Dynasty, who ruled for over 400 years. The Han Dynasty created many cultural achievements. During their reign, the Chinese invented the process to make **paper**. They also invented a process to make utensils and vases out of a type of ceramic called **porcelain**. And they advanced **silk** weaving methods to make better cloth. These goods made China an important part of world trade. The Han Dynasty established trade routes known as the **Silk Road** – where merchants travelled between China and the Roman Empire selling goods. This trade route – running between the Mediterranean Sea all the way to China – also spread and exchanged Western culture and ideas with Asian ones. Because India was in the middle of the Silk Road, Buddhism was able to spread out from India into the rest of Asia more easily along these trade routes. The played a vital role in the cultural diffusion occurring in this time as ideas and innovations were able to spread throughout the Classical World.

Politically, the Han Dynasty also contributed a major new idea for government. In Han government, the emperor was the supreme ruler with absolute authority. However, all civilizations also have officials and bureaucrats beneath the ruler who actually carry out the day-to-day tasks of running the government. Before the Han Dynasty, high officials would be chosen based on birth – nobles would choose one another to rule the government. This all changed when the Han Dynasty adopted **Confucianism** as their state philosophy. Confucianism said that government should be in the hands of moral people, who would set good examples for people to follow. And since morality can be taught, the Han Dynasty believed that only people who were educated in morality should rule. So the Han Dynasty created **civil service exams** – people who wished to enter government had to study Confucian books and how to be a good person. Only people, both noble and commoner, who passed these tests would be chosen for government. Instead of being chosen for government service by birth, the Han Dynasty created a brand new idea: **rule by merit**.

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