

The Ancient Dynasties

Chinese civilization, as described in mythology, begins with Pangu, the creator of the universe, and a succession of legendary sage-emperors and culture heroes (among them are Huang Di, Yao, and Shun) who taught the ancient Chinese to communicate and to find sustenance, clothing, and shelter.

The first prehistoric dynasty is said to be Xia, from about the twenty-first to the sixteenth century B.C. Until scientific excavations were made at early bronze-age sites at Anyang, Henan Province, in 1928, it was difficult to separate myth from reality in regard to the Xia. But since then, and especially in the 1960s and 1970s, archaeologists have uncovered urban sites, bronze implements, and tombs that point to the existence of Xia civilization in the same locations cited in ancient Chinese historical texts. At minimum, the Xia period marked an evolutionary stage between the late neolithic cultures and the typical Chinese urban civilization of the Shang dynasty.

The Dawn of History Thousands of archaeological finds in the Huang He, Henan Valley --the apparent cradle of Chinese civilization--provide evidence about the Shang dynasty, which endured roughly from 1700 to 1027 B.C. The Shang dynasty (also called the Yin dynasty in its later stages) is believed to have been founded by a rebel leader who overthrew the last Xia ruler. Its civilization was based on agriculture, augmented by hunting and animal husbandry. Two important events of the period were the development of a writing system, as revealed in archaic Chinese inscriptions found on tortoise shells and flat cattle bones (commonly called oracle bones or, and the use of bronze metallurgy. A number of ceremonial bronze vessels with inscriptions date from the Shang period; the workmanship on the bronzes attests to a high level of civilization.

A line of hereditary Shang kings ruled over much of northern China, and Shang troops fought frequent wars with neighboring settlements and nomadic herdsmen from the inner Asian steppes. The capitals, one of which was at the site of the modern city of Anyang, were centers of glittering court life. Court rituals to propitiate spirits and to honor sacred ancestors were highly developed. In addition to his secular position, the king was the head of the ancestor- and spirit-worship cult. Evidence from the royal tombs indicates that royal personages were buried with articles of value, presumably for use in the afterlife. Perhaps for the same reason, hundreds of commoners, who may

have been slaves, were buried alive with the royal corpse.

The Zhou Period The last Shang ruler, a despot according to standard Chinese accounts, was overthrown by a chieftain of a frontier tribe called Zhou, which had settled in the Wei Valley in modern Shaanxi Province. The Zhou dynasty had its capital at Hao, near the city of ~Xi'an, or Chang'an, as it was known in its heyday in the imperial period. Sharing the language and culture of the Shang, the early Zhou rulers, through conquest and colonization, gradually sinicized, that is, extended Shang culture through much of China Proper north of the Chang Jiang (or Yangtze River). The Zhou dynasty lasted longer than any other, from 1027 to 221 B.C. It was philosophers of this period who first enunciated the doctrine of the "mandate of heaven" (tianming or), the notion that the ruler (the "son of heaven" or) governed by divine right but that his dethronement would prove that he had lost the mandate. The doctrine explained and justified the demise of the two earlier dynasties and at the same time supported the legitimacy of present and future rulers.

The term feudal has often been applied to the Zhou period because the Zhou's early decentralized rule invites comparison with medieval rule in Europe. At most, however, the early Zhou system was proto-feudal, being a more sophisticated version of earlier tribal organization, in which effective control depended more on familial ties than on feudal legal bonds. Whatever feudal elements there may have been decreased as time went on.

The Zhou amalgam of city-states became progressively centralized and established increasingly impersonal political and economic institutions. These developments, which probably occurred in the latter Zhou period, were manifested in greater central control over local governments and a more routinized agricultural taxation.

In 771 B.C. the Zhou court was sacked, and its king was killed by invading barbarians who were allied with rebel lords. The capital was moved eastward to Luoyang in present-day Henan Province. Because of this shift, historians divide the Zhou era into Western Zhou (1027-771 B.C.) and Eastern Zhou (770-221 B.C.). With the royal line broken, the power of the Zhou court gradually diminished; the fragmentation of the kingdom accelerated. Eastern Zhou divides into two sub-periods. The first, from 770 to 476 B.C., is called the Spring and Autumn Period, after a famous historical chronicle of the time; the second is known as the Warring States Period (475-221 B.C.).

The Hundred Schools of Thought

The Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, though marked by disunity and civil strife, witnessed an unprecedented era of cultural prosperity--the "golden age" of China. The atmosphere of reform and new ideas was attributed to the struggle for survival among warring regional lords who competed in building strong and loyal armies and in increasing economic production to ensure a broader base for tax collection. To effect these economic, military, and cultural developments, the regional lords needed ever-increasing numbers of skilled, literate officials and teachers, the recruitment of whom was based on merit. Also during this time, commerce was stimulated through the introduction of coinage and technological improvements. Iron came into general use, making possible not only the forging of weapons of war but also the manufacture of farm implements. Public works on a grand scale--such as flood control, irrigation projects, and canal digging--were executed. Enormous walls were built around cities and along the broad stretches of the northern frontier.

So many different philosophies developed during the late Spring and Autumn and early Warring States periods that the era is often known as that of the Hundred Schools of Thought. From the Hundred Schools of Thought came many of the great classical writings on which Chinese practices were to be based for the next two and one-half millennia. Many of the thinkers were itinerant intellectuals who, besides teaching their disciples, were employed as advisers to one or another of the various state rulers on the methods of government, war, and diplomacy.

The body of thought that had the most enduring effect on subsequent Chinese life was that of the School of Literati (ru or), often called the Confucian school in the West. The written legacy of the School of Literati is embodied in the Confucian Classics and from which the period derived its name), which were to become the basis for the order of traditional society. Confucius (551-479 B.C.), also called ~Kong Zi, or Master Kong, looked to the early days of Zhou rule for an ideal social and political order. He believed that the only way such a system could be made to work properly was for each person to act according to prescribed relationships. "Let the ruler be a ruler and the subject a subject," he said, but he added that to rule properly a king must be virtuous. To Confucius, the functions of government and social stratification were facts of life to be sustained by ethical values. His ideal was the junzi (or ruler's son), which came

to mean gentleman in the sense of a cultivated or superior man.

Mencius (372-289 B.C.), or Meng Zi, was a Confucian disciple who made major contributions to the humanism of Confucian thought. Mencius declared that man was by nature good. He expostulated the idea that a ruler could not govern without the people's tacit consent and that the penalty for unpopular, despotic rule was the loss of the "mandate of heaven."

The effect of the combined work of Confucius, the codifier and interpreter of a system of relationships based on ethical behavior, and Mencius, the synthesizer and developer of applied Confucian thought, was to provide traditional Chinese society with a comprehensive framework on which to order virtually every aspect of life

There were to be accretions to the corpus of Confucian thought, both immediately and over the millennia, and from within and outside the Confucian school. Interpretations made to suit or influence contemporary society made Confucianism dynamic while preserving a fundamental system of model behavior based on ancient texts.



Diametrically opposed to Mencius, for example, was the interpretation of Xun Zi (ca. 300-237 B.C.), another Confucian follower. Xun Zi preached that man is innately selfish and evil and that goodness is attainable only through education and conduct befitting one's status. He also argued that the best government is one based on authoritarian control, not ethical or moral persuasion.

Xun Zi's unsentimental and authoritarian inclinations were developed into the doctrine embodied in the School of Law (or fa), or Legalism. The doctrine was formulated by Han Fei Zi (d. 233 B.C.) and Li Si (d. 208 B.C.), who maintained that human nature was incorrigibly selfish and therefore the only way to preserve the social order was to impose discipline from above and to enforce laws strictly. The Legalists exalted the state and sought

its prosperity and martial prowess above the welfare of the common people. Legalism became the philosophic basis for the imperial form of government. When the most practical and useful aspects of Confucianism and Legalism were synthesized in the Han period (206 B.C.-A.D. 220), a system of governance came into existence that was to survive largely intact until the late nineteenth century. Taoism, the second most important stream of Chinese thought, also developed during the Zhou period. Its formulation is attributed to the legendary sage Lao Zi (or Old Master), said to predate Confucius, and Zhuang Zi (369-286 B.C.). The focus of Taoism is the individual in nature rather than the individual in society. It holds that the goal of life for each individual is to find one's own personal adjustment to the rhythm of the natural (and supernatural) world, to follow the Way (dao) of the universe. In many ways the opposite of rigid Confucian moralism, Taoism served many of its adherents as a complement to their ordered daily lives. A scholar on duty as an official would usually follow Confucian teachings but at leisure or in retirement might seek harmony with nature as a Taoist recluse. The Taoist approach to life is embodied in the classic Dao De Jing.

Another strain of thought dating to the Warring States Period is the school of yin-yang and the five elements. The theories of this school attempted to explain the universe in terms of basic forces in nature, the complementary agents of yin (dark, cold, female, negative) and yang (light, hot, male, positive) and the five elements (water, fire, wood, metal, and earth). In later periods these theories came to have importance both in philosophy and in popular belief.

Still another school of thought was based on the doctrine of Mo Zi (470-391 B.C.?), or Mo Di. Mo Zi believed that "all men are equal before God" and that mankind should follow heaven by practicing universal love. Advocating that all action must be utilitarian, Mo Zi condemned the Confucian emphasis on ritual and music. He regarded warfare as wasteful and advocated pacificism. Mo Zi also believed that unity of thought and action were necessary to achieve social goals. He maintained that the people should obey their leaders and that the leaders should follow the will of heaven. Although Moism failed to establish itself as a major school of thought, its views are said to be "strongly echoed" in Legalist thought. In general, the teachings of Mo Zi left an indelible impression on the Chinese mind.

Another good source of information about Chinese philosophy on the web can be found in the Chinese Philosophy page by Su Tzu.