

China in the Beginning



Wikimedia Commons

- The fertile river valleys of China allowed villages and towns to flourish along their banks.
- The most important rivers were the Yellow and Yangzi Rivers which supported agricultural settlements after about 7000 B.C.E.
- By the late third millennium B.C.E., the small settlements had begun to grow into much larger regional states.

- The Yellow River in China flooded much like the Nile in Egypt and deposited fertile soil in its wake.
- The fertile soil created agricultural surpluses which brought increased population and eventually complex societies.

- The ancient Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties were hereditary states that eventually ruled much of China and laid a political foundation for a distinctive Chinese society.
- Spokesmen for the Zhou dynasty expressed a set of principles that influenced Chinese thinking about government and political legitimacy until the twentieth century.
- The Zhou theory of politics rested on the assumption that heavenly powers granted the right to govern, "the mandate of heaven" to a special person, the "son of heaven".

- The “son of heaven” had the obligation to be a responsible and conscientious ruler or the gods could replace him.
- The Zhou state was so much larger than the Shang that Zhou rulers needed more than a single central court to rule effectively. They relied on a decentralized administration that looked to the central government for support but functioned on their own.
- After the early eighth century B.C.E, Zhou rule deteriorated as nomadic invaders forced the royal court from its capital at Hao.

- Competitive states fought each other viciously for control of the Zhou dynasty and although it survived, it never regained its authority.
- The Zhou dynasty officially ended in 256 B.C.E.

Society and Family in Ancient China

- As in India, agriculture in China enabled people to accumulate wealth and preserve it within their families.
- Social distinctions began to appear during neolithic times, and the ancient dynasties of Xia, Shang, and Zhou, the distinctions became sharper.
- Throughout China, the patriarchal family emerged as the institution that most influenced individual's lives and their roles in the larger society.

- During the ancient dynasties, the royal family and allied noble families occupied the most honored positions in Chinese society.
- A privileged class of hereditary aristocrats arose from the military allies of Shang and Zhou rulers.
- A large class of semi servile peasants populated the Chinese countryside. They owned n land but provided agricultural, military, and labor srVICES for their lords to exchange for plots to cultivate, security, with a portion of the harvest.

- There was also a sizeable class of slaves most of whom were enemy warriors captured during battles between the many competing states of ancient China, Slaves performed hard labor that required a large work force.
- In China the extended family emerged as a particularly influential institution during Neolithic times.
- It continued to play an important role during the three ancient dynasties.

- The Chinese family had profound influence because of the veneration of ancestors, a custom that had its roots in Neolithic times.
- In the absence of organized religion or official priesthood in ancient China, the patriarchal head of the family presided at ceremonies honoring the ancestor's spirits.
- Patriarchy intensified with the emergence of large states.

Early Chinese Writing and Cultural Development

- Early Chinese myths and legends explained the origins of the world, the human race, agriculture and various arts and crafts but Chinese thinkers didn't see any need to organize these ideas into a system of religious traditions.
- Chinese leaders often spoke of an impersonal heavenly power but did not recognize a personal supreme deity who intervened in human affairs or took a special interest in human behavior.
- Ancient China also did not support a large class of priests.
- It was family patriarchs who represented the interests of living generations.

- Merchants pioneered the use of writing in Mesopotamia and India but in China the earliest known writing served the interests of the rulers instead of the traders.
- Writing in China goes back to the early part of the second millennium B.C.E.
- Scribes at the Shung royal court kept written accounts of important events on strips of bamboo or pieces of silk.
- The earliest form of Chinese writing like Sumerian and Egyptian writing was the pictograph.

- The Zhou dynasty produced books of poetry and history, manuals of divination and ritual and essays dealing with moral, religious, philosophical and political themes.
- Some books of the Zhou dynasty include the Book of Changes, the Book of History and the Book of Etiquette. The Book of Songs is a collection of verses.

- Ancient China and the Larger World
- High mountain ranges, forbidding deserts, and stormy seas separated China from the other early societies of the eastern hemisphere.
- These barriers did not entirely prevent communication between China and other lands, but they prevented the establishment of direct long distance trade relations such as the ones linking Mesopotamia with Harappan Indian or those between the Phoenicians and other peoples of the Mediterranean basin.

- Like the other early societies, ancient China developed in the context of a larger world of interaction and exchange.
- From the valley of the Yellow River, Chinese agriculture spread of the north and west and Chinese cultivation encountered nomadic peoples who had built pastoral societies in the grassy steppe lands of central Asia.
- These lands were too arid to sustain large agricultural societies, but their grasses supported large herds of livestock.

- By 2200 B.C.E. these nomads were experienced horseback riders and had developed the technology of bronze metallurgy. They had introduced large numbers of heavy wagons into the steppes.
- Several clusters of nomadic peoples organized powerful herding societies on the Eurasian steppes.
- The Chinese and these nomad peoples often engaged in bitter wars, and nomadic raids posed a constant threat to the northern and western regions of China.

- Chinese influence spread to the south as well as to the north and west.
- The valley of the Yangzi River supported even more intensive agriculture than did the Yellow River basin.
- The moist subtropical climate of southern China lent itself readily to the cultivation of rice.
- Ancient cultivators sometimes raised two crops of rice per year.
- Rice cultivation depended on elaborate irrigation systems.

- Agricultural surpluses and growing populations stimulated the growth of cities, states, and complex societies in the Yangzi as well as the Yellow River valley.