

Chinese Social Structure

Introduction Chinese society in the late neolithic and early bronze ages developed largely independent of other ancient societies. As a result, there are a number of distinctive features infrequently seen in other areas of the ancient world. How or why this combination of attributes emerged as it did is not known. Nonetheless, these achievements: a strict patriarchy and social structure built on Confucian and Daoists ethics; a strong, highly centralized, interventionist government in an era when that was rarely seen; and a commitment to social order and the greater good over individual rights and liberty, converged to produce an ideal that has endured for more than 4000 years. Of course, there have been periods of divergence and of great social disruption, such as the integration of Buddhism, the Mongol invasions, and the leveling of society under communism. Indeed, each ruler and every generation have left their own mark on China. Nevertheless, the idea of “China”—its identity—has remained steadfast in essential ways across many different epochs, at least among the ruling elites. Chinese civilization, despite interludes and discontinuity, has endured.

PREHISTORY—The Neolithic Age (10,000-2000 BCE)

Social Relationships. For most of the neolithic period people lived in small groups where many if not most social relationships were based on some level of kinship ties. Fathers, mothers, uncles, aunts, cousins, in-laws, and other extended family were all a part of any given group--which was likely a patriarchy. When groups got larger and small villages emerged, family ties were still paramount.

Class. Class as we understand it in the contemporary world had almost certainly not yet emerged in the neolithic era. It is associated with civilization and is social construct found where relatively large numbers of people live in close proximity to each other. Given that, early on, very small groups lived in caves and in very small villages, social structures were rudimentary at best. Later, neolithic Chinese began to construct pits with fires in the center around which huts made of wood, straw and mud were constructed. In warm, wet periods, multiple, large pits were sometimes constructed that could accommodate several dozen people, demonstrating the appearance of small villages. Still, settlements were highly dispersed so that humans would not compete for limited resources. There are no known cities until the Xia period, which spanned the last century of the neolithic and the early bronze age. Warmth and security from attack and predation were primary goals as well as the pooling of resources. The collection and production of food was the most important task of all neolithic societies. As China transitioned to the bronze age, the capacity to store food stuffs increased dramatically. However, this storage capacity would likely not be enough to get through entire seasons and certainly not enough to navigate years of drought or pestilence. As the era progressed, there likely emerged some stratification of society with village headmen and others controlling a disproportionate amount of resources. For most, however, subsistence was tenuous and often difficult.

BRONZE AGE (2000 BCE-600 BCE)

Class and Social Relationships. Society in bronze age China was no longer solely based on the tribal or clan system, although familial ties were still paramount in daily life. There was a monarch, and usually, a central government which relied upon local elites to implement and administer government directives. Society was generally dispersed in rural areas, but there was a thriving urban culture as well, something that indicated a stratified social system. In the cities of the late bronze age, Chinese elites valued large architectural edifices for both their practical and symbolic uses. In the Zhou Era (1046 BCE-771 BCE), there was an institution that resembled serfdom for the peasantry, although its contours are not well known. In addition, slavery is known to have existed in some form or another. Relationships between superiors and subordinates are believed to have had a reciprocal, moral component. It was the moral obligation of the rulers to govern fairly and justly and it was the moral obligation of the peasants to obey just rulers.

Funerary. In the burial tombs of early and middle Bronze Age elites, archaeologists have found the skeletal remains of large numbers of humans as well as animals who had clearly been sacrificed in order to be buried together with the deceased. This evidence of human sacrifice, though troubling for us in the contemporary world, was widely practiced in antiquity. It indicates the extent of the control elites exercised over those around them. As China moved through the Bronze Age, evidence of human sacrifice diminished until it was largely replaced by symbols of humans, such as small clay or bronze figurines, and in the most extreme case, the Terra Cotta Warriors of the First Emperor of the Qin Dynasty (r. 221 BCE-210 BCE).

IRON AGE (1000 BCE-500 CE)

Class and Geographic Mobility. In each of the kingdoms of pre-unification China before 220 BCE, society was structured in slightly different ways. Peasants, in particular, had different experiences in the various kingdoms. In most of the eastern kingdoms, peasants were tied to the land through one form of coercion or the other. Though not exactly serfs in the medieval European sense, peasants could not move freely from place to place without the permission of their lords. This led to the problem of peasants absconding—that is to say—peasants moving without permission to a different kingdom where, it was hoped, conditions were better. Others could and did move as well: artisans, scholars, bureaucrats and even military men. This was possible because of a shared language. The Qin dynasty (221 BCE-206 BCE) is well known for the incentives they offered to the laboring classes. For a brief period, the Qin provided land to new peasants in a way that was similar to homesteading in the United States during the 19th century. Peasants became free-holders instead of semi-serfs if they improved land on the frontier. In due course, this land was brought under cultivation, was taxed and brought under the control of the central authorities. It provided an additional layer of protection against the barbarians on the periphery. These policies relating to the peasantry were modified several times during the Han period (202 BCE-220 CE).

POST-CLASSICAL PERIOD (500 CE-1500 CE)

Class and the Scholarly Tradition. Society in post-classical China functioned in much the same way as it had under the Han (206 BCE-220 CE). There were monarchs, aristocrats, artisans, clergy, peasants, laborers, etc. Each played their role in an organized and generally stable society. During the Tang period (618-907), another class of society emerged, the Confucian elite, sometimes also known as degree holders or Mandarins. These government officials helped society function as the population of China skyrocketed. They also created a custom known as the “scholarly tradition” in China, a concept that is well understood and highly valued in East Asia to this day. Scholars, or those with other specialized learning in China, are much more highly valued than in the western world. For hundreds of years in China, it was believed that society could neither function nor progress without learned, moral men to provide a philosophical framework for actions taken by the state. Service to the state and to the emperor was the highest calling to which a man could aspire.

EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1500-1800 CE)

Class and Structure. Society was structured in the early modern period much as it was in the early Ming period (1368-1644). Though the ruling household had changed in 1644 and a barbarian conquest dynasty had seized power, not a great deal changed in society. There were monarchs, aristocrats, artisans, clergy, peasants, laborers, etc. Each played their role in an organized and generally stable society. Mandarins or degree holders acted as the administrative class and governed much as they had during the early Ming period. The vast majority of the population worked the land just as their ancestors had and most had very little contact with their foreign conquerors. The Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) simply created an additional layer of administration at the very top. This, of course, led to the problem of the government being administratively top-heavy. But, given just how prosperous China was in the 17th and 18th centuries, this structural weakness was not evident until well into the 19th century.

The Retention of Culture. The Qing sought to maintain their distinct culture as members of the Jurchen/Manchu ethnicity. They were well aware just how quickly China had assimilated other conquest dynasties and were determined not to lose their identity. They used the Manchu language in the imperial household and kept two different sets of records for many years: one in Manchu for household deliberations and one in Mandarin for civil administration. They handed down laws which separated all the different ethnicities of China from the Jurchen. For example, during much of the Qing period, it was not legal for a member of the Jurchen/Manchu ethnicity to marry or have sexual relations with someone from any other ethnicity. This was an extremely problematic restriction, however, when one considers that several bannermen armies were stationed long-term far away from Manchuria. Indeed, it was a law that was often broken, particularly later in the Qing period. Interaction, in general, between the ethnicities was not encouraged. This was made somewhat possible because Qing armies often lived in garrison towns when not on campaign. Members of the Manchu ethnicity were also treated differently from the Han under the law. Among the imperial family, it is generally understood that the Emperor Kangxi (1654-1722) lived and acted in a way which reflected his Jurchen/Manchu heritage, but his grandson, the Emperor Qianlong (1711-1799)

struggled to maintain Jurchen/Manchu traditions. Nonetheless, in the late Qing period, it was still possible to distinguish the Manchu ethnicity from the Han ethnicity.

The Queue. Perhaps the most recognizable element of the Manchu conquest in the early modern period was the appearance of the queue in China. It was also one of the most hated symbols forced upon all male Han Chinese. The queue is a type of hairstyle. In the Ming period, it was customary for men to have long, flowing hair. Indeed, it was a badge of honor. When the Manchu began the conquest of China, they required all Chinese men to adopt the Jurchen hairstyle, often referred to as the “pigtail.” But it was more than that. One also had to shave one’s hair from the forehead to at least half-way back on the scalp. Often the pigtail was trimmed only to keep it from dragging the ground when walking. Han men chafed under this rule. Nonetheless, as early as the first raids across the north China/Manchuria frontier in the early 17th century, they forced this upon the Han. It symbolized the acceptance of Qing authority. If a man refused to adopt the queue, he was considered to be in open and visible revolt against the Qing and subject to summary execution. Early in the dynasty, thousands were killed because they refused. A famous slogan of the era was, “keep your hair and lose your head, lose your hair and keep your head.” Within a few years, the queue had become customary.

The 19th CENTURY

Class and Fragmentation. As the 19th century progressed, Chinese society first saw little in the way of change, then there were the years of catastrophe during the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864) and then finally, the slow devolution of the existing order. The system, in which there were monarchs, aristocrats, bureaucrats, artisans, clergy, peasants, laborers, etc., had worked very well since the transition from the Ming Period (1368-1644). Most Chinese understood their role in a stable and prosperous society. The Mandarins, the administrative class, continued to do their jobs at all levels of government. But it is, in part, because of China’s stable and prosperous system that the population continued to grow in the early 19th century. In 1800, there were perhaps 300 million Chinese. By 1900, that number had reached at least 400 million. Agriculture was the key to maintaining social and political order. It is not clear who or what is to blame for China’s social problems in the 19th century. But it is clear, as evidenced by the widespread use of opium, the rise of banditry and the breakdown of authority, that they got worse as the century progressed. Any disruption in agriculture due to drought, flood, pests, excessive heat or cold required the use of emergency government-run granaries to feed the people until the next harvest. It appeared that many of China’s peasants (which represented most of the population) often teetered on the brink of hardship or worse. And the government was increasingly unresponsive, even though the peasants continued to pay their taxes. In addition, government corruption was endemic. Infrastructure such as dikes, roads and irrigation ditches, which had allowed for the dramatic advances in agriculture, but which was expensive to maintain, began to breakdown. When the Grand Canal ceased to function after the 1855 Yellow River floods (during which the Yellow River changed course dramatically), some of the Confucian elites began to imply that the Qing had lost the “Mandate of Heaven.” Failure to maintain essential infrastructure often presaged dynastic decline.

Early 20th CENTURY (1900-1950)

Continuity and Change. It would be easy to say that Chinese society in the early 20th century had devolved into something that neither resembled nor functioned as it had in previous epochs. But that would not be true. It had a well-established, mature society that provided the glue which held China together in the absence of effective government. There were many elements of society that functioned as they always had. In particular, China’s peasants, who constituted at least 90% of society, continued to farm the land and live their lives much as they always had. Village headmen, applying basic Confucian ideology, still acted as intermediaries between individual producers and the authorities. What had changed was who they paid taxes to and who enforced the laws by which they ordered their lives. It is also true that taxes were sometimes very high (more than 50%) and paid in advance or sometimes multiple times per year if a warlord or government changed. One of the primary weaknesses in society in the early 20th century was the lack of a strong bureaucracy. The old Confucian elites, the Mandarins, had been dissolved as an official class of society. And, given the lack of a central government, most of those magistrates were not replaced with effective leadership. Neither the leaders of the Republican Revolution nor the Guomindang had succeeded in re-ordering society, but that had not that been among their goals in the first place. While it is true that both wanted to bring China into modernity, a radical restructuring of society was not the highest of their priorities.

Class. One group did emerge in the first half of the 20th century that sought the radical restructuring of society: the Chinese Communist Party. As was true of other countries ruled by communists, the CCP wanted to flatten society. All of China would be radically equal. All great landowners would be stripped of their land (and capital) and it would be redistributed to those who actually worked it. They wanted to apply the old socialist adage popularized by Karl Marx (1818-1883) in the 19th century: “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need” to all elements of the economy. No one would become wealthy, but no one would be desperately poor either. In the political realm, the politburo would govern until the people of China were educated sufficiently to understand that communism was in their best interests. They would then voluntarily vote themselves into a communist system (the dictatorship of the proletariat). In short, this was the plan that the CCP used when it set up soviets in their 1920s and 30s. However, before it could be instituted, the war with Japan (1937-1945) disrupted society in a way not seen since the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864).

Social Disruption in the War With Japan (1937-1945). Though Japan could not control all of China, it occupied territory in which hundreds of millions of Chinese lived. In these territories, Japanese occupation officials recognized the extent of their limitations. They were governing a people group who had not submitted to their rule and whose government would not surrender. The Japanese therefore ruled with a very, very strong hand and would not allow any dissent. The Japanese traumatized the Chinese people in many ways. First, the Japanese did not perceive of the Chinese as being equally human. They enjoyed no rights given by the Japanese. Second, the best of all that China produced went to the Japanese: food, housing, clothing, manufactured goods, etc. Third, when the Chinese had the temerity to oppose the Japanese or question any decisions made by the Japanese, the Chinese were killed. Fourth, when the Chinese actively engaged in guerilla war, the Japanese responded with large-scale slaughter. Individuals, villages, and whole cities survived (or didn't) based on whim and chance. Society, as might be expected, was terrorized and moved into a protective, survival mode. From 1937 until the defeat of the Japanese in 1945, China's losses reached approximately 20 million. It should come as no surprise that many elements of Chinese society still express hatred for the Japanese.

Late 20th Century (1950-1999)

Class and Social Engineering. In the years following the 1949 communist revolution, the CCP sought to completely level society. There was to be radical equality, true liberation and no class distinctions. In a country where the government had allowed for the stratification of society during the Qing period (1644-1912), this was truly revolutionary. All large landowners were stripped of their lands and capital and sent to reeducation camps if they were lucky and executed if not. Their land was then used to create agricultural communes where the people who had actually been working the land were given responsibility to work the land for the state. All known supporters of capitalism, bankers, financiers, industrialists (a relatively small number) had their factories nationalized and their wealth seized. All members, supporters, known associates and family members of the Guomindang party were given a notation in their records that they had a suspect background. Many were sent to reeducation camps. They were then blocked from becoming a member of the CCP or from rising to any position of leadership in society. In the early years, even their children were not allowed access to education on the university level. This black mark followed them through their entirety of their lives. A new social hierarchy emerged, one which valued ideological purity and membership in the CCP above all else. The CCP governed society, the economy, the military, the state and everything else of value.

The Peasants. Mao sought to glorify the rural peasantry in Chinese society. His version of Marxism substituted the agricultural worker for the industrial worker. This was a subtle, but extremely important, shift in communist ideology because most Chinese were still engaged in agricultural pursuits—and there was very little industry. It was therefore difficult for the Chinese industrial worker to, as Marx wrote, become “alienated from the means of production.” Instead, the government during the revolutionary era sought to elevate the lowly peasant to the equal of all in society. Their way of life, which was characterized by the CCP as exemplifying hard work, frugality, responsibility and rectitude appealed to the politburo. Mao wanted all of society to emulate the best qualities of China's peasants.

Liberalization of Economy. Mao Zedong died in 1976 and, after a short period of transition, was succeeded by Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997). Deng is remembered most for liberalizing the Chinese economy and for allowing for

limited capitalism in the economy. However, when China began on its path to capitalism, the government also moved away from relying on the rural peasant for social and economic inspiration. Today, China has a large and thriving middle class and a very large number of industrialists and super-wealthy. There are also tens of millions of poor, homeless and marginalized. Though the communists are still in power, they have abandoned most of their economic ideology and, through that, the attempt to bring radical equality to all members of society.

Readings

- 1) David Keightley ed., *The Origins of Chinese Civilization*, (University of California Press, 1983).
- 2) Li Feng, *Early China: A Social and Cultural History*, (Cambridge, 2013).
- 3) Lothar von Falkenhausen, *Chinese Society in the Age of Confucius*, (University of California Press, 2006)
- 4) Evelyn Rawski, *The Last Emperors: A Social History of Qing Institutions*, (University of California Press, 1998).
- 5) Andrew G. Walder, *Fractured Rebellion: The Beijing Red Guard Movement*, (Harvard University Press, 2012).