

Chinese Government

Introduction Chinese civilization boasts one of the oldest and most unique cultures in the world. It is known for developing strong central governments at a time when it was extremely difficult to administer large territories. It is unclear precisely where or when the model for an authoritarian state originated. Perhaps the Xia (2100-1600 BCE), the Shang (1600-1050 BCE) or the Zhou (1046-475 BCE) rulers created prototype systems that were later perfected. Regardless, Chinese society has provided historians with examples of nearly a dozen strong, prosperous, stable dynasties that facilitated some of the greatest expressions of human achievement in history. The prototype of Chinese authoritarianism was the first emperor Qin Shihuangdi (259-210 BCE). Many historians believe that he created the notion of China as a unified entity, although he was so hated that his dynasty lasted only a few months after his death. Still, there would likely be no China without him. Successor dynasties built on his legacy—the Han (206 BCE-220 CE), Tang (618-906 CE), Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) stand out among all the epochs in human history as among the greatest. All were distinctive and reflected the time and milieu in which they were situated. But they also all embraced the vision of a unified system with a strong central government ruling all Chinese people. This is a vision that remains the ideal today.

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

Political Organization. The inhabitants of early and middle neolithic era China were hunter-gatherers and lived in small groups limited by the supply of food and other resources in their general area. Settlements were mostly impermanent and very small because people groups had to be mindful of limited resources. Humans were largely oriented towards the local and village level but were aware of and probably linked to neighboring settlements. Before the transition to agriculture in the late neolithic, settlements were also widely dispersed and, though trade goods and marriage partners could be exchanged so as to not intermarry too closely within kinship groups, were far enough apart to not compete for limited resources. Government, as we think of it today, therefore didn't exist. Until very, very late in the neolithic period, there is no evidence of a ruler, a state, a bureaucracy, a set of written laws, a specialized military or the like. There was, perhaps, someone like a village headman or family/clan leader because limited resources had to be administered. Association was largely based on kinship because clan or family systems provided what little security and stability was available. The future of anyone outside the limited social system could become extremely bleak very quickly. Life could be precarious, particularly in times of drought, flood or famine. Settlements were vulnerable to even small, periodic changes in climate because early neolithic Chinese did not have the capacity to store excess foodstuffs for very long. During periods of hardship, several failed hunting trips or poor foraging outings in a row could lead to hunger, malnutrition, and catastrophe for a small group.

BRONZE AGE (2000 BCE-600 BCE)

Political Organization. The Shang government (1600-1050 BCE) was organized hierarchically, with ranks, specialized functions, and the like. There was an aristocracy which was feudal in nature and fiefdoms which passed from father to son. History has provided us with the names of a few Shang rulers. However, we do not know much more about the Shang government, their legal system and the like. The chronicles tell us that the first Zhou rulers (1046-475 BCE) built on the old Shang organization rather than reinventing the system, so it is possible, to a certain extent, to extrapolate backwards. We also know the names of a few Zhou monarchs, but a no comprehensive history exists. As is the case with most ancient governments, the Zhou government was not highly centralized when compared to governments today. It was divided into administrative areas which, over the course of time, became something like hereditary feudatories. These later became the basis of the “kingdoms” of the Warring Kingdoms period, when regionalism overcame the vestiges of central authority. In total, between the collapse of the Western Zhou in the 770s BCE and the unification of China under the Qin in 221 BCE, there were more than 200 recorded kingdoms complete with walled cities, organized militaries and the like. It should be noted that many of these “kingdoms” were very small or situated on the periphery of Chinese civilization. Most were very short lived.

IRON AGE (1000 BCE-500 CE)

Political Organization and De-Feudalization. Upon the cessation of major combat in 221 BCE, the First Emperor (Qin Shihuangdi r. 247-220 BCE) imposed much the same structure on the rest of his empire that he had used in his home kingdom. In particular, he embarked on a system of “de-feudalization” in which all power resided with the central authorities. All aristocrats of the old kingdoms were stripped of their lands, titles and privileges and given to

the state to be disposed of as the Qin saw fit. More than 120,000 former nobles were resettled in the new capital city of Chang'an so that the Emperor could carefully monitor their activities. All military fortifications were pulled down or otherwise destroyed if not needed for defense by the Qin and all weapons were confiscated. As you might imagine, this created immense resentment among the landed elites in the other former kingdoms. Nevertheless, a highly organized, hierarchical structure for society was put into place. Upon the ascendancy of the Han in 206 BCE, many of the Qin de-feudalization initiatives were relaxed. Though it is not believed that aristocrats of the old kingdoms returned to their ancestral homelands to rule as they pleased, new aristocrats with lands, titles and privileges emerged over the centuries. Nonetheless, the basic governmental structure the First Emperor put into place lasted until the fall of the Han. Indeed, some historians have argued that the system, as envisioned by Qin Shihuangdi, became the ideal form of government for China and lasted in one form or another, for more than 2000 years!

Provincial Administration and Standardization. Administratively, China under the Qin was divided into 36 units (known by historians as commanderies) each with three different but generally equal administrators: a civil governor, a military commander and an inspector (sometimes known as a censor). The civilian governor was named by the Emperor and was accountable to the Emperor personally. Though not strictly the governor's to command, each governor had immense power over the civilian population. This was initially not a hereditary position but later sometimes moved in that direction. Above all, a governor's job was to keep the peace and to implement the Emperors initiatives. The military commander's job was to face the military threat posed by any internal or external foe. The inspector's job was to investigate the situation on the ground and to determine the extent to which the civilian governor and military commander were doing their jobs. He then reported directly back to the Emperor. On the local level, small accountability groups composed of 5 family units were to be the norm. If any member ran afoul of the new, standardized legal system, all 5 family units could be held accountable. The Qin were also known for standardizing weights and measurements, the writing system, road widths (50 paces wide) and even axle widths. As above, most of these movements to standardize systems within China remained in place during the Han period, but were more relaxed than under the Qin.

Central Control. The Qin also sought to control all public discourse as a form of public "thought control." The Confucian elites, who had enjoyed some freedom to comment on society during the Warring Kingdoms period, saw their freedom of speech severely curtailed under the Qin. The First Emperor was very unhappy that individuals had the audacity to publicly criticize his initiatives. He responded by limiting the study of philosophy (mostly Confucianism) to topics which would not lead to the questing of state policy. In addition, the writing of history was limited to those topics approved by the state. In essence, by praising the past, Qin policies—through omission—were obliquely called into question. Finally, all writings other than the Qin official state histories, and works on state religion and agriculture were collected and burned. One copy of all works of literature were to be kept in the Imperial library. In a public display of defiance, a number of Confucian scholars refused to abide by Qin Shihuangdi's wishes in 212 BCE. He then terrorized those who opposed him by executing the most prominent 460 scholars in the land. In this way, the First Emperor exercised control over public discourse and society. But he became one of the most hated men in all of Chinese history. As above, when the Han ascended to power, the most severe restrictions on public "thought control" were relaxed.

POST-CLASSICAL PERIOD (500 CE-1500 CE)

Political Organization. All emperors in China, from the Qin in the 3rd century BCE down through the end of the Qing in 1911, were considered absolute monarchs. In theory, they ruled by decree, controlled all land and exercised the power of life and death over all in their realm. As subjects, any rights enjoyed by the Chinese were given by the monarch and could be withdrawn by the monarch. In practice, all Chinese emperors relied on aristocrats and other government officials, who were often treated differently than commoners, to help them rule. The monarchs of the post-classical age used many of the same elements of administration that the Han had used in antiquity, but modified them as necessary. There was a highly organized, hierarchical structure for government and for society. There was a clear division between aristocrats, commoner, peasant and artisan. The empire was divided into administrative units. Each large unit was, in theory, administered by a governor who was usually named by the emperor himself and accountable personally to the emperor. The military was under the direct control of the emperor and was occasionally even commanded on the battlefield by the emperor, although aristocrats raised, maintained and led most campaigns after each dynasty was well established. The office of the inspector (also known as censor) also remained in place to provide reliable reports (sometimes known as memorials) to the emperor.

The Civil Service Examination. Because of the size of the empire, it was impossible for the imperial household to maintain familial and/or close political ties with the number of high-level and mid-level administrators and aristocrats necessary to govern the empire. To meet this challenge, the Chinese created a meritocracy, which was based largely on one's ability to score well on a test over the Confucian classics. One had to be educated, literate and capable to do well. But in theory, anyone could take the test. Since governmental officials were needed at every level, tests were administered at various levels. All test-takers had to take the test on the local level. Those who scored the highest were allowed to proceed to the regional level. Those who passed at the local level but did not pass at the regional level became local bureaucrats. Those that passed at the regional level but did not score high enough to pass at the national level became government officials on the regional level. And so it went until the top scorers took a test administered, in theory, by the imperial household. In most test cycles, there was one top scorer who would move into a position to later become a governor, chancellor or other top advisor to the emperor. In due course, these Confucian elites became known as Mandarins or degree holders. The testing process was widely followed by the aspirational classes in China. Since most government positions could not be handed down to one's son, each person earned their own position. Those who passed at the highest level achieved national renown and were celebrated in their hometowns as heroes of the realm. In this way, the government at all levels was staffed by competent, moral men who understood and valued the Confucian system. Of course, there was graft and corruption which had to be rooted out every few decades. As impressive as this achievement was, it is perhaps more important to note that this system lasted, with a few interruptions, in one form or another from the Tang period to the 20th century—more than 1000 years.

EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1500-1800 CE)

Political Organization. The Manchu conquest of China beginning in the 1630s and 1640s required the collaboration of the Confucian elites and the people of the Han ethnicity because the population of ethnic Jurchen (Manchu) was too small to complete the job. The problem of how to govern China as a conquest dynasty was just as perplexing and much more complicated. The Qing had won the war, then they had to win the peace. The first monarchs of Qing China (1644-1911), who theoretically exercised absolute power, determined to maintain, but reform, the moribund Ming system. The early Ming monarchs (1368-1644) had found success using the Civil Service examination to staff and maintain the bureaucracy. The system, however, had ceased to work as effectively in the last few decades of the Ming period as it had earlier. Indeed, the late Ming period is known for graft, corruption and neglect in government. Thus, the Qing sought to reestablish and reinvigorate the Civil Service and the Civil Service examination. In the early years of the Qing period, there were several efforts to root out corruption and the system began to function as designed on the lower levels. But there remained the problem of how to staff the upper levels.

Central Government and Manchu Ministers. To meet the challenge of staffing at the highest levels, the Qing rulers split the duties of "minister of state" into two theoretically equal positions each with a Han (Confucian) minister and a Manchu minister. In practice, the Manchu ministers sometimes just passed down directives from the Imperial household to the Han ministers. The Manchu ministers were therefore more important but the positions did not require a great deal of attention. Of course, reports back to the imperial household had to be written and the Manchu minister, like his Han counterpart, could be held accountable when things went wrong. There were six ministries of state: civil affairs, finance, rituals, war, justice and public works. Each had two ministers. In this way, the Qing ruled through and maintained the existing Chinese system but rarely had much contact with the dominant Han Chinese ethnicity. The foreign rulers, though not exactly hiding in plain sight, consciously sought to minimize their interaction with the Chinese.

Taxation and the Treasury. The coffers of the imperial treasury in Qing China were generally full after the recovery from the War of the Three Feudatories (1674-1681). The Emperor Kangxi (r. 1661-1722) set up a tax system which was based on goods produced, on land and on population (head tax). The tax was carefully collected and put to good use for much of the early Qing years. The peasants had to pay their taxes to the village headmen, who then forwarded revenue on the authorities on the higher levels. The head tax was also used to determine conscription and corvée quotas. It is worth noting that though the peasants were not always tied to the land, they were required to provide labor to the state for the purposes of building or rebuilding common infrastructure such as roads, bridges, dikes, irrigation projects and the like. The peasants despised this requirement and did everything they could to shirk this duty. Those who could paid a fee to be freed of this obligation. Others would abscond,

making the duty of the remaining peasants that much more difficult. The tax rolls were based initially on Ming surveys and were not regularly updated. By the time the Emperor Qianlong (r. 1735-1796) had completed many of his extraordinarily expensive and bloody wars, the treasury was under serious stress.

The 19th CENTURY

Political Organization and the Decline of Manchu Government. The system the Qing used to govern China required the collaboration of large segments of the ethnic Chinese. Most Han Chinese had embraced the Qing initially because of their hatred of the Ming. But by the middle of the 19th century, hatred of the Ming had been replaced with growing bitterness toward the Manchu. The events of the early and middle 19th century exposed the Qing as being incapable of repelling foreign invasion, of lacking administrative acumen and of being incapable of maintaining the peace domestically. In short, it was only the accumulated inertia of two centuries of rule that allowed the Qing to retain power after the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864) because they exercised neither effective military power nor maintained meaningful political authority.

The Bureaucracy. One of the hallmarks of late Imperial China was the Confucian bureaucracy. The system of staffing government positions which had worked so well since the Tang Period (618-907CE) was based on the civil service examination. Degree seekers prepared for years for an examination which would reveal the best and brightest in the land who would then provide staffing for every level of government. These examinations constituted the first true large-scale meritocracy in the world. However, by the 19th century, there were two major problems with government employees. First, there were not enough of them. The population of China had quadrupled to approximately 400 million by the 1880s (since 1644), but the number of bureaucrats had hardly risen in 200 years. Second, the tax base had not kept pace with the population increase. This led to the treasury being first stressed and then always empty. Sufficient funding for essential government functions could not be secured. When government bureaucrats anywhere are not compensated appropriately but must still fulfill their function, they turn to corruption—both in the selection/hiring process and in the taking of bribes and kickbacks once in office. In short, government corruption became endemic and, in time, government ceased to function at the highest levels. Only the willingness of local officials to continue to do their jobs stood between the people of China and administrative collapse. By the 1890s, even local authority was beginning to become unreliable. Though not in a complete state of chaos, China mostly had a titular government by the last decade of the 19th century.

The Early 20th CENTURY (1900-1950)

Political Organization and the Nationalists. The Guomindang Party was known in English as the Nationalist Party. They succeeded in bringing unification to large parts of China in the late 1920s. They then ruled for approximately a decade before the war with Japan began. The Guomindang leadership was an ideologically disparate group. Some were dedicated to the radical forms of socialism, others supported more capitalist ideals. Some believed China was ready for democracy, others such as Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), believed it might take many years of practice before the Chinese people could be trusted with the franchise. For a while, the Guomindang was supported by the COMINTERN (Communist International) and many of their leaders went to Moscow for training and support, including Chiang Kai-Shek. Others were supported by the governments (or individuals) in western Europe or the United States. It was simply unclear exactly where many of the Guomindang leaders stood ideologically in the early 1920s. It was, in fact, their intention to garner as much support from whatever source they could. It didn't matter much where it came from. Vladimir Lenin, and later Joseph Stalin of the USSR, however, didn't believe that the Guomindang was sufficiently Communist and decided to support a more pure political party in China. This would later become known as the Chinese Communist Party. For a while, the Soviets supported both parties.

Given the lack of a clear ideology, it is no surprise that the decade of Nationalist rule in China is not remembered fondly. Other than trying to unify the country, there didn't appear to be a larger goal. In their defense, the Guomindang had inherited a fragmented country, much of which was still not under their control. The economy was largely agrarian and suffered from half a century of neglect. Large sections of China had been brought under the control of one or more of the western nations or Japan. In short, China's future as a unified country was very much in doubt. Nonetheless, the Guomindang are remembered for being corrupt, nepotistic and incompetent. But China under Guomindang rule was better than China under the rule of capricious and arbitrary warlords.

The Chinese Communist Party. The CCP was established in 1921 in the aftermath of the May 4th Movement which had swept the nation beginning in 1919. The May 4th Movement had awakened the masses to politics and had created a sense of nationalism which the CCP would later exploit. The CCP was established when two comintern agents, Yang Mingzhai (1882-1930) and Grigori Voitinsky (1893-1953), made contact with two leaders of the May 4th Movement, Chen Duxiu (1879-1942) and Li Dazhao (1888-1927). This core group announced the first National Congress in 1921 to be held in the French Concession in Shanghai. The first years of the CCP were very bleak. The party was small and quarrelsome, and its future precarious. As might be expected, it did not grow quickly. To many interested Chinese, it simply appeared to be the left-wing of the Guomindang Party and was therefore not discernable as a separate political entity. Nonetheless, the right-wing of the Guomindang, exemplified by Chiang Kai-Shek, understood very clearly the risks posed by the extreme left. When the CCP engaged in an unauthorized labor action in Shanghai and other actions in Nanchang in the late 1920s, they became the sworn enemy of the Guomindang. This is a “blood-feud” that has still not exhausted itself. Of course, the CCP eventually won the civil war and still rules mainland China today.

The Late 20th Century (1950-1999)

Political Organization and the Communist System. Beginning in 1949, the CCP determined to completely reshape the government of China. All vestiges of Guomindang rule were abandoned. At the very highest levels, there were to be three top positions: Chairman of the Central Committee of the CCP (political control), President of the People’s Republic (civilian control) and Chairman of the Central Military Commission (military control). From 1945 through 1975 Mao Zedong was known simply as Chairman Mao—the supreme leader, since he was so powerful that he didn’t need the titles of Premier or Commander of the People’s Liberation Army. Since the death of Mao, Chinese leaders who occupy all three offices control all elements of the government and have come to be known as “paramount” leaders. Authority was and is distributed through and by the Party to all other levels of government. For example, the Central Committee names governors of each province, who then often names his/her lieutenants in the party on down to the local level. In time, much of the structure of Party bureaucracy has remained in place as leaders at the top levels were promoted, purged, retired or died.

The Party. The Chinese Communist Party itself convenes as a large group every five years at meetings known as the National Party Congress. In theory, all major decisions are made at these meetings. In reality, however, all decisions are made in advance and the National Party Congress votes to affirm them. The PRC has been and is still governed by a small group of people, an oligarchy working behind mostly behind the scenes. Since 1949, there have only been a few great leaders of China: Mao Zedong (r. 1949-1976)— the supreme leader, paramount leaders Deng Xiaoping (r. 1978-1989), Jiang Zemin (r. 1993-2003), Hu Jintao (r. 2003-2013) and Xi Jinping (r. 2013-present). Recently, political succession at the top levels has become more stable and predictable. But the process remains opaque. Political purges and infighting rarely spill over into the public domain, although power struggles continue unabated behind the scenes.

In a communist system, the Party controls all elements of government, society, economy and culture. This includes the military as well. In theory, nothing happens in the country that the Party is not aware of and controls. Everything from central economic planning, to what crops are planted in what area, to what books are allowed to be printed, to what drama will be allowed to be performed on stage is decided by the authorities. For the ambitious, the only route to success had been through the Party, although that has been changing. For example, until quite recently, only Party members were allowed to attend university. Today there are approximately 88 million members of the CCP. The members of the Party enjoy all the rights of citizenship, including the limited franchise. Chinese who are not members of the Party do not.

The Cultural Revolution. In the years following the catastrophe of the second 5-year economic plan (Great Leap Forward, 1958-1962), the Central Committee decided to investigate what went wrong with agriculture and industry in China. It was determined that Mao’s policies could not have led to the mass starvation of 20 million Chinese. Furthermore, it was determined that the peasantry also could not have been responsible. Therefore, blame fell on the Party itself which was responsible for implementing Mao’s policies. What followed was a political and social purge the likes of which has never been seen anywhere in the world in the modern era. In the early days of the investigation, anyone associated with the Great Leap failures was sent down to the rural areas to be purified by manual labor with the peasantry. Some of these re-education sentences were very harsh and were to last ten or even twenty years. They were effective death sentences for many. Over the course of several years, groups emerged

among university students who were dedicated to proving their ideological purity. They would seek out those in society who were not, members of the party or not. They would then be publically humiliated. These groups, who over time expanded from the ranks of students to include all segments of society, became known as Red Guard Units. Conditions nationwide began to degenerate in the late 1960s and it became impossible to tell who was ideologically pure and who was not. Eventually, society ceased to function effectively. Workers were so busy demonstrating their love for Mao and communist purity that they didn't go to work. Doctors, teachers, engineers, even peasants—all were swept up in the fervor. This amounted to a sort of mass hysteria which lasted for the better part of a decade. Tens (if not hundreds) of millions took part. Many Chinese were brutalized and killed in the violence and chaos. Finally, in the early 1970s, Mao called a halt to the worst of the excesses of the Cultural Revolution. But the damage was done to society, to the economy and to the culture. It is still rarely spoken of because the blame for it can be laid directly at the feet of Chairman Mao.

Readings

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