

CHINESE SOCIAL HISTORY – Ancient Period (to 500 CE)

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Bronze Age

Social Relationships. Society in Bronze Age China was no longer solely based on the tribal or clan system. 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, at least according to Confucius, 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

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 (221 BCE-206 BCE) are 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 the land. 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).

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.