

CHINESE POLITICAL HISTORY – Postclassical Period

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Structure. 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 As subjects, any rights enjoyed by the Chinese were given by the monarch and could be withdrawn by the monarch.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, who were often treated differently than commoners, and other government officials 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.

Vast Population. The plight of the peasants remained much the same. In some dynasties, they were tied to the land using one form or coercion or another. In the Sui (589-618) and Tang (618-907) periods, significant numbers of the peasant population enjoyed something close to “free-holder” status. This was particularly the case if they served in the military. And there were enormous numbers of peasants in Tang China, approximately 80 million. Interestingly, the population under the control of the Tang Emperor represented roughly one-quarter of the world’s population, which was double the population of the contemporaneous Umayyad Caliphate and more than quadruple the number of the Carolingian Empire. I might add that troops from the Abbasid Caliphate later encountered Tang troops near Samarkand in Uzbekistan, so these civilizations knew each other quite well. The difficulties inherent in governing this vast and populous empire in a pre-modern age are easy to understand. In order to govern well, the Tang court created the world’s first large-scale civil service examination.

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.