

Chinese Government – Ancient period

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.