

Chinese Military - 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)

The Military. There is no evidence for the existence of specialized military units until very late in the neolithic era. Small groups of hunter gatherers banded together for protection and safety. By definition, however, many members of hunter gatherer groups were proficient in the use of weapons that could take down large game. When threatened, the same skills and weapons used to hunt big game could be employed against enemies. These included spears and clubs, and mechanical devices such as bows and arrows. Small groups occasionally fought, likely over dwindling resources, abductions, and other perceived slights, but there is scant evidence of large scale warfare. Settlements and villages were extremely exposed if significant numbers of inhabitants were away hunting, fishing or fighting. Given the size of the population and the highly dispersed and isolated settlements, fighting was surely sporadic and also probably didn't result in the complete annihilation of an enemy. The taking of slaves and the abduction of women was far more advantageous to the victor than the utter destruction of an enemy.

BRONZE AGE (2000 BCE-600 BCE)

The Military. The Shang military was quite small but generally well organized. It is recorded that they were able to field up to 3000 warriors in battle and keep them there for a season. The government was therefore organized well enough, along with its vassals, to arm itself and defend against significant barbarian threats. In the Zhou period, the monarchs were able to field more than 30,000 warriors and 3000 chariots. This 10-fold increase in military size and strength indicates a commensurate increase in organizational ability and command of resources by the central government.

IRON AGE (1000 BCE-500 CE)

The Military. The capability and effectiveness of the Chinese armies increased dramatically in the iron age. Advances in metallurgy provided soldiers with new and stronger swords, pikes, battle axes, arrow tips and other items such as chariots. Iron was also much, much cheaper to produce than bronze and more effective than wood or stone. These same advances applied to agriculture meant that society could spare additional manpower for fighting and armies grew quite large. An arms race appeared whereby larger, more effective armies took the field of battle during the Warring States period. Some kingdoms eventually fielded hundreds of thousands of soldiers. Those that could not were quickly destroyed. By the third century BCE, only a handful of kingdoms remained. The monarch of the state of Qin is well known for organizing his entire kingdom for war. Indeed, it was mobilized for total war, was capably led and its soldiers battle-hardened. King Zheng, its monarch, was also known to be the embodiment of ruthlessness. On several occasions he massacred hundreds of thousands of soldiers who had surrendered. When the last kingdom succumbed in 221 BCE, King Zheng proclaimed himself Emperor of China: Qin Shihuangdi.