# CHINESE HISTORY – Ancient Period ( to 500 CE )

*Paul Clark, Ph.D.*

**Contents**



## PART I : **China in the Bronze Age (3000 BCE-600 BCE)**

### Overview

It is not known when the first human migrants reached the territory of contemporary China. Excavations of the earliest archeological sites indicate that some areas of China have been inhabited for between 5000 and 6000 years by people groups who were likely ancestors of today's Chinese. Evidence for this includes pictographic writing found on ancient bones, pottery shards with identifiable food stuffs on it and the like. Civilization in China began to emerge in three distinct areas. One, the area east of the bend of the Yellow River in Henan and Shanxi provinces, is where northern Chinese civilization began to emerge. Another developed in the eastern areas of the Yangzi River Valley and, over the course of time, largely merged with the first. The third developed in the far southeastern regions of China along the border with Vietnam. Both China and Vietnam lay claim to this culture in the far southeast. Unlike the cultures that emerged in the Nile River Valley, the Indus River Valley and the land between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers (the Fertile Crescent), Chinese civilization evolved with very little influence from one of the other of the earliest human civilizations.

### Events.

**The Xia.** The first organized government we have record of in China is the Xia Dynasty. According to the most recent archaeological evidence, it existed from approximately 2205 BCE to roughly 1600 BCE (the early-to-middle Bronze Age years). The Xia people inhabited an area that straddled the Yellow River in what is today the provinces of Shanxi, Henan and possibly as far east as Shandong. The Yellow River nourished ancient Chinese civilization. However, it is also known as "China's Sorrow" because even though the silt it deposited on the north China plains made this land very fertile, it also caused the river to flood catastrophically every few years. It is very difficult to know just how far east the Xia people lived because the Yellow River also changed course dramatically every few hundred years and washed away settlements. Indeed, in the Xia Period, the Yellow River emptied into the Yellow Sea in an alluvial plain that would eventually become the home of the coastal city of Tianjin. Later, the Yellow River emptied into the Yellow Sea south of Shandong Peninsula (a distance of more than 400 miles!) until 1853 CE at which time it returned back north of Shandong Peninsula. The Yellow River was (and remains) a capricious progenitor. It is not known what group, tribe, government or state preceded the Xia. It is possible that there was a previously organized state, but that knowledge has been lost to humanity. In the absence of indisputable archaeological and/or historical evidence, it is also possible that the Xia themselves were more mythical than real. However, the preponderance of evidence suggests they did exist, although we know very little about them. The Xia were followed by a group known as the Shang, about whom we know much more.

**The Shang.** The Shang Dynasty ruled from approximately 1600 BCE to 1050 BCE. It was a large and well-organized state and was unrivaled in size and strength for much of its existence by any other in the world except for perhaps the New Kingdom in Egypt. Although the heart of the Shang Dynasty was old Xia territory, the area they governed was significantly larger. The borders of Shang territory were: the Yangzi River in the south, the Yellow Sea and East China Sea in the east, the area near Beijing in the northeast and Shaanxi province in the west. The most well-known monarch of the Shang Dynasty was its founder, Cheng Tang or Tang the Successful (r. 1675 BCE-1646 BCE) who, the chronicles tell us, dispatched the last Xia monarch.

**The First Historical Monarchs.** There were approximately 30 kings of the Shang Dynasty. We know the names of 12 of them. There does not appear to have been a fixed capital city in the early centuries of the dynasty. However, in later years, the capital city was Yin, a large city which we believe encompassed more than 16 square

miles. Today, this site is near the contemporary city of Anyang. It is during the Shang period that Chinese writing first emerged. It is not clear what caused the downfall of last Shang monarch. Documents produced more than 1000 years after the collapse of the Shang mention that the Shang monarchs were very fond of wine and strong drink and that this overindulgence caused them to offend Heaven. Other documents paint a much darker portrait of the last Shang monarch, depicting him as a cruel and depraved man who drank from the skulls of vanquished foes. Nonetheless, the Shang were dispatched in an action which started as a large-scale slave revolt. Their former vassal, King Wu "the Martial" (r. 1046 BCE-1043BCE) of the Zhou is credited with overthrowing the Shang. The Zhou Dynasty (1046 BCE-771 BCE) was even larger and more organized than was the Shang, although there does not appear to have been a revolutionary break between the dynasties. Zhou territory extended south of the Yangzi River and west into Sichuan Province.

**The Zhou Dynasty.** King Wu recognized that he was more suited to life as a warrior than to the day-to-day administration of a vast kingdom. He is well known for naming his brother, the Duke of Zhou, to the position of power within his kingdom. This was fortuitous because King Wu died two years later, leaving a young son as heir. The Duke of Zhou then acted as regent for a number of years but then voluntarily yielded power when his nephew came of age. There was no known bloodshed in the transition. The Duke of Zhou is remembered for his moral rectitude and is, because Confucius memorialized him in the *Analects*, the single most influential political figure in either the Shang or Zhou periods. It is perhaps the idea of the Duke of Zhou, rather than the man himself, that Confucius characterized as the archetype political leader for all of China. Confucius depicted him as one who governed righteously but with a light hand. For Confucius, it was a time when all was right and true with the government. The Zhou state fragmented in 771 BCE just before Iron Age technology appeared, although vestiges lasted until well into the period of the Warring Kingdoms (475 BCE-221 BCE).

## Government

**The Structure of Government.** The Shang government 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. 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 monarchs built on the old Shang organization rather than reinventing the system, so it is possible, to a certain extent, to extrapolate backwards. 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.

**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.

## Culture

**Early Religion.** Our knowledge of early Bronze Age culture is largely limited to that which archaeologists have been able to reveal through excavations. In particular, our knowledge of the religion practiced in early Bronze Age China is limited to the existence of bone divination. It is believed that a holy man or shaman wrote on animal bones, heated them and interpreted them based on how they responded to heat. He acted as something of an oracle in this rather elaborate ritual. Other vestiges of "civil religion" from the late Bronze Age remain in the form of the Jade Emperor and the concept of heaven, earth and the underworld. The Jade Emperor ruled over the heavenly court. The ruler of earth was known as the Son of Heaven. In this way, the concept of the "Mandate of Heaven" began to emerge to describe the divine right of monarchs to rule in the Zhou period (1046 BCE-771 BCE). Part of the job of the monarch was to maintain harmony between heaven and earth. It is interesting to note that monarchs could and

very often did lose the "Mandate of Heaven." In practice, this could happen if a monarch ruled poorly, taxed the people too heavily or otherwise engaged in behavior inappropriate for the Son of Heaven. Earthly harmony was then lost.

**The Arts.** Bronze Age art forms were also in evidence in China. Craftsmen, potters and sculptors were generally well advanced for the time, particularly in bronze metallurgy. Craftsmen fired colorfully-decorated pottery. Motifs sometimes consisted of geometric patterns and/or human and animal designs. Pottery ran the gamut between richly adorned, ceremonial items to those used in everyday life. Bronze itself, being very, very expensive is not as ubiquitous as pottery in the archaeological record. It is believed that only the elites were able to possess it. Nonetheless, bronze castings reveal a very high level of sophistication and artistry. Some items that have been discovered are very large, thick and heavy. This indicates that the craftsmen were able to maintain consistent temperatures in the casting and cooling processes.

**Literature.** In the late Bronze Age, some of the first recorded literary works emerged in China. The most famous is the *Shijing* (Book of Poetry). This work is a compilation of 311 poems gathered between the 11$^{th}$ and 7$^{th}$ centuries BCE. It is believed that some were handed down as ritual songs from the Shang period and other poems are attributed to the Duke of Zhou, who lived in the 11$^{th}$ century. Given the mention of the Duke of Zhou, it is easy to understand that Confucius is given credit for compiling this work, although there is no way to verify this claim. Nonetheless, this book is one of five in the Confucian cannon. It is important to note that the religion espoused by Confucius did not exist in an organized form before he himself began teaching in the 6$^{th}$ century BCE. However, many of the ideals he promoted are believed to have existed in China long before he was born. Other ancient works include the *I Ching* (Book of Changes) and the *Shujing* (Book of Documents).

## Society

**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).

## Economy

**Agriculture.** The economy of Bronze Age China was largely agrarian. Many peasants were serfs or subsistence farmers and barely grew enough food to pay their taxes and survive from season to season. Unlike some of the other Bronze Age cultures, bronze implements were slow to be introduced into the daily life of peasants (and equally slow to be used for military purposes). The reason for this is unknown. Nonetheless, some bronze tools have been unearthed in archaeological sites. This indicates that though peasants were able to scratch a living out of the earth, their ability to produce food in excess was likely limited.

**Diet.** In contrast to conventional wisdom, the Chinese diet in the early and middle Bronze Age was not based on rice. Instead, crops more suited to cultivation on the north China plain were grown including millet, early varieties of wheat, hemp, barely and the like. There is also evidence of the consumption of livestock such as pork and beef. In the southern areas of China where moisture is much more abundant, wet rice agriculture was in use as early as the

4500 BCE. However, it was not introduced into northern China until the late Shang period. Wet rice agriculture is very labor intensive, but good producers were able to grow more than was necessary for consumption by one family. Calories were therefore beginning to be produced in excess in the late Bronze Age, allowing for additional members of society to specialize in pursuits other than agriculture and for a rise in population. As a result, cities grew dramatically larger and more important. Vestiges of pre-wet rice agriculture can be seen in the regional cuisine of contemporary China. For example, the cuisine of north China still shows evidence of more reliance on grains other than rice.

**Currency.** The monetary system of the Shang period (1600 BCE to 1050 BCE) is unknown. It is believed that there was no minting of coins and the like. Jade was sometimes used as currency, as were some kinds of sea shells. It is not clear what specie taxes were paid in or how markets functioned in the absence of coinage. During the Zhou Era (1046 BCE-771 BCE), coins were minted for the first time. They were made of bronze and copper. They do not appear to have had much intrinsic value, but bore the mark of the monarch and therefore carried the weight of officialdom. However, it is not clear how widespread their use was and how well controlled they were by the government.

**Readings**

1) Harold Tanner, *China: A History, Volume 1. From Neolithic Cultures through the Great Qing Empire*, (Hackett Publishing, 2010), pp. 3-82.

2) Patricia Buckley Ebrey, ed., *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook*. (Free Press, 1993), pp. 1-16.

3) Arthur Waley, trans. *The Book of Songs*, (Grove Press, 1996).

4) Cyril Birch, *Anthology of Chinese Literature: Volume 1. From Early Times to the Fourteenth Century*, (Grove Press, 1994), pp. 39-80.

5) Rowan K. Flad and Pochan Chen, *Ancient Central China: Centers and Peripheries along the Yangzi River*, (Cambridge, 2013) pp. 1-42, 287.

6) Li Feng, *Early China: A Social and Cultural History*, (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 1-161.

**Questions for Discussion**

1) Amateur historians often ask the question "which society created the world's first civilization?" The Chinese, the Egyptians, the Mesopotamians and the Indians all like to lay claim to being the first. Do you think this is an important and meaningful question to ask? If so, what assumptions underlie these assertions? What are the criteria used to determine civilization? Is it writing, religion, an organized government, the existence of a monarch, cities, advanced agriculture, etc?

2) The "Mandate of Heaven" is a well-established concept in China. It was, initially, an attempt to legitimize authority through an appeal to religion. Can this sort of appeal be found in other civilizations? What are the components of the "Mandate" and can it be broken down into behavior, world-view, economic policy, etc.? Does a ruler know that he has lost the "Mandate" or is it something that historians can see only after a change in leadership has occurred?

3) In the 300-400 year period of transition between the Bronze Age to the Iron Age, several of the world's most important religions were established. Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism all found expression for the first time during this period. Others, such as Judaism, matured into the religions that are recognizable today. Was there something about this time in human history—and in China—in particular were conditions were just right to incubate and nurture all these new religions?

**Texts**

1) From the *Book of Poetry*, 11th-7th centuries BCE, Number 1

> Here long, there short, is the duckweed;
> On the left, on the right, we gather it.
> The modest, retiring, virtuous, young lady:
> With lutes, small and large, let us give her friendly welcome.
> Here long, there short, is the duckweed;
> On the left, on the right, we cook and present it.
> The modest, retiring, virtuous, young lady:
> With bells and drums let us show our delight in her.

2) From the *Book of Documents*, 3th century BCE, Number 33, compiled by Sima Qian. Attributed to the Duke of Zhou

> From the reign of the Shang founder Tang to that of Di Yi, none did not perform the proper sacrifices and make their virtue bright; none was not a suitable match for Heaven. But then his son, the king Zhou, was greatly dissolute and lax, he attended neither to Heaven, nor to the needs of the people. His people were all as under sentence of death. In the meantime, King Wen did not take the time even to eat a meal while the sun was in the sky, and so he enjoyed the throne of the Zhou people for fifty years.

3) From the *I Ching* (The Book of Changes), Book 1, Part 1, Section 15, *On Modesty*, originally compiled during the Zhou Period

> The destinies of men are subject to immutable laws that must fulfill themselves. But man has it in his power to shape his fate, according as his behavior exposes him to the influence of benevolent or of destructive forces. When a man holds a high position and is nevertheless modest, he shines with the light of wisdom; if he is in a lowly position and is modest, he cannot be passed by. Thus the superior man can carry out his work to the end without boasting of what he has achieved.

# PART II : **China in the Iron Age (Classical Period)**

**Overview**

The period between the slow collapse of the Zhou Dynasty (beginning in the 770s BCE) and the rapid rise of the Qin in the 3rd Century BCE is known by various names—the Western Zhou, the Eastern Zhou, the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States/Kingdoms Period. Each of these uses vastly different dates to provide context for the time and describes different geographical spaces and power structures. It is therefore difficult to describe this period using a short, pithy title. However, this 300-400 year period is one of the most dynamic times in all of Chinese history. Two major new religions were born, there were advances in statehood, iron technology was introduced, new forms of culture found expression and society was reshaped in the image of the First Emperor. Perhaps most importantly, China was unified in 221 BCE—a situation all Chinese rulers have aspired to maintain or recreate. Put succinctly, the concept of "China" was born during this period and is still the primary ideology that dominates the Chinese cultural and political landscape.

**Events**

**Political Fragmentation.** It is difficult to provide the precise date when iron was first introduced into China. Archaeologists argue that there is evidence for the appearance of iron by at least 600 BCE, which is a few hundred years after it first appeared in other parts of the world. It is not clear who introduced it or by what means this knowledge was transmitted. But its effects on the largely moribund Zhou Dynasty, a political entity which existed mostly in name only by this time, were limited. The rulers of the Eastern Zhou period (770 BCE-256 BCE) are generally understood to be figureheads. Rulers were custodians of the "Mandate of Heaven," but possessed very little power. Political fragmentation had already occurred. In the years just before the rise of the Qin in the 3rd Century BCE, there were at least 7 great kingdoms: Yan, Qi, Chu, Qin, Wei, Han and Zhao (other states such as Song, Jin and Zheng had ceased to exist years earlier). The monarchs of these kingdoms operated in a Darwinian environment. They had to govern well in the territory they controlled or risk being overthrown by their own aristocracy or military. But they also operated under the endless threat of invasion from one or more of the other Chinese kingdoms or from one or more of the non-Chinese "barbarian" groups on the periphery. Alliances with unreliable and unsavory partners were necessary for survival. Treachery was often the norm and not the exception in both the domestic and foreign realms. In addition, the monarchs of each kingdom sometimes had difficulty keeping their peasantry and skilled laborers from absconding. If conditions became intolerable in one state, migration to another, though not commonplace, sometimes occurred. Good governance mattered.

**War Between Kingdoms.** The Chinese kingdoms in the 6th and 5th centuries BCE often warred against each other. But these were relatively small affairs at that time, with "gentlemen's agreements" about the rules of warfare and the exchange of prisoners sometimes in evidence. Small armies of several thousand took the field of battle against each other. The total destruction of the enemy, however, was a secondary consideration to the notion that one must not weaken oneself and therefore become a tempting target of one or more of the other monarchs. This situation was destined not to last because as China moved into the 4th century BCE, the intensity of conflict began to escalate. By the early 3rd century, warfare had become a savage affair. Wholesale slaughter of a vanquished foe was increasingly common. Each of the monarchs of the great Chinese kingdoms believed they would one day come to rule all the remaining kingdoms. None would have dared to consider that it would be the Qin.

**The Qin.** The Qin had arisen in the period when the Chinese states were transitioning from playing at war to seeking to completely crush each other. Indeed, many historians argue that it was the combination of the large-scale introduction of iron technology and the threat posed by the Qin that changed the nature of warfare in China. In the 4th and 3rd centuries BCE, several states had attained ascendency over the others. One of the most prominent and powerful in the late 4th century BCE was the Zhao. The Zhao monarchs had ruled well and controlled reasonably fertile land with a stable peasantry. The Zhao governed territory on the northern periphery of Chinese civilization and often faced the threat posed by raiding Xiongnu, a nomadic people group who have disappeared from the human record. Given their geographic position constantly defending against barbarians, they sought out people groups who were even further on the periphery for an alliance and made contact with the Qin. It was a Zhao monarch who was the first to confer an official title on one of the Qin warriors for military service on the frontier. The other Chinese kingdoms perceived of the early Qin as, at best, semi-barbarian. They were certainly not perceived to be fully Chinese. They inhabited the far, far western reaches of Chinese territory along the Wei River and acted as a buffer

from even more brutal barbarian people groups. This geographic setting, rather than acting solely as a weakness, insulated the Qin from the existential threats posed by the political and military machinations the other Chinese states in the east. Qin territory was relatively easy to defend. This allowed the Qin to develop economically, militarily and culturally facing constant threat, but rarely the threat of complete annihilation. Nonetheless, when they fought, they rarely took prisoners. There was little room for sentimentally on the frontier. Perhaps most importantly, the Qin monarchs created a "state of war"—that is to say—they organized their state for perpetual conflict. There was a clear military-style hierarchy, elements of which were also imposed on the civilian population, and severe consequences for warrior or civilian alike if one failed at ones duty. On the other hand, the Qin recognized excellence and loyalty, promoted warriors who displayed uncommon valor and rewarded peasants who farmed well with additional land and other considerations.

**King Zheng.** Bringing political order out of chaos in a brutal age was an extremely messy business. Often, it was the most ruthless, callous warrior who won the day. In the case of the unification of China under the Qin in the 3rd century BCE, the victorious armies were often instructed to take no prisoners. Hundreds of thousands of enemy warriors were executed after surrendering in battle. The architect of this bloodshed was King Zheng (260-210 BCE) of the kingdom of Qin. King Zheng inherited the position from his father, King Zhuangxiang, who died in the year 247 BCE. Though King Zheng's paternity has been called into question, his ability to rule as well as reign has never been called into question. He possessed exceptional talent, discernment and decisiveness. But he was also a megalomaniac. As a young man during the time when he still had a regent to help him govern, he was made aware of a plot against him and ordered the gruesome executions of all the plotters, even down to third degree familial relations! From that point on, only those who wished to die slowly and painfully opposed him both at home and in the other kingdoms.

**Qin Ascendency.** Notwithstanding palace intrigue, conflict with other states continued unabated. By 230 BCE, the Qin had become the most powerful, wealthy kingdom in China. They controlled approximately 1/3rd of China's land under cultivation and 1/3rd of its population. The balance of power had decisively shifted in their favor. The final decade of conflict was surprisingly short but predictably brutal. Unfortunately, an absence of war chronicles deprives us of many of the details. The Qin armies slowly conquered each of the 6 other kingdoms one by one beginning with the kingdom of Han in 230 BCE. Zhao fell in 228, most of Yan in 226 and Wei in 225 BCE. The greatest challenge was the kingdom of Chu, which fell in 223 BCE. Finally, the relatively distant kingdom of Qi, after putting up futile resistance, fell in 221 BCE.

**The First Emperor.** After unifying China politically, King Zheng began the process of consolidation. Not content with just being the victorious King of Qin, he adopted the title of "shihuangdi" 始皇帝—which literally means the "First Emperor." In taking this title, Qin Shihuangdi sent a statement to all of Chinese civilization that he had in mind a massive, all-powerful state with him as the undisputed ruler. All vestiges of the old, feudal system were to be swept away.

**The Han.** The First Emperor was successful in implementing his revolution. His reforms were comprehensive and durable. However, he is also remembered as one of the most despicable human beings to have ever ruled China in its more than 4000 years of recorded history. The same brutality that allowed him to overwhelm his adversaries on the battlefield was visited upon anyone who opposed him in his vast, new kingdom. While alive, no one dared to oppose him. However, upon his death, the people of China had had enough. Few mourned in passing in 210 BCE. Soon thereafter, there was unrest in the land. By 206 BCE, the dynasty had collapsed. The Qin had lost the Mandate of Heaven.

**Liu Bang.** In the midst of the brief period of chaos that followed the Qin collapse, a new leader emerged, a commoner named Liu Bang (259-195 BCE). Liu Bang started his career as a low-ranking military officer in the Qin armies but quickly ran afoul of the authorities after the death of the First Emperor. For a while, he and his men were considered bandits and/or rebels. However, he began to successfully command troops in battle, first leading small groups, and then increasingly leading larger armies in the invasion and conquest of the old kingdoms. By 202 BCE, large-scale fighting had ended and Liu Bang had become Emperor Gao, the founding Emperor of the Han Dynasty. The Han period is considered the "golden age" of classical China. Indeed, the dominant ethnic group in China still call themselves the "People of the Han."

**Emperor Wu of Han.** The Han Dynasty lasted, in one form or another, from 202 BCE to 220 CE. It was, in every way—geographic size, population, culture, economic and military strength—a rival to the Roman Empire. Indeed, it was larger and more powerful than the Roman Empire for most of its existence. These two empires were aware of each other, but had very little contact. There is no known record of official correspondence between the two. The most powerful and prominent ruler of Han China was the Emperor Wu. Emperor Wu ruled for 54 years between 141-87 BCE and oversaw the geographic expansion of the empire to its greatest extent. At one point, the borders of Han China reached from what is today the Kazakhstan/Kyrgyzstan border in the southwest to Korea in the northeast, from Mongolia in the north to Vietnam in the southeast. Like the Roman Empire, Han China was destined to slowly diminish in size, strength and vitality. It was followed by a period of fragmentation which lasted from approximately 220 CE to the 6th century.

## Government

**De-Feudalization.** Upon the cessation of major combat in 221 BCE, the First Emperor imposed much the same structure on the rest of his kingdom that he had used in his home kingdom. In addition, he embarked on a system of "de-feudalization" where 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 ascendency of the Han, 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!

**Standardization.** Administratively, China 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 accountable to the Emperor personally. Though not strictly the governor's to command, they had immense power over the civilian population. This was generally not a hereditary position. Above all, 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. And then, of course, the Qin were also know for standardizing weights and measurements, the writing system, road widths (50 paces wide) and even axel 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.

## Culture

**Cultural Integration.** Culture in Iron Age China (and particularly under the Qin) was dependent on the monarch and the state. The chronicles tell us that the First Emperor (r. 220-210 BCE) was a tyrant who sought to control society and culture at virtually every level. Still, the area ruled by the First Emperor, though slightly less than one-third of the area of contemporary China, was nevertheless a very diverse place. The most important characteristic which indicated at least partial cultural integration of Iron Age culture in China was language. The First Emperor, not content with this state of affairs, successfully standardized the writing system and created a more common language. This made possible all the other elements of common culture— religion, shared heritage and experiences, similar social habits, related cuisine and the arts.

**Language.** Contemporary Chinese uses ideographs (characters) as a writing system. There is no alphabet nor syllabary—only characters which began to emerge in the early Bronze Age. Archaeological evidence indicates that as early as the 13th century BCE, pictographs identifiable as early characters were written on bones. Over the

centuries, these characters evolved and were systematized into the language we now know as "old Chinese." Linguistic archaeologists believe that old Chinese was likely less tonal than contemporary Mandarin Chinese, but was still based on ideographs. During the Iron Age, old Chinese in its written form was widely used among the elites in the old kingdoms and was the common thread weaving together the disparate kingdoms. It made possible significant people migrations, the exchange of ideas and best practices and eventually, under the Qin, the attempt at full, cultural and social integration. In addition, calligraphy became a well-established art during the classical age and is still practiced today as one of the traditional art forms.

**Confucianism.** The most important religion to emerge in the Iron Age was Confucianism. Unlike Buddhism, it is indigenous to China. Confucianism originated with the historical figure, Master Kung (Kung Fuzi), who was born in the kingdom of Lu in approximately 551 BCE. Though Confucius lived in a highly fragmented, fluid political environment, generational memory existed of a golden age, a fabled time of stability when sage-rulers governed judiciously and with integrity. Confucius was the quintessential wandering sage, a teacher who moved between the many kingdoms of China offering his knowledge and services to whomever he encountered. Confucius taught that rulers and the ruled should act in a moral fashion and that if everyone understood their place in society and acted in accordance with his teachings, society would function as it had in the days of old. Confucianism was a very public religion in the early Iron Age. It applied the patriarchal family system and filial piety to the state. The emperor was to act as the great father and the people were to follow and revere the emperor as they would their father or ancestors. The most well-known of Confucius teachings are found in the *Analects* (sayings). The *Analects* were compiled by Confucius' disciples in the years after his death. No works written by Confucius himself are known to have ever existed. Confucianism was widely practiced in the years before the Qin came to power, but began to flourish during the period of the Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) when it was adopted by the authorities as a model of moral and social rectitude. Confucianism is not a monotheistic religion, does not have a well-articulated theory on the afterlife and emphasizes the present rather than the hereafter. Today, Confucianism in China is largely a philosophy and is not widely practiced as a religion.

**Daoism**. Daoism emerged at roughly the same time as Confucianism and is often described by Chinese scholars as its near opposite. Whereas Confucianism was a public religion, Daoism was private. In fact, throughout most of history, many Chinese were willing to embrace both because they addressed different areas of life. Whereas Confucian philosophy is exoteric and provides a practical, moral code for public life, Daoist ideology emphasizes the esoteric, the mystical and provides a guide for private life. There are two major texts in Daoism which are associated with the philosophers Laozi and Zhuangzi. Though there is no evidence that either of these two were real historical figures, they are credited with compiling the foundational texts entitled the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*. These works are believed to have been compiled over a period of centuries and served to explain the *Way* (the Dao). The philosophy of Daoism does not seek to find the single, objective truth, but rather points to the Dao as one way of understanding truth. Other than the Jade Emperor, it is difficult to speak of a single, monotheistic deity in Daoism. Daoism, like all Chinese religions, has not fared well under the leadership of the government of the People's Republic of China. Other religions, such as Buddhism, have such a small number of followers today that they have very little influence on society in the People's Republic.

**The Arts.** The Arts in Iron Age China are best exemplified by the Terra Cotta Warriors, which constitute a very small portion of the burial complex of the First Emperor, Qin Shihuangdi. There are believed to be several terra cotta armies, each of which was to protect the emperor in the afterlife, but only one has been partially excavated. The one area which has been partially excavated encompasses more than 7 acres and is composed of 3 vaults. In the vaults are at least 8000 statues of soldiers, hundreds of horses, chariots and other war implements all situated in battle formation. The statues are approximately life sized, made of clay, painted, with none of the warriors' faces the same. Indeed, many archeologists believe that each of the warriors, which are anatomically correct and lifelike, represent a different person. It took 700,000 laborers from all over the emperor's kingdom more than 36 years to complete the complex.

**Sculpture.** The skill and sophistication of the sculptors, artists and laborers compares favorably to their counterparts in the Roman Empire. Each of the elements of the production process required the considerable expertise of 5-6 disciplines: sculptors, painters, smithies, metallurgists, chemists and the like. Each of the Terra Cotta Warriors was produced in three different phases. First, the legs were solid clay and had to be fired and cooled slowly and carefully in order to diminish cracking. Second, the torso was hollow and composed of cord-like sections of clay laid upon each other until completed. It was also fired and cooled using a different method than the

legs. Third, the heads were hollow like the torso but were sculpted individually. Perhaps more impressive than the skill shown by the artisans was the organizational skill exhibited by the logisticians who provided the resources necessary to sustain the work force and the materials needed to complete the job. And then, of course, when the First Emperor died, all of this remarkable display was covered over and forgotten for approximately 2200 years.

**A UNESCO World Heritage Site.** The confluence of a shared concept of the afterlife (religion), the skill of the sculptors, painters and artisans (culture), and the organizational skills of the imperial household (government), provided the world with one of the most important cultural sites in the history of mankind. Only one very small portion of the First Emperor's necropolis has been excavated. In due course, the Chinese government might see fit to open the actual tomb of the First Emperor. If what remains undiscovered is as impressive as what has already been discovered, this UNESCO world heritage site will be rivaled in importance only by the great pyramids of Egypt.

## Society

**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 19$^{th}$ 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.

## Economy

**Agricultural Advances.** The economy of Iron Aga China was largely agrarian. That is not to say that there were not advances in technology which made the lives of working peasants, artisans and laborers much more productive than their ancestors. Indeed, the Chinese economy benefited immensely from the shift from Bronze Age technology to Iron Age technology. Iron implements made possible the expansion of agriculture into marginal lands which had previously not been under cultivation. It was possible in the late Warring Kingdoms period (475 BCE-221 BCE) for your average peasant to possess iron hoes, scythes, plows, axes and more, all of which were utilized in agriculture. Iron was also used in carts used to transport goods and in yokes to harness oxen both on the roads and in the fields. In addition, iron was used for shovels to dig irrigation ditches, in dredging equipment and the like. Finally, iron cooking utensils became widespread during the Iron Age. Because of advances in agriculture, populations increased dramatically. There were also more people shifting from subsistence farming to other endeavors where they were allowed to specialize in skilled professions and become masons, smithies, farriers, carpenters, coopers, and the like.

Others became educators, philosophers, clergy, accountants, bookkeepers and bureaucrats. Still others were dedicated to the art of war and became fletchers, swordsmiths, bowmen, professional soldiers, foundrymen, etc. Many of these professions had existed in the Bronze Age, but in much smaller numbers. Their proliferation in the Iron Age made possible the classical age of human history.

**Taxes.** As more land was brought under cultivation and the land already under cultivation was made more productive, property and goods could be more effectively taxed. This enriched treasuries, made possible more stable governments and created predictable government budgets. One of the initiatives the Qin (221 BCE-206 BCE) were known for was standardizing the monetary system and for bringing the minting of coinage under the control of the central government. This allowed for the proliferation of markets and facilitated the exchange of goods and services. Taxes were paid both in an amount of the government's choosing and in a specie of its choosing. It was also possible to apply this new-found tax revenue to the military, which was also using new iron weapons to great effect. In essence, the shift from Bronze Age technology to Iron Age technology created the conditions which made possible the unification of China. It also led to some of the greatest bloodshed known to man at that time. As above, taxes were reduced and the economy generally flourished when the Han ascended to power in 202 BCE.

**Readings**

Harold Tanner, *China: A History, Volume 1. From Neolithic Cultures through the Great Qing Empire,* (Hackett Publishing, 2010), pp. 59-130

Patricia Buckley Ebrey, ed., *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook.* (Free Press, 1993), pp. 14-85

Cyril Birch, *Anthology of Chinese Literature: Volume 1. From Early Times to the Fourteenth Century,* (Grove Press, 1994), pp. 81-153

Simon Leys, trans., *The Analects of Confucius*, (Norton Press, 1997), pp. 3-101

Stephen Mitchell trans., *Tao Te Ching by Lao Tzu: An Illustrated Journey*, (Frances Lincoln Limited Press, 1999), pp 1-85

Lothar von Falkenhausen, *Chinese Society in the Age of Confucius*, (University of California Press, 2006)

**Questions for Discussion**

1) Many historians believe that the strength of the Kingdom of Qin derived from its geographic position on the periphery of Chinese civilization. This, however, is debatable. This approach minimizes the role of strong leadership, fails to recognize unorganized or poorly led opponents, does not take into account the effects of natural disasters such as famines, floods, etc. and does not address luck and good timing. Using the information found in the readings and your knowledge of Iron Age China, evaluate which of the above reasons (or one of your own) created the conditions which allowed for the triumph of the Qin.

2) Confucianism and Taoism emerged at roughly the same time. Both religions have shaped and molded Chinese society in profound ways. Confucianism is widely known around the world and credited for helping to create Chinese culture and for influencing the cultures of Korea, Vietnam and Japan, to name a few. Why is Taoism so poorly known around the world? Why does it too not receive equal credit for influencing Chinese culture? In order to answer the question, you will need to be able to articulate the primary tenants of each faith. You will need to know how one of the religions was used to legitimize the ruler of the Han Dynasty and the other was not.

3) The Qin set up a system which lasted (with some minor changes) until the fall of the Han Dynasty in the 3rd century CE. Yet, the Qin (and in particular the first emperor) have been vilified by the Chinese since 210 BCE. Analyze the Chinese approach to official histories, how each succeeding dynasty has authored the work on the loss of the Mandate of Heaven by the preceding dynasty. In other words, how is history understood by the Chinese? What is its purpose and what are the aims of the authors.

4) The concept of the "Iron Age" as an organizing principle for historians has both strengths and weaknesses. Periodization can take many shapes and forms. How do historians determine periods? What are the criteria upon which one may decide that one period has ended and another epoch has begun? Do abstractions such as "Bronze Age," "Classical Period," "Iron Age," "Golden Age" and the like have meaning for China? Once applied to China using one set of criteria, can these be applied across the world using the same criteria?

**Texts**

1) Lao Tzu. From the *Tao Te Ching*, 7th century BCE

> Those who know don't talk.
> Those who talk don't know.
>
> Close your mouth, block your senses,
> blunt your sharpness, untie your knots,
> soften your glare, settle your dust.
> This is the primal identity.
>
> Be like the Tao.
> It can't be approached or withdrawn from,
> benefitted or harmed, honored or brought into disgrace.
> It gives itself up continually.
> This is why it endures.

2) Confucius. From the *Analects*, 5th century BCE

> The Master said: "At home, a young man must respect his parents; but abroad, he must respect his elders. He should talk little, but with good faith; love all people, but associate with the virtuous. Having done this, if he still has energy to spare, let him study literature."
>
> The Master said: "Do not worry if you are without position; worry lest you do not deserve a position. Do you worry if you are not famous; worry lest you do not deserve to be famous."

3. The Emperor Qin Shihuangdi, 3rd century BCE, on the issue of the control of knowledge. Recorded by the ancient historian Sima Qi'an

> The emperor ordered his ministers to debate this question:
>
> The Prime Minister Li Si said, "The Five Emperors did not emulate each other nor did the Three Dynasties" adopt each other's ways, yet all had good government. This is no paradox, because times had changed. Now Your Majesty has built up this great empire to endure for generations without end. Naturally this passes the comprehension of a foolish pedant. Chunyu Yueh spoke about the Three Dynasties, but they are hardly worth taking as examples. In times gone by different barons fought among themselves and gathered wandering scholars. Today, however, the empire is at peace, all laws and order come from one single source, the common people support themselves by farming and handicrafts, while students study the laws and prohibitions.
>
> "Now these scholars learn only from the old, not from the new, and use their learning to oppose our rule and confuse the black-headed people." As Prime Minister I must speak out on pain of death. In former times when the world, torn by chaos and disorder, could not be united, different states arose and argued from the past to condemn the present, using empty rhetoric to cover up and confuse the real issues, and employing their learning to oppose what was established by authority. Now Your Majesty has conquered the whole world, distinguished between black and white, see unified standards. Yet these opinionated scholars get together to slander the laws and judge each new decree according to their own school of thought, opposing it secretly in their hearts while discussing it openly in the streets. They brag to the sovereign to win fame, put forward strange arguments to gain distinction, and incite the mob to spread rumors. If this is not prohibited, the sovereign's prestige will suffer and factions will be formed among his subjects. Far better put a stop to it!

"I humbly propose that all historical records but those of Qin be burned. If anyone who is not a court scholar dares to keep the ancient songs, historical records or writings of the hundred schools, these should be confiscated and burned by the provincial governor and army commander. Those who in conversation dare to quote the old songs and records should be publicly executed; those who use old precedents to oppose the new order should have their families wiped out; and officers who know of such cases but fail to report them should be punished in the same way.

"If thirty days after the issuing of this order the owners of these books have still not had them destroyed, they should have their face tattooed and be condemned to hard labor at the Great Wall. The only books which need not be destroyed are those dealing with medicine, divination, and agriculture. Those who want to study the law can learn it from the officers. The emperor sanctioned this proposal.