

Background

The foundations of Chinese civilization reach back thousands of years to the Neolithic and Bronze Ages. The Neolithic or Stone Age lasted from approximately 12,000 – 2000 BCE. The earliest distinct Chinese civilization is called the Xia Dynasty which lasted from approximately 2070 – 1600 BCE. These early cultures are represented by ritual and ornamental objects made of jade and bronze, pottery, and bone. Throughout the long and varied history of China, art has played an important role.

Shang Dynasty (1700-1122 BCE)

The Shang dynasty is believed to have been founded by a rebel leader who overthrew the last Xia ruler. Its civilization was based on agriculture, augmented by hunting and raising livestock. Two important events of the period were the development of a writing system, as revealed in archaic Chinese inscriptions found on tortoise shells and flat cattle bones (commonly called oracle bones) and the use of bronze metallurgy. A number of ceremonial bronze vessels with inscriptions date from the Shang dynasty period; the workmanship on the bronzes attests to a high level of civilization.

A line of hereditary Shang kings ruled over much of northern China, and Shang troops fought frequent wars with neighboring settlements and nomadic herdsman from the inner Asian steppes. The capitals, one of which was at the site of the modern city of Anyang, were centers of glittering court life. Court rituals to propitiate spirits and to honor sacred ancestors were highly developed. In addition to his secular position, the king was the head of the ancestor- and spirit-worship cult. Evidence from the royal tombs indicates that royal personages were buried with articles of value, presumably for use in the afterlife. Perhaps for the same reason, hundreds of commoners, who may have been slaves, were buried alive with the royal corpse.

Zhou Dynasty (1045-256 BCE) (“joh”)

The Zhou were a northwestern Chinese people who moved into the central plains and overthrew the Shang. The Zhou tribes were very successful at controlling water and farming techniques which led to them grow and development large communities. This success allowed them to build many temples and palaces and obtain resources which allowed them to conquer and extend the Shang territories. The Zhou Dynasty was a feudalist society until the 700s BCE, when the

landowners' increasing wealthy and power gave them the opportunity to challenge the king. This brought on the Warring State Period. During this era, regional warlords annexed smaller states around them and consolidated their power. By the 3rd century BCE, seven major states had emerged as the dominant powers in China. The king was more of a figurehead rather than an actual ruler.

Chinese culture changed radically during the Zhou Dynasty, as power extended across family lines to create aristocratic cities and principalities. Bronzes lost their religious associations and became instead ornate symbols of personal status. Because clay was cheaper, ceramic copies of bronze ritual items were placed in burials. Jade work flourished. Three philosophies emerged--Confucianism, Daoism and Legalism, and the Chinese literary tradition began. Unfortunately the last Zhou kings became greedy and cruel to their people which led to their overthrow.

Qin Dynasty (221-210 BCE) (“chin”)

Qin Shi Huang became king of the strong Qin state when he was only 13 years old. This dynamic leader took his armies and defeated and unified the "warring states" of the Zhou era and declared himself China's first emperor.

During its reign, the Qin Dynasty achieved increased trade, improved agriculture, and military security. The abolition of feudalism and adherence to Legalist philosophies strengthened the central government and gave it direct control of the masses and access to a much larger workforce. This allowed for the construction of ambitious projects, such as connecting and extending the wall on the northern border, now known as the Great Wall of China. Under the Qin Dynasty, currency, weights and measures and the writing system were standardized.

As soon as he became King, Qin transported 700,000 men from all over China to construct a tomb for himself. The project continued until he died 36 years later. It became by far the most elaborate tomb in the world, a complex of many chambers around a central tomb the height of a 25-storey 25 building. Buried with him in his tomb were more than 7,000 terra-cotta soldiers and horses; obviously, this dynasty supported a sophisticated ceramic industry. Archaeologist believe they have only uncovered a small amount and new pits are being discovered, but left excavated as we do not have the technology to prevent the artifacts from losing their painted colors and form.

The Emperor reigned with tight control, hundreds of thousands of peasant died while building his temples, palaces and tomb. His strict controls and ideas created opposition especially from Confucian scholars and executed many he suspected of plotting against him as well as burning books which countered his commands. Unfortunately the Emperor's sons were unable to keep control and peasant rebellions arose. The rebels looted Emperor Qin's new tomb to obtain weapons and destroyed much of the warriors and objects found there.

Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) (“hahn”)

Military expansion, political centralization, and cultural achievements characterize the Han Dynasty, which set the stage for the period known as China's golden age. The Han retained and improved the centralized government of the Qin. Introducing a “civil service” exam for those who wanted to serve in government which set a standard for all future dynasties.

The Han invented paper and lead-glazed ceramics, and greatly improved silk-weaving techniques. Their quest for alliances with foreign powers prompted them to establish an extensive ‘silk trade’ route across Central Asia linking China to the West. In fact, the Han Dynasty was comparable in power and size to the Roman Empire.

The land trade routes were supplemented by sea routes which extended from the Red Sea to East Africa, India, China, and Southeast Asia. In total the Silk Road extended for 4,000 miles. Trade on the Silk Road was a significant factor in the development of the great civilizations of China, India, Ancient Egypt, Persia, Arabia, and Ancient Rome, and in several respects helped lay the foundations for the modern world. Though silk was certainly the major trade item from China, many other goods were traded, and various technologies, religions and philosophies also traveled along the Silk Road.

An emphasis on funerary art is evident in tombs artfully decorated with figures and geometric shapes; these images provide clues to Han costumes, architecture, and aristocratic pastimes.

Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE)

The Chinese empire reaches its greatest extent until the 18th century. Chinese culture, language and politics dominate the Far East c. 660. The Golden Age of Chinese poetry with the great poets Li Bai and Du Fu.

Printing was invented and Porcelain pottery techniques were invented during this dynasty.

The Northern & Southern Song Dynasties (960-1279 CE)

This time period saw struggles for control between the traditional North population center around the Huang He (Yellow) River and the rise of the Southern rice growing regions. Large growth in population led to shift from aristocratic elite to bureaucratic elite.

The capital came to Beijing for the first time. Many innovations such as moveable type, gunpowder warfare and engineering and naval improvements. The visual arts during the Song Dynasty were heightened by new developments such as advances in landscape and portrait painting. The gentry elite engaged in the arts as accepted pastimes of the cultured scholar-official, including [painting](#), composing [poetry](#), and writing [calligraphy](#).^[1]