

Module 3: Classical Civilizations and Religious Traditions

Topic 3 Content: Dynasties of Classical China

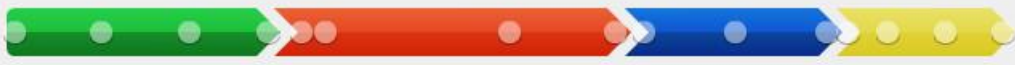

Introduction

Dynasties of Classical China

Introduction

Chinese culture began in the basin of the Huang He (or Yellow River) around 1500 B.C. (B.C.E.) Classical China was governed by a series of ruling families called dynasties. Click on each of the events on the timeline to learn more about Classical China's dynasties.

Image: "Mother Huang He" / Mother of the Yellow River in Langzhou



Shang Dynasty Zhou Dynasty Qin Dynasty Han Dynasty

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Dynasty Begins

Dynasties of Classical China


Dynasty Begins

The Shang dynasty began around 1750 B.C. (B.C.E.). These early Chinese people were mostly farmers and are well-known for their skills using bronze to make beautiful artwork, weaponry, and ceremonial vessels.

Image: The Is Mu Wu Ding is the largest and heaviest bronzeware found from the Shang Dynasty (Photo Credit: Rosemania CC BY-SA 3.0)



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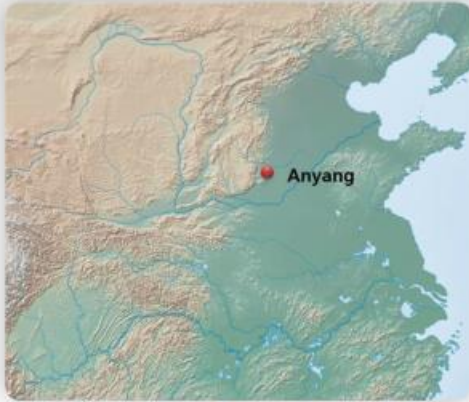
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Topic 3 Content: Dynasties of Classical China

Rulers

Dynasties of Classical China


Rulers



The Shang dynasty was ruled by an aristocracy, which is hereditary rule by wealthy landowners. Kings during the Shang dynasty built large cities in several locations, but centered the rule in the city of Anyang. Cities during this time period had many large structures including walls, palaces, and tombs for royalty. While the king was the highest authority, the kingdom was divided into sections overseen by warlords chosen by the king. The Shang king was at the top of the social structure, along with other wealthy families. Peasants and merchants fell under these rulers.

Image: The location of Anyang on the China Plain

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Writing and Religion

Dynasties of Classical China

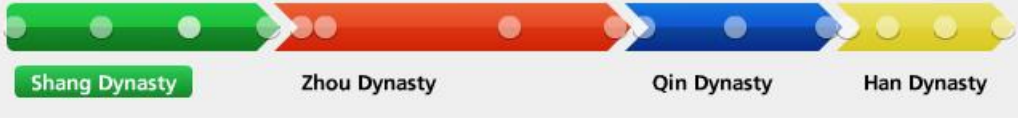
Writing and Religion



Religion during the Shang dynasty was polytheistic and people worshipped a number of gods that were placed in a hierarchy. The first evidence of pictographic writing was seen during this time period and has been found on oracle bones. During the Shang dynasty, priests would use oracle bones to make predictions about everything ranging from the king's rule to the weather. First, the priest would scratch impressions into a bone and then apply heated metal. This heated metal caused the bone to crack and then the priest would seek predictions in the shape and nature of the cracks.

Chinese people during the Shang dynasty had a strong belief in the afterlife. Often, human sacrifices would be placed in tombs with the ancient kings in order to provide them with company. In addition, the ancient Chinese people held their ancestors in high regard and would venerate, or revere, them because they believed that they had the ability to improve or make more difficult the lives of their living ancestors.

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Image: Oracle bone with Chinese writing from the Shang Dynasty (Photo Credit: BabelStone CC BY-SA 3.0)


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Dynasty Ends


Dynasties of Classical China

Dynasty Ends



The end of the Shang dynasty came around 1045 B.C. (B.C.E.) as the last of the Shang kings was defeated at the Battle of Muye. The battle was part of a civil war between the Shang king and one of his warlords.

Image: A bronze weapon from the Shang dynasty



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Dynasty Begins

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Dynasty Begins

The Zhou dynasty began around 1045 B.C. (B.C.E.) after the Battle of Muye and lasted for over eight hundred years. This time period was relatively peaceful.

Image: Chinese silk from the 4th Century B.C. (B.C.E.)



The diagram shows a horizontal timeline with four colored segments: green for the Shang Dynasty, red for the Zhou Dynasty, blue for the Qin Dynasty, and yellow for the Han Dynasty. A callout box labeled 'Dynasty Begins' points to the start of the Zhou Dynasty segment.

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Rulers


Dynasties of Classical China

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The ruling structure of the Zhou dynasty was similar to that of the Shang dynasty. Leadership remained in the hands of a king, along with the wealthy aristocracy. Due in part to their conquering of the Shang rulers and the depravity that they thought had been exhibited by the Shang leaders, kings during the Zhou dynasty felt that they were given the right and duty to rule through the Mandate of Heaven. They believed that Heaven granted the right to rule to a just leader, and could similarly revoke that right if the ruler was unjust by allowing for someone else to overthrow their leadership. The ancient Chinese people assigned divine influence to their kings and it was the king's duty to please the gods by ruling appropriately.

Image: King Wu of Zhou Dynasty



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Changes in Farming

Dynasties of Classical China

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The Zhou dynasty saw many technological advancements, particularly in the area of farming. The Chinese people completed large-scale water projects in order to irrigate crops. In addition, working with iron allowed for the creation of new types of farming tools, particularly the iron plow towards the end of the Zhou dynasty. This advancement helped increase food production.

Image: Axe head from the Zhou dynasty



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Dynasty Ends

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The Zhou dynasty ended in 221 B.C. after China experienced over 200 years of civil war called the Era of Warring States.

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Dynasty Begins

Dynasties of Classical China

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After several hundred years of civil war at the end of the Zhou dynasty, the Qin dynasty began in 221 B.C. (B.C.E.) when Qin Shi Huangdi emerged victorious and began a new dynasty. The Qin dynasty was China's first empire, since Qin Shi Huangdi gained control of all of China and unified it. China was no longer regionally-controlled by wealthy landowners and all direction came from the central government. The central government was organized into a large bureaucracy including a civil group, a military group, and then a group of people who would report to the emperor about any dishonesty or fraud on the part of government workers.

Image: A statue of Emperor Qin Shi Huangdi



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The Great Wall

Dynasties of Classical China

The Great Wall

For some time, northern China had been susceptible to invasion by northern tribes living in the region which is now Mongolia. These warrior people fought on horseback and were pastoral, moving with the seasons. In order to keep themselves safe, many of the northern Chinese communities built walls to prevent invasion. Qin Shi Huangdi fortified and connected these walls in what was the first version of the Great Wall of China. The original sections of the wall were not organized stone lengths and fortresses; those improvements came much later. Qin Shi Huangdi's efforts connected the sections of wall that were already in existence with stones and packed sand. This allowed future dynasties to build upon this project and provided more protection for the northern part of the empire. Today, the Great Wall of China has several branches and is composed of over 13,000 miles of stone walls, fortresses, trenches, and natural defensive barriers.

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Image: The light orange color indicates the area controlled by the Qin Empire. The dark orange pattern at the north of the empire indicates the Great Wall. (Photo Credit: Ian Kiu CC BY 3.0)

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Dynasty Ends

Dynasties of Classical China

Dynasty Ends

During his rule, Qin Shi Huangdi kept an extremely tight rein on the empire, and he punished or killed anyone who disagreed with his rule. After his death in 210 B.C. (B.C.E.), his son and his nephew took power for about two years each. The Chinese people rose up, and the dynasty was overthrown in 206 B.C. (B.C.E.). For four years, China was again in a state of civil war.

Image: A section of the Great Wall of China as it stands today



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After the civil war following the Qin dynasty, the Han dynasty began in 202 B.C. (B.C.E.). Liu Bang of Han, later known as Emperor Gaozu, rose to power. Because of this dynasty's contributions to human civilization, it is known as the Golden Age of Classical China. During this period, China prospered and trade became important through the Silk Road.

Image: Glazed pottery from the Han dynasty



The diagram shows a horizontal timeline of four dynasties: Shang (green), Zhou (red), Qin (blue), and Han (yellow). Each dynasty is represented by a colored arrow pointing right. A callout box labeled 'Dynasty Begins' points to the start of the Han Dynasty arrow.

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Civil Service System


Dynasties of Classical China

Civil Service System



During the Qin dynasty, many government officials were chosen based on their own merits or abilities, and not based on inheritance or the recommendations of the wealthy. Leaders during the Han dynasty expanded on this practice, creating the world's first civil service system. A civil service system is a system of written examinations and recommendations for the appointment to public office. The first known use of a formalized appointment process occurred during the Han dynasty. This practice continues in modern-day China.

Image: Civil service exam candidates by Qiu Ying



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Contributions

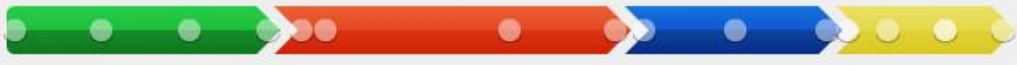
Dynasties of Classical China

Contributions

Classical China, particularly the Han dynasty, is responsible for many contributions to that period, and to modern-day human civilization. A Han dynasty political official named Cai Lun is credited as the inventor of paper. While modern production methods are mechanized and more efficient, the same techniques are still used. During the Han dynasty, artists started glazing ceramic pieces of pottery to create some of the earliest known pieces of porcelain. This craft is grounded in Chinese culture and many of the most-prized pieces of porcelain were created by Chinese artisans throughout history. In addition, the Han dynasty textile workers formalized methods for dyeing and weaving silk threads to form fabric. Silk threads are produced by various insects and the delicate threads can be woven into a thin cloth for clothing and artwork. Typically, silk fabric was owned by the wealthy only, and it played an important role in Chinese trade.



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Image: A print of Cai Lun as the inventor of paper

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Dynasty Ends

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Dynasty Ends

At the end of the Han dynasty, complacency amongst its rulers and corruption on the part of wealthy landowners led to uprisings from the common people. For the last fifty years of the Han dynasty, China was faced with civil war. A regional governor named Cao Cao ruled during the final years of the dynasty, but the dynasty ended with his death in 220 A.D. (C.E.). Over the next thousand years, China would have many dynastic shifts.

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