Chapter 2 Guiding Questions - Classical Civilization: China

- Write a chapter thesis.
- Describe the work of Confucius’s disciples.
- What did it become the foundation of?
- What type of rule did Confucius advocate?

Establishment of Political Order
- Describe Shi Huangdi and the Qin dynasty.
- Describe the Han dynasty.

Cultural Traditions
- Describe China’s world view.

Patterns in Classical China
- How do the Chinese view history? How is this different from how the West views it?

The Zhou Dynasty
- What are the dates of existence for the Zhou dynasty?
- What was the political structure of the Zhou?
- How did they expand Chinese territory?
- What is the Mandate of Heaven
- How did they try to encourage more cultural unity?
- What did Confucius write?
- When was the Era of the Warring States and what happened to the Zhou?

The Qin Dynasty
- How did Shi Huangdi rule? Give some examples.
- What was the Great Wall?
- Why did he order a national census?
- What things were standardized to make trading more uniform?
- What projects did the government support?
- Why was his rule short lived?
- What happened after his death?

The Han Dynasty
- What was their political system like?
- Where did they expand Chinese territory to?
- How did Confucianism play a role in this dynasty?
- Why did their rule decline?
- What was China like between 220 and 589 C.E.?

Political Institutions
- What were the key elements of the Qin and Han dynasties?

Strong Bureaucracy
- Describe the Chinese civil service exam.
- Why did the bureaucracy outlast the empire itself?

Roles of the State
- What did the state operate?
- What did the state sponsor?
- What did the state promote?
- How did the state take an economic role? Please describe.
- Describe the system of courts.

Religion and Culture
- What did upper-class cultural values emphasize?
• What did the Zhou dynasty maintain and stress the importance of?

Confucianism
• Describe the life and teachings of Kong Fuzi or Confucius.
• What problems did Confucius try to rectify?
• What type of political system did he support?

Legalism
• What did Legalists believe in? What did they believe about human nature?
• Why did Confucianism appeal more to the upper classes?

Daoism
• What did Laozi stress in his teachings?
• What types of ethics did Daoism promote?
• How did Daoists feel about political activity and learning?
• Why did Confucianists and Daoists disagree?

Literature, Art, and Science
• What were the Five Classics and what were they used for?
• From the classical period onward, what was the mark of an educated Chinese person?
• What was Chinese art like?
• Why didn’t the Chinese have monumental architecture?
• What astronomical discoveries did they make?

Economy and Society
• What was the social gap like? Describe social classes.

The Confucian Social System
• What were the three main social groups in the Confucian social system? Describe.

Trade and Technology
• The focus was on luxury items. What were the luxury items?
• What two areas exchanged food?
• What did copper coins help to do?
• Why didn’t the merchant class become focal points in Chinese culture?
• Why were they able to have ox drawn plows by 300 B.C.E.?

Gender and Family
• Describe the family structure in China.
• Describe the role of women.

How Chinese Civilization Fits Together
• What spread to China during and after the Han that was a notable instance of cultural diffusion?

Social and Cultural Links to Politics
• Did the Chinese see the government and society as two separate entities?

Complexities in Classical China
• What did Chinese officials believe?

Global Connections
Classical China and the World
• What was the Silk Road?
• Write a SPICE reflection.
• Create a BRIEF chapter timeline.
late in the 6th century B.C.E., a brilliant middle-aged scholar-philosopher applied for a high post in the bureaucracy of the small kingdom of Lu in northeast China. Perhaps because Kong Fuzu—or Confucius as he came to be known centuries later in the West—was widely reputed to be an opinionated and outspoken person, he was denied the position for which he was confident he was well qualified. Angered by this rebuff, Confucius left Lu and took to the road in search of the ideal ruler, who presumably would recognize his talents and offer him employment at a suitable level of distinction at his court.

The China of Confucius’s day offered abundant options for a talented political advisor. The declining power of the Zhou kingdom, which had for centuries dominated early Chinese civilization along the Yellow River, opened the way for the rise of a patchwork of rival states. Many of these competing states were ruled by nomadic peoples who had migrated from the north or west. Wars between these upstart forces and the lords of long-established households with imperial pretensions were frequent, banditry was widespread, commerce was threatened, and displaced peasants and warrior bands wandered throughout the countryside. The monarchs of some nomad kingdoms had extensively adopted the distinct culture that had been developing in the Huanghe region since the age of the Shang warrior kings. Nonetheless, Confucius and others in the emerging scholar-gentry—or shi—social strata continued to regard most of the nomads as uncouth, warlike barbarians. Convinced that he was a man with a mission, Confucius undertook a lifelong quest to become the chief advisor to a ruler who possessed the vision and skills to restore centralized control, peace, and order.

One among many wandering scholars in the late Zhou era, Confucius attracted numerous disciples, some of whom became distinguished philosophers in their own right. The master’s students preserved, spread, and debated his teachings, and after his death in the early 5th century B.C.E., they compiled his wisdom in what would come to be known as the Analects, or collected sayings: hence, “Confucius says.”

Over time, Confucius’s political and social philosophy became foundational for one of humanity’s greatest and most enduring civilizations. In view of the turmoil in China when Confucian teachings were formulated, it is not surprising that they idealized strong rulers and the consolidation of political power. Confucius advocated rule by a highly educated, exclusively male elite, but one that was deemed responsible for the well-being of all of the subjects of the state. Primarily an ethical rather than a religious system, Confucianism sought to establish norms for all aspects of Chinese life, from relationships within the family that stressed respect for one’s elders to manners for rulers and subjects. Confucianism also highlighted the importance of art, music, and elegant calligraphy in the cultivation of the scholar-bureaucrats.

Measured in terms of the acquisition of wealth and power, Confucius was a failure. He never found his ideal monarch, or even a suitable post at any of the numerous royal households that jostled for dominance across China. In fact, in the centuries following his death—often appropriately designated as the era of the warring states—political and social disintegration intensified. But the students and disciples of Confucius found a large and enthusiastic audience for his teachings in these troubled times.
This chapter focuses on the conditions that gave rise to Confucianism as well as the teachings of rival philosophical systems, such as Legalism, Daoism, and Buddhism. As we shall see, even as late as the end of the 3rd century B.C.E., when Chinese political unity was again restored by the warrior strongman Shi Huangdi’s kingdom of Qin, Confucian social norms and political prescriptions were eclipsed by more authoritarian alternatives. But with the rise of the Han dynasty after 207 B.C.E., the teachings of Confucius and several of his more prominent followers came to provide the ideological underpinnings of both the Chinese state and society. In subsequent dynasties, the influence of Confucianism waned and waxed, but even after its alleged extinction in the crisis-ridden decades of the 20th century, it has persisted as a major cultural force to the present day. Confucianism has also exerted a pervasive and enduring influence on other societies throughout Asia, from Japan and Korea through central Asia and southward into present-day Vietnam. China’s Confucian ideals, scholar-gentry bureaucracy, technological advancements, and prosperous agrarian state captivated major thinkers in Europe and the United States—from Jesuit missionaries to Thomas Jefferson.

Establishment of Political Order

The Zhou dynasty’s ability to control its vassals broke down in the 8th century B.C.E. and led to a long period of political conflict and social turmoil throughout China. Political structures developed in key phases, with cultural traditions contributing as well. In both the Yellow and the Yangzi river basins, many states rose and fell, each seeking to replace the Zhou as the paramount power in east Asia. Chinese expansions to the south and west created periodic instability as local peoples tried to defend themselves. Internal conflicts left China vulnerable to outside invaders, and between the 8th and 3rd centuries B.C.E., nomadic peoples often raided the farming areas of the north China plain. Many of the nomads settled down and eventually assimilated the distinct culture that had been developing in the region since the age of the Shang warrior kings. Some of these invaders captured existing states; others established new dynasties that further intensified the already complex political maneuvers and wars for supremacy.
1200 B.C.E. | 500 B.C.E. | 250 B.C.E.
---|---|---
1029–258 Zhou dynasty; introduction of a standard spoken language
551–478 Life of Confucius

C. 500 Laozi and Daoism
C. 500 Editing of the Five Classics
C. 450 Development of Chinese calendar
402–201 Era of the Warring States
221–202 Qin dynasty: the First Emperor, the Great Wall begun, a single basic language
202 B.C.E.–220 C.E. Han dynasty
C. 200 Introduction of ox-drawn plow, horse collar, water mill
141–87 Reign of Han Wu Ti, increased bureaucracy; examinations, spread of Confucianism

The yearning for unity and an end to civil strife appeared to be answered in the 3rd century B.C.E. by the emergence of the warrior strongman Shi Huangdi (shih-hwaing-dee). By 221 B.C.E., Shi Huangdi’s state of Qin (chin) had vanquished all its rivals, and he founded a new imperial dynasty that promised to bring an end to the centuries of strife. But Shi Huangdi proved to be a tyrant. His death in 210 B.C.E. was the signal for resistance throughout the empire to the rule of his less despotic and less capable son and his inner circle of advisors. A rapidly spreading revolt, led by two peasants, toppled the Qin dynasty in 207 B.C.E. and gave rise to its much longer-lived successor, the Han.

The Han era, which lasted, with a brief interruption, for more than 400 years, saw the consolidation of Chinese civilization. Unity was established in the old core regions, and Chinese political control was greatly extended in all directions. Perhaps more critically, the Han rulers founded the largest, most effective, and most enduring bureaucracy in the preindustrial world. They oversaw the development of the first civil service examinations and the professionalization of Chinese administration. These institutions helped build a sense of Chinese distinctiveness and identity that was reflected in later centuries by Chinese references to themselves as the “sons of Han.” This identity proved critical to the survival of Chinese civilization in the centuries of war, foreign invasion, and internal division that returned when the Han dynasty collapsed in the early 3rd century C.E.

**Cultural Traditions**

China generated the first of the great classical societies. The region’s isolation limited its ability to learn from other cultures but also spared it frequent invasion and encouraged an intense, and distinctive, Chinese identity. The decline of the Shang dynasty did not result in as much internal chaos as did invasions of parts of the Middle East and particularly India. Hence, the Chinese could build more strongly on Huang he precedents, including technological advancements. Particularly important was a general, if somewhat vague, worldview developed by thinkers in the Shang and Zhou dynasties and accepted as a standard approach in later Chinese thinking. This intellectual heritage stressed the basic harmony of nature: every feature is balanced by an opposite, every yin by a yang. Thus for hot there is cold, for male, female. According to this philosophy, an individual should seek a way to relate to this harmony, avoiding excess and appreciating the balance of opposites. Individuals and human institutions exist within this world of balanced nature not, as in later Mediterranean philosophy, on the outside. Chinese traditions about balance, Dao, and yin/yang were intrinsic to diverse philosophies and religions established in the classical period, and they provided some unity among various schools of thought in China.

Despite important cultural continuity, classical China did not simply maintain earlier traditions. The formative centuries of classical Chinese history were witness to a great many changes. The religious and particularly the political habits of the Shang kingdom were substantially modified as China built the world’s largest classical empire. These new developments led to much diversity, but also to often painful conflict. From them, the Chinese emerged with an unusually well integrated system in which government, philosophy, economic incentives, the family, and the individual were intended to blend into a harmonious whole.

**Patterns in Classical China**

Of all the societies in the world today, it is China that has maintained the clearest links to its classical past—a past that has been a source of pride but also the cause of some problems of adaptation. Already in the period of classical Chinese history, a pattern was set in motion that lasted until the
early part of the 20th century. A family of kings, called a **dynasty**, would start its rule of China with great vigor, developing strong political institutions and encouraging an active economy. Subsequently, the dynasty grew weaker and tax revenues declined, while social divisions increased in the larger society. Internal rebellions and sometimes invasions from the outside hastened the dynasty's decline. As the ruling dynasty declined, another dynasty emerged, usually from the family of a successful general, invader, or peasant rebel, and the pattern would start anew. Small wonder that many Chinese conceive of history in terms of cycles, in contrast to the Western tendency to think of steady progress from past to present.

**The Zhou Dynasty**

Three dynastic cycles cover the many centuries of classical China: the Zhou, the Qin, and the Han (Map 2.1). The Zhou (joh) dynasty lasted from 1029 to 258 B.C.E. Although lengthy, this dynasty flourished only until about 700 B.C.E.; it was then beset by a decline in the political infrastructure and frequent invasions by nomadic peoples from border regions. Even during its strong centuries, the Zhou did not establish a powerful government, ruling instead through alliances with regional princes and noble families. The dynasty initially came into China from the north, displacing its predecessor, the Shang rulers. The alliance systems the Zhou used as the basis for their rule were standard in agricultural kingdoms. (We will see similar forms later emerge in Japan, India, Europe, and Africa.) Rulers lacked the means to control their territories directly and so gave large regional estates to members of their families and other supporters, hoping that their loyalties would remain intact. The supporters, in exchange for land, were supposed to provide the central government with troops and tax revenues. This was China's feudal period, with rulers depending on a network of loyalties and obligations to and from their landlord-vassals. Such a
system was, of course, vulnerable to regional disloyalties, and the ultimate decline of the Zhou dynasty occurred when regional land-owning aristocrats solidified their own power base and disregarded the central government.

The Zhou did, however, contribute in several ways to the development of Chinese politics and culture in their active early centuries. First, they extended the territory of China by encouraging settlers to move into the Yangzi River valley. While the Zhou were too weak to take this territory over directly, the expanded settlement, from the Huang he to the Yangzi, became China’s core—often called the “Middle Kingdom.” It provided rich agricultural lands plus the benefits of two different agricultures—wheat-growing in the north, rice-growing in the south—a diversity that encouraged population growth. The territorial expansion obviously complicated the problems of central rule, for communication and transport from the capital to the outlying regions were difficult.

Despite limited control over key regions, the Zhou did actually heighten the focus on the central government. Zhou rulers claimed direct links to the Shang rulers. They also asserted that heaven had transferred its mandate to rule China to the Zhou emperors. This political concept of a Mandate of Heaven remained a key justification for Chinese imperial rule from the Zhou onward. Known as Sons of Heaven, the emperors lived in a world of awe-inspiring pomp and ceremony.

The Zhou worked to provide greater cultural unity in their empire. They discouraged some of the primitive religious practices of the Huang he civilization, banning human sacrifice and urging more restrained ceremonies to worship the gods. They also promted linguistic unity, beginning the process by which a standard spoken language, ultimately called Mandarin Chinese, would prevail over the entire Middle Kingdom. This resulted in the largest single group of people speaking the same language in the world at this time. Regional dialects and languages remained, but educated officials began to rely on the single Mandarin form. Oral epics and stories in Chinese, many gradually recorded in written form, aided in the development of a common cultural currency.

Increasing cultural unity helps explain why, when the Zhou empire began to fail, scholars were able to use philosophical ideas to lessen the impact of growing political confusion. Indeed, the political crisis spurred efforts to define and articulate Chinese culture. During the late 6th and early 5th centuries B.C.E., the philosopher known in the West as Confucius wrote an elaborate statement on political ethics, providing the core of China’s distinctive philosophical heritage. Other writers and religious leaders participated in this great period of cultural creativity, which later reemerged as a set of central beliefs throughout the Middle Kingdom.

Cultural innovation did not, however, reverse the prolonged and painful Zhou downfall. Regional rulers formed independent armies, ultimately reducing the emperors to little more than figureheads. Between 402 and 201 B.C.E., a period known aptly enough as the Era of the Warring States, the Zhou system disintegrated.

The Qin Dynasty

At this point, China might have gone the way of civilizations such as India, where centralized government was more the exception than the rule. But a new dynasty arose to reverse the process of political decay. One regional ruler deposed the last Zhou emperor and within 35 years made himself sole ruler of China. The young warrior took the imperial title Qin Shi Huangdi, or “the tiger.” The dynastic name, Qin, conferred on the whole country its name of China. Shi Huangdi was a brutal ruler, but effective given the circumstances of internal disorder. He understood that China’s problem lay in the regional power of the aristocrats, and like many later centralizers in world history, he worked vigorously to undo this force. He ordered nobles to leave their regions and appear at his court, assuming control of their feudal estates. China was organized into large provinces ruled by bureaucrats appointed by the emperor. Shi Huangdi was careful to select his officials from nonaristocratic groups, so that they would owe their power to him and not dare to develop their own independent bases. Under Shi Huangdi’s rule, powerful armies crushed regional resistance.

The First Emperor followed up on centralization by extending Chinese territory and political control to the south, reaching present-day Hong Kong on the South China Sea and even influencing northern Vietnam. In the north, to guard against outside invasions and to protect his own expansionist drives. Shi Huangdi built the Great Wall, extending over 3000 miles, wide enough for chari-
The Han Dynasty

The Han dynasty, which lasted over 400 years, to 220 C.E., rounded out China's basic political and intellectual structure. Han rulers retained the centralized administration of the Qin but sought to reduce the brutal repression of that period. Like many dynasties during the first flush of power, early Han rulers expanded Chinese territory, pushing into Korea, Indochina, and central Asia. This expansion gave rise to direct contact with India and also allowed the Chinese to develop contact with the Parthian Empire in the Middle East, through which trade with the Roman Empire around the Mediterranean was conducted. The most famous Han ruler, Wu Ti (140–87 B.C.E.), enforced peace throughout much of the continent of Asia, rather like the peace the Roman Empire would bring to the Mediterranean region a hundred years later, but embracing even more territory and a far larger population. Peace brought great prosperity to China itself. A Han historian conveys the self-satisfied, confident tone of the dynasty:

The nation had met with no major disturbances so that, except in times of flood or drought, every person was well supplied and every family had enough to get along on. The granaries in the cities and the countryside were full and the government treasuries were running over with wealth. In the capital the strings of cash had stacked up by the hundreds of millions until they could no longer be counted. In the central granary of the government, new grain was heaped on top of the old until the building was full and the grain overflowed and piled up outside, where it spoiled and became unfit to eat. Even the keepers of the community gates ate fine grain and meat.

Under the Han dynasty, the workings of the state bureaucracy also improved and the government was linked to formal training that emphasized the values of Confucian philosophy. Reversing the Qin dynasty's policies, Wu Ti urged support for Confucianism, seeing it as a vital supplement to formal measures on the government's part. Shrines were established to promote the worship of the ancient philosopher as a god.

The quality of Han rule declined after about two centuries. Central control weakened, and invasions from central Asia, spearheaded by a nomadic people called the Huns, who had long threatened China's northern borders, overturned the dynasty entirely. Between 220 and 589 C.E., China was in a state of chaos. Order and stability were finally restored, but by then the classical or formative period of Chinese civilization had ended. Well before the Han collapse, however, China had established distinctive political structures and cultural values of unusual clarity, capable, as it turned out, of surviving even three centuries of renewed confusion.
Political Institutions

The Qin and Han dynasties of classical China established a distinctive, and remarkably successful, kind of government. The Qin stressed central authority, whereas the Han expanded the powers of the bureaucracy. More than any other factor, it was the structure of this government that explained how such a vast territory could be effectively ruled—for the Chinese empire was indeed the largest political system in the classical world. This structure would change after the classical period, particularly in terms of streamlining and expanding bureaucratic systems and procedures, but it never required fundamental overhaul.

The political framework that emerged as a result of the long centuries of China’s classical period had several key elements. Strong local units never disappeared. Like most successful agricultural societies, China relied heavily on tightly knit patriarchal families. Individual families were linked to other relatives in extended family networks that included brothers, uncles, and any living grandparents. Among the wealthy land-owning groups, family authority was enhanced by the practice of ancestor worship, which joined family members through rituals devoted to important forebears who had passed into the spirit world. For ordinary people, among whom ancestor worship was less common, village authority surmounted family rule. Village leaders helped farming families regulate property and coordinate planting and harvest work. During the Zhou dynasty, and also in later periods when dynasties weakened, the regional power of great landlords also played an important role at the village level. Landed nobles provided courts of justice and organized military troops.

Strong local rule was not the most significant or distinctive feature of Chinese government under the Qin and Han dynasties, however. Shi Huangdi not only attacked local rulers but also provided a single law code for the whole empire and established a uniform tax system. He appointed governors to each district of his domain, who exercised military and legal powers in the name of the emperor. They, in turn, named officials responsible for smaller regions. Here indeed was a classic model of centralized government that other societies would replicate in later times: the establishment of centralized codes and appointment of officials directly by a central authority, rather than reliance on arrangements with numerous existing local governments. The effectiveness of a central government was further enhanced by the delegation of special areas and decisions to the emperor’s ministers. Some dealt with matters of finance, others with justice, others with military affairs, and so on.

Strong Bureaucracy

Able rulers of the Han dynasty resumed the attack on local warrior-landlords. In addition, they realized the importance of creating a large, highly skilled bureaucracy, one capable of carrying out the duties of a complex state. By the end of the Han period, China had about 130,000 bureaucrats, representing 0.2 percent of the population. The emperor Wu Ti established examinations for his bureaucrats—the first example of civil service tests of the sort that many governments have instituted in modern times. These examinations covered classics of Chinese literature as well as law, suggesting a model of the scholar-bureaucrat that would later become an important element of China’s political tradition. Wu Ti also established a school to train men of exceptional talent and ability for the national examinations. Although most bureaucrats were drawn from the landed upper classes, who alone had the time to learn the complex system of Chinese characters, individuals from lower ranks of society were occasionally recruited under this system. China’s bureaucracy thus provided a slight check on complete upper-class rule. It also tended to limit the exercise of arbitrary power by the emperor himself. Trained and experienced bureaucrats, confident in their own traditions, could often control the whims of a single ruler, even one who, in the Chinese tradition, regarded himself as divinely appointed—the “Son of Heaven.” It was no accident then that the Chinese bureaucracy lasted from the Han period until the 20th century, outliving the empire itself.

Small wonder that from the classical period at least until modern times, and possibly still today, the Chinese were the most tightly governed people in any large society in the world. When it worked well—and it is important to recall that the system periodically broke down—Chinese politics represented a remarkable integration of all levels of authority. The edicts of an all-powerful emperor were administered by trained scholar-bureaucrats, widely respected for their learning and,
Capital Designs and Patterns of Political Power

The design and physical layout of the capital cities of early civilizations can tell us a great deal about the distribution of political power and social status in different centers of the ancient world. In addition, the configurations of these pivotal cities usually manifest religious beliefs and conceptions of the cosmic order in the ways they are oriented and physically constructed. Therefore, plans of the capital centers of ancient civilizations can be read like written texts to help us understand the early history of some of mankind's greatest civilizations. Reproduced here are schematic diagrams of some of the key features of the capital cities of three of the great early civilizations of Eurasia: from Xi'an in Han China, Athens in Greece, and Harappa in India. Study and compare these diagrams for what they tell us about the kinds of elite groups that exercised political power, social stratification, and thinking about the relationship between the supernatural and human rulers in each civilization for which they served as capitals. In thinking about these issues, you may want to refer to relevant sections in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

QUESTIONS Which social groups were the most powerful politically in each society? How prominent was military force in the exercise of power by the elites in each civilization? To what extent was political power legitimized by religious figures, ideas, and conceptions of the workings of the cosmos? To what degree did the rulers and political elites seek to separate themselves from the subject population, and what evidence could you use to determine this?

Map 2.2 Ancient Capitals

often, their noble birth. Individual families also emphasized this strong principle of authority, with the father in charge, presumably carrying on the wishes of a long line of ancestors to which the family paid reverence. The Chinese were capable of periodic rebellions, and gangs of criminals regularly came to disrupt the social scene—indeed, frequently harsh punishments reflected the need of the government to eradicate such deviant forces. Nevertheless, whether within the family or the central state, most Chinese in ordinary times believed in the importance of respect for those in power.

Roles of the State

Government traditions established during the classical period included an impressive list of state functions. Like all organized states, the Chinese government operated military and judicial systems. Military activity fluctuated, as China did not depend on steady expansion. Although classical China produced some enduring examples of the art of war, the state was not highly militaristic by the Han