

ANCIENT CHINA—PART 2



A Section of the Great Wall of China

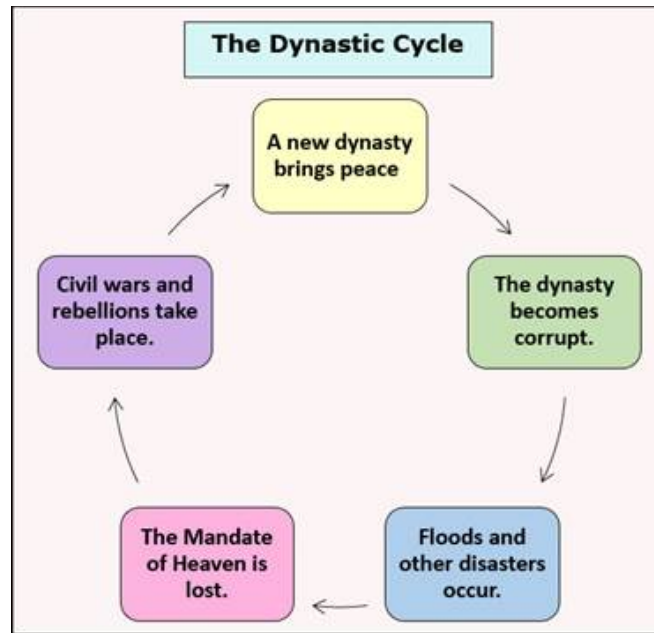
Unit Overview

After the collapse of the Shang Dynasty, the Zhao claimed to have been given by the gods the right to rule China. This began a cycle of leadership that would shape Chinese civilization and culture in ancient and modern times. The discoveries, accomplishments and failures that took place during the Zhao, Qin and Han Dynasties continue to impact China and the Eastern Hemisphere today. Let's see how it all happened. A word of caution—not all scholars and historians agree on how to spell Chinese names and titles in English. For this reason, some resources, such as videos and articles, may use different spellings for some of the names found in this unit.

The Mandate of Heaven

In ancient China, a person's first loyalty was to their family. They viewed their kings as the leaders of the Chinese people, just as their grandfathers were the leaders of their families. They believed that the authority to lead came from heaven and was a gift from the gods. If a king ruled wisely and fairly, he had their support. This idea of divine approval was called the **Mandate of Heaven**. When a king behaved unjustly or foolishly, the mandate was taken away, and his dynasty lost its power. Floods, crop failures, earthquakes, peasant uprisings and other catastrophic events were signs that the gods were about to pass the Mandate of Heaven to another noble family. The Chinese people were then justified in rebelling and overthrowing the old dynasty. In this way, the fall of the old dynasty gave rise to a new one. Historians call this process the **dynastic cycle**. For 1,900

years, four dynasties—the Shang, the Zhou, the Qin and the Han—ruled ancient China as one followed the other.



A New Dynasty Replaces the Shang

While the royal families of the Shang Dynasty enjoyed a luxurious lifestyle, most people under their rule remained poor and were treated badly. As a result, they no longer supported their rulers. In 1045 BCE, **Wu Wang** led a rebellion and defeated the Shang. He established a new line of rulers called the **Zhou Dynasty**. Like the Shang, Wu Wang divided the kingdom into smaller territories, but he did not put members of his family in charge in them. Instead, Wu Wang rewarded loyal followers by giving them authority over sections of land. In return, these nobles were expected to defend the king and to fight on his side if asked. These became **hereditary** positions. In other words, when the local noble died, his son or another family member took his place.

Bronze Cups from the Zhou Dynasty



Image Courtesy of Gary Lee Todd

Economic and Technological Advancements

Under the leadership of the Zhou Dynasty, China's economy grew, and its knowledge of technology advanced. By 559 BCE, the Chinese were working with **iron** instead of bronze. This change resulted in stronger weapons and sturdier tools. Iron plows and the invention of the wheel barrow enabled farmers to grow more food. New crops, such as soybeans, also increased the food supply. Some local lords engineered irrigation projects that made farming even more productive.

An Early Chinese Wheelbarrow



The food surplus opened up more opportunities for trade. To make exchanges easier, the Chinese made copper coins and began to use money for the first time. Increased trade inspired some lords to build roads and canals within their territories. As the economy grew, so did the population. By 260 BCE, about 50 million people lived in China. Farmers pushed into new lands. Soon they were growing crops in the Chang Jiang Valley in addition to the Huang He Valley.

The Time of Warring States and the Teachings of Confucius

China appeared to be a wealthy, prosperous civilization, but the Zhou Dynasty was facing serious problems. Many of its local lords had started to ignore the laws of the king. They fought among themselves, and some went to war on their own with neighboring tribes. As the lords grew stronger, the Zhou kings grew weaker. China fell into a period of chaos and confusion. Historians refer to this period as the **Time of Warring States**.

Although most Chinese did not like the violence and lack of order, they were powerless to stop it. Nonetheless, there were some scholars and philosophers who had ideas for ending the conflict. One of these was a teacher named **Confucius**. He lived in early China from 551 to 479 BCE. Confucius believed that order could be restored if people learned to respect one another. To accomplish this, he taught his students a code of proper conduct based on five human relationships. These are listed in the table pictured here.

The Five Relationships	
Family	Society
Father and son	Friend and friend
Brother and Brother	Ruler and subject
Husband and wife	

Confucius

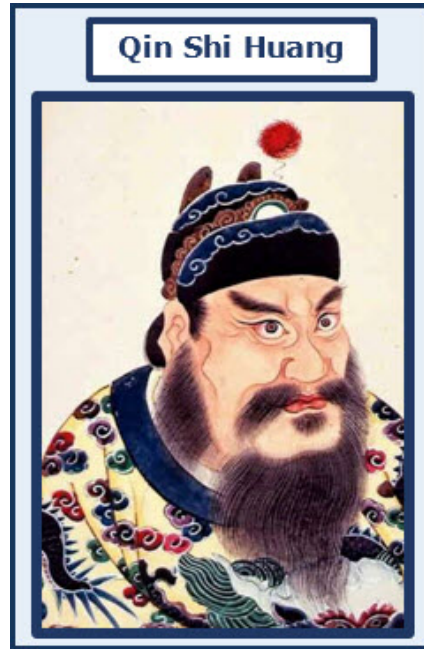


Confucius thought that good conduct began at home with respect for parents and other family members. As children grew into adults, this concept expanded to include respect for friends and government authorities. At the same time, it was the ruler’s responsibility to set a good example. If kings led with this in mind, there would be peace. Although not everyone agreed with Confucius, some rulers did follow his model for leadership. Confucius continued to influence Chinese culture long after his death. His students recorded many of his sayings and stories. They called the collection *Analects*, and it is still read today. However, China’s next dynasty would govern based on a very different philosophy. Click on the graphic here to read some sayings of Confucius. What do you think they mean?



The Qin Dynasty

Weak kings and constant wars convinced many Chinese that the Zhou had lost its Mandate of Heaven. It was time for new leadership. From the Qin province in western China, **Ying Zheng** used his large army to defeat the warring lords and what was left of the Zhou Dynasty. He had no mercy for anyone who opposed him. In 221 BCE, he proclaimed himself **Qin Shi Huang**, or First Emperor, at the age of thirty-eight. Qin Shi Huang established the **Qin Dynasty** and claimed the Mandate of Heaven.



The restoration of order, however, came at a price. Qin Shi Huang governed China based on the philosophy known as **Legalism**. Legalists believed that people should not complain about the government and should not criticize what it did. Strict laws and harsh punishments were necessary to control behavior. Under this system, leaders rewarded the citizens who did their duty and disciplined those who did not. Many Confucians were put to death for opposing these policies. Books that did not support the Legalist point of view were destroyed. Members of the old royal families were required to live near the emperor to ensure that they were not plotting against him. Learn more about the Qin Dynasty by clicking on the graphic pictured here and by watching the video.

Qin Dynasty...in five minutes or less



Qin Shi Huang was determined to complete several public projects. To make it easier to conduct business, he established a standard system of weights and measures throughout the kingdom. Additional roads, bridges and canals were constructed to make it easier for the emperor to control his lands. He also began to build a long wall across China's northern border to keep out invaders. Building walls for protection was not a new idea, but linking a series of them over a great distance was.

A section of the Great Wall of China as it looks today



Over the centuries, other Chinese leaders extended this wall and rebuilt it several times. Today, it is called the **Great Wall of China**, and it is one of the world's most famous landmarks. Like the restoration of order, these public projects also came at a price. They were expensive, and the emperor raised taxes to pay for them. For many Chinese, this was a major hardship. In the process of construction, thousands of peasants, who were forced to work on the wall, died from hard labor.

The Han Dynasty

In 210 BCE, Qin Shi Huang died. He was buried in an elaborate tomb along with thousands of life-size, clay statues of warriors. The Chinese believed that the emperor would need these in the afterlife. Since the clay warriors were first discovered in 1974, archaeologists have worked to recover them. Watch the video to learn more.



Qin Shi Huang's son became the next emperor, but it was soon obvious that he was not prepared to lead. Once again, a dynasty appeared to have lost the Mandate of Heaven, and civil war followed. Liu Bang and his warriors won the war, and China was reunited under the Han Dynasty. Liu Bang gave himself the title **Gaozu** and began to put the empire back together. Although he was a Legalist, Gaozu changed some of the Qin Dynasty's strict laws and lowered taxes. He also added some Confucian scholars to his group of advisers. The Han rulers expanded China's borders and continued to work on the Great Wall. **Wudi**, one of the greatest Han emperors, opened the **Silk Road**. For centuries, this group of trade routes remained the major link between China and the west.

Ceramic Dog from The Han Dynasty



Image Courtesy of Gary Lee Todd

Historians have described the Han Dynasty as one of the golden ages of Chinese civilization. During this era, astronomers studied the movement of the planets and the stars. Their observations improved the ability to keep time. One scientist even invented an early version of a **seismograph**, a device used to detect and to measure earthquakes. Chinese doctors experimented with herbal remedies and developed **anesthetics**, which helped to decrease pain during and after surgeries. Chinese doctors also used **acupuncture** to relieve pain. This technique consisted of placing needles under the skin on certain parts of the body. It is still used as a treatment today. One of the most important achievements of the Han Dynasty was the invention of **paper**. The Chinese combined tree bark and fibers from cloth rags to create this product. This discovery made it easier and cheaper to publish books. Paper was also used to keep government records. These accounts have helped all of us to learn about life in ancient China. In spite of their accomplishments, the Han would face rebellions, peasant uprisings and natural disasters, but their dynasty would rule for China almost four hundred years.

Time for a Quick Review

Before moving on to Unit 18, review the names and terms found in Unit 17. Be sure you can answer the “Can I” questions with a loud “yes”.

Can I

...identify the four dynasties of ancient China?

...define the Mandate from Heaven and describe the dynastic cycle?

...give examples of how the ancient Chinese continued to modify their environment through advancements in technology?

...explain the factors that led to the increase in China's population?

...name items and processes that were invented in ancient China and are still used today?



Additional Resources and Activities

[Unit 17 Organizer](#)

[Article with quiz: Philosophers—Confucius](#)

[Article with quiz: The Great Wall of China](#)

[Brain POP: Ancient China](#)