

Classical Civilization: China

Patterns in Classical China

- Three dynastic cycles cover the many centuries of classical China: the **Zhou**, the **Qin**, and the **Han**.
- Political instability and frequent invasions caused the decline of the Zhou Dynasty and promoted debate over China's political and social ills.
- In the last centuries of the later Zhou era, some of China's greatest thinkers, including **Confucius**, tried different ways to restore order and social harmony. Central to culture were the family, **filial piety**, harmony, reciprocal social relationships, and deference to social superiors.
- **Shi Huangdi**, the brutal founder of the Qin Dynasty, centralized power in China, and began construction of the **Great Wall**.
- **Wu Ti**, most famous of the Han rulers, supported Confucianism and promoted peace.

Political Institutions

- For most of recorded history, the Chinese people have been the most tightly governed people in any large society in the world.
- Political institutions became one of classical China's hallmarks. Among the most permanent aspects of Chinese culture was the belief in the unity and the desirability of a **central government** in the hands of an **emperor** assisted by an **educated, professional bureaucracy**.

Religion and Culture

- Chinese culture began coalescing during the last, calamitous centuries of Zhou rule. During this time, three critical secular philosophies arose, each of which emphasized the role of **education** to achieve social ends.
- **Confucianism**, an ethical system based on relationships and personal virtue, became the predominant philosophy.
- **Legalism** countered Confucianism by favoring an authoritarian state and harsh rule.
- **Daoism** taught harmony with nature and humble living. **Laozi** was Daoism's most popular figure.
- Art in classical China was mostly decorative, and appeared in many forms, including **calligraphy**, carved jade and ivory, and silk screens.
- Science and mathematics emphasized the practical over the theoretical, and the ancient Chinese were particularly adept at **astronomy**.

Economy and Society

- China's classical economy focused on **agriculture**. All Chinese philosophies extolled the virtues of the peasants and their world.
- **Sharp class division existed** between 1) the landowning aristocracy and educated bureaucrats—Mandarins, 2) the laboring masses, peasants, and urban artisans, and 3) the “mean” people, or those without meaningful skills.
- The state also fostered an extensive **internal trade**, even while maintaining some ambivalence about merchants and commercial values.
- Technological advances were plentiful, including ox-drawn plows, water-powered mills, and **paper**.
- Socially China was **hierarchical, deferential, and patriarchal**, and tight family structure was valued.

How Chinese Civilization Fits Together

- China's **politics and culture meshed readily**, especially around the emergence of a Confucian bureaucracy.
- Economic innovation did not disrupt the emphasis on order and stability, and family structures were closely linked to political and cultural goals.
- Classical Chinese civilization evolved with very **little outside contact**. Though internal disagreement existed, most Chinese saw the world as a large island of civilization (China) surrounded by barbarians with nothing to offer save periodic invasions.

Multiple Choice Questions