

History of China

Humans have lived in the region of the world known nowadays as China for over 1 million years. The development of agriculture during the Neolithic period (c.10,000 - 1500 BC) led to the growth of settlements alongside China's main rivers. During this period power shifted among the different groups of people and individual neighbouring cultures such as the Hongshan (c.3800 – 2700 BC) and Liangzhu (c. 3300 – 2250 BC). Some of the earliest known Chinese jade, silk and lacquer objects date from this time.

The Xia dynasty (c.2100-1600 BC) is often referred to as a 'legendary' dynasty because there is disagreement about its actual existence. The first historically documented dynasty was the Shang dynasty (c.1500 - 1050 BC). The Shang used bronze and the first examples of Chinese writing were found on oracle bones dating from this period. The Shang dynasty was followed by the Zhou dynasty (1050 - 221 BC) who aimed to create a single Chinese state. However, in 771 BC the Zhou lost control of western China and moved their capital to the east. As a result, the Zhou period is divided into Western Zhou (1050-771 BC) and Eastern Zhou (770-221 BC).

During the Spring and Autumn period (770-476 BC) and the following Warring States period (475-221 BC) the Zhou king was unable to exercise strong central power and different states struggled to gain power over their neighbours. This was also a period of great philosophers such as Confucius and Laozi (the traditional founder of Daoism).

In 221 BC Ying Zheng, king of the Qin Dynasty (221 - 206 BC), unified the other states under his rule and declared himself emperor under the title Qin Shi Huang.

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He was responsible for the earliest Great Wall of China and the Terracotta Army (buried alongside his tomb at Xi'an). The rule of the Qin Dynasty as emperors of China lasted only 20 years but their unification policy allowed the dynasties which followed to rule as emperors of an Imperial China until AD 1912.

The Han dynasty (206 BC- AD 220), who followed the Qin Dynasty, were contemporaries of the Roman empire. This period saw the invention of paper, the development of the Silk Road and the introduction of Buddhism to China. Towards the end of the dynasty civil unrest and rebellion broke out and in AD 220 the Han empire collapsed. Power was seized by local feudal lords who ruled during a period of history known as the Period of Disunity which lasted over 300 years.

In AD 589 China was reunified by the Sui Dynasty whose strong central rule continued under the following Tang dynasty (AD 618-906) for nearly 200 years. The Tang period is considered a golden age for Chinese literature and art. Tang territorial expansion brought economic problems and in AD 906 the dynasty finally collapsed in the midst of wide spread rebellion. Northern China divided into five separate kingdoms, known as the Five Dynasties, while southern China split into ten independent states called the Ten Kingdoms.

In AD 960 an army general named Zhao Kuangyin united China and founded the Song dynasty. Government reforms were introduced to strengthen central rule and there was economic growth. However, the Song dynasty eventually lost control of the north of the country to the invading Jin Dynasty in AD 1127 and moved their capital to southern China where they continued to rule as the Southern Song dynasty until AD 1273. In AD 1234 the Jin were themselves

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conquered by the Mongols who then went on to conquer the southern Song and place all of China under the control of the Mongol Empire.

The Mongol leader Kublai Khan (AD 1215-1294) founded the Yuan dynasty (AD 1279-1368) and in AD 1266 established a new capital city at Beijing. During this period Chinese textiles, ceramics, lacquer ware and metal work were exported to the West and had particularly strong influence on Turkey and Iran. In AD 1368 the Mongols lost power to the Chinese military leader Zhu Yuanzhang who founded the Ming dynasty (AD 1368-1644). The Ming dynasty continued in power for nearly 300 years until the founding in AD 1644 of the Qing dynasty (AD 1644-1911) by the Manchu people, who invaded China from the north and subsequently ruled China for over 250 years. Under Qing rule there was massive territorial expansion and the arrival of European traders and missionaries. In the mid AD 1800s Qing rule was weakened by Chinese defeat in the First Opium War (AD 1839-1842) and Second Opium War (AD 1856-1860) with Great Britain.

In AD 1911 a republican revolution broke out in northeast China. The unrest quickly spread across China and in February AD 1912 imperial China came to an end with the abdication of the last emperor of China and the foundation of the Republic of China with the military commander Yuan Shikai as President. This new regime soon lost power, leading to local rule by regional feudal lords and conflict between different political parties (in particular the Nationalist and Communist parties) until the eventual victory of the Communist Party. In AD 1949, under their leader Mao Zedong, the Communists founded the People's Republic of China which continues as the government of mainland China to this day.

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