

Empires in East Asia, 600–1350: CHINA

River Dynasties in China

The last of the great early civilizations arose in China—and continues to this day. China's geography insured that it would develop apart from other cultures. It was isolated from other areas. The land lies protected by a great ocean, huge deserts, and high mountains. Within China, though, are two rich rivers, the Huang He and the Yangtze. Almost all the good farmland in China lies between these two rivers. The Chinese people also made use of the flood waters of these rivers. They had to be careful, though, for the Huang He caused terrible floods that could kill whole villages of people. The mountains did not protect China totally. Many times during Chinese history, people living to the north and west of China invaded the land.

Just a few thousand years ago, some people began to farm along the rivers. About 2000 B.C., the first dynasty of rulers brought government to China. A Chinese legend tells of a clever engineer who told the people how to build walls to control the flooding river and bring water to the farm fields. It is not certain that such a person lived, but it is known that about this time the Chinese began to build cities.

Around 1500 B.C., a new dynasty began to rule. They are called the Shang, and they began to leave the first written records in China. Objects found in their palaces and tombs also tell us much about their society. Chinese people built their buildings of wood, not mud-dried brick as the other early cultures did. Huge walls made of earth surrounded these buildings to protect them. The walls were needed because it was a time of constant war. At the top of Shang society were the king and the nobles who helped him fight these wars. At the bottom was the mass of peasants who lived in crude huts outside the city walls. They worked hard on the farms, using wooden tools because the Shang believed that bronze was too good to be used for farming.

Shang society was held together by a strong belief in the importance of the group—all the people—and not any single person. The most important part of society was the family, and children grew up learning to respect their parents. The family played a central role in Chinese religion, too. The Chinese thought that family members who had died could still influence the lives of family members still alive. They gave respect to dead members of the family, hoping to keep them happy. The Chinese system of writing differed from those of other groups. Symbols stood for ideas, not sounds. As a result, the many different groups in China, who all had a special spoken language, could still understand the same writing. The written language had thousands of symbols, however, which made it very hard to learn. Only specially trained people learned to read and write.

About 1027 B.C., a new group, the Zhou, took control of China. They adopted Shang culture, but started an idea of royalty that was new to China. Good rulers, they said, got authority to rule from heaven. They claimed the Shang rulers were not just and had lost the favor of the gods. That is why they had to be replaced. From then on, the Chinese believed in divine rule. However, it also meant that disasters such as floods or war pointed to a ruler that had lost the support of the gods and needed to be replaced.

The Zhou gave the rights to large areas of land to members of the royal family and other nobles. The nobles promised to fight for the rulers and to protect the peasants who lived on the land. Later the power of these nobles grew great. Eventually the Zhou rulers lost all power. The nobles fought each other for control of China in a period called the "time of the warring states." It lasted many hundred years, and the Chinese people suffered during this time.

Section 1: Two Great Dynasties in China

Starting in A.D. 220, China went through a long period of troubles during which no single ruler was strong enough to unite the entire area. In 589, Sui Wendi changed that. He brought the northern and southern regions under his power and named himself emperor. His new dynasty—the Sui—lasted only during his rule and that of his successor. However, these two rulers were important. They built the Grand Canal, a long waterway that connected the two major rivers of China. It linked the people of the cities in the north to the rice grown in the fertile south.

The Tang Dynasty followed and lasted for 300 years. Tang rulers retook northern and western lands that had been lost under the Han Dynasty. Under the Empress Wu—the only woman ever to rule China as emperor—the Tang captured parts of Korea as well.

Early Tang rulers made the government stronger and won support from the poor peasants by lowering their taxes. To run their empire, they revived the practice of using men educated in the writings of the philosopher Confucius. Schools were set up to train people in these works. Candidates for government jobs had to pass tests in order to win work.

The Tang Dynasty began to weaken when the rulers once again levied heavy taxes. While the Chinese people became angry over these burdens, nomads attacked the empire's western lands and began to capture some areas. In 907, the last Tang ruler was killed, and a new dynasty—the Song—took its place. It, too, lasted about 300 years. The Song Dynasty ruled a smaller area than did the Tang. However, China under its rule was strong and wealthy.

During the Tang and Song periods, China made many advances in technology. The Chinese invented the use of movable type, allowing them to print books. They also invented gunpowder for use in fireworks and weapons. The Chinese grew more food, based on advances in farming and an improved variety of fast-growing rice. Trade increased, first through Central Asia on the land route called the Silk Road and later over the oceans. This allowed Buddhism to spread from China to Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. Tang and Song China became famous for their artistic advances.

These developments brought about changes in Chinese society. The old noble families lost power, while the scholar-government officials gained power. Below them was an urban middle class, laborers, and peasants. The status of women became worse.

Section 2: The Mongol Conquests

Much of Central Asia is covered by flat grassland that cannot support farming. Nomadic herders lived in this area. They traveled from place to place seeking grass to feed herds of sheep and goats. From time to time over the centuries, these nomads struck out to attack the settled farming peoples to the east, south, and west. In the early 1200s, the Mongols began such an attack. Under the leadership of Genghis Khan, they met huge success. In just over 20 years, he led his people to conquer China and Central Asia.

Four factors contributed to the Mongols' military success. First, they organized their army in a logical, easy-to-control way with experienced fighters in command. Second, Genghis Khan was able to out think and out wit his enemies. Third, they adopted useful technology from the people they conquered, such as the Chinese invention of gunpowder. Finally, they used cruelty as a weapon. This helped convince other cities to surrender without a fight.

After Genghis Khan died in 1227, the Mongol armies continued to advance. Under Genghis' son Ogadai, the armies conquered China, took parts of Korea, captured Russia, and threatened Eastern Europe. The conquest ended in 1241 with Ogadai's death. Otherwise even Europe may have been conquered. By 1260, the remaining empire was divided into four areas called khanates. The rulers in these areas gradually adopted the culture of the people they ruled. Those in the west became Muslims. Those in China took on Chinese culture. In this way, the four khanates grew apart.

The Mongols proved able rulers who brought about a long period of peace in Central Asia. They promoted trade and the exchange of ideas between Asia and Europe. Along with this trade, they may have brought a deadly disease—the plague—that caused widespread death in Europe in the 1300s.

Section 3: Empire of the Great Khan

The Mongols needed several decades to complete their conquest of China begun by Genghis Khan in 1215. In 1260 Kublai Khan, grandson of Genghis took the title of Great Khan. Finally, in 1279, Kublai Khan managed to defeat the last Chinese army in the south. He became the first foreigner to gain complete control of China and rule the land. Kublai Khan founded the Yuan Dynasty that ruled China for only about 100 years. The dynasty was important because it united China for the first time in several hundred years and opened China to trade with the west. The Mongols did not disrupt Chinese government or culture but, in fact, adopted it for themselves. Kublai Khan adopted Chinese ways and built a new capital in the city of Beijing.

However, the Mongols still wanted further conquests. Kublai Khan launched two attacks on Japan in 1274 and 1281, but both failed. To rule his empire, Kublai Khan continued to follow Chinese practices. The Mongols kept the top government jobs for themselves. They also hired many people from other lands for these jobs, trusting them more than they did the Chinese.

Kublai Khan rebuilt the Great Canal. He promoted foreign trade, which took such Chinese inventions as printing, gunpowder, paper money, the compass, and playing cards to Europe. This activity led the European trader Marco Polo to journey to China. He lived there for many years and traveled throughout the Mongol Empire. When he returned to Italy in 1292, he told Europeans fantastic stories about Chinese wealth.

In the last years of his rule, Kublai Khan ran into trouble. Attacks on Southeast Asia failed, costing many lives and much treasure. The government raised taxes, which caused hardship in China. After his death in 1294, Mongol leaders struggled for control of the empire. These fights helped weaken Mongol rule, which allowed parts of China to erupt in rebellion. In 1368, some rebels finally won control of the Chinese government from the Mongols. They established a new dynasty called the Ming.

By this time, the whole Mongol Empire had begun to collapse. Mongols lost control of Persia in the 1330s and Central Asia in the 1370s. They continued to rule Russia until the late 1400s, however.

Section 4: Feudal Powers in Japan

Japan gained from its location. It was near enough to China to benefit from the influence of Chinese culture. It was also far enough to be able to protect itself from complete Chinese domination.

Japan is not one island but several thousand islands of varying sizes. Most people, though, live on the four largest of them. The islands have few natural resources, such as coal and oil. Also, the many mountains leave little land that can be used for farming.

Early in its history, Japan was broken up into many small areas, each led by a clan. These clans believed in their own gods. Later, all these beliefs were combined to form Japan's religion, Shinto. The main ideas of Shinto were to respect the forces of nature and the ancestors of a family.

In the A.D. 400s, the Yamato became the most powerful of these clans. They claimed that they were descended from a sun goddess. A few hundred years later Yamato leaders began to call themselves emperors. The emperor remained an important figure in Japan. Even when other groups took control of the government, they retained the position of the emperor and said they were ruling in his name.

Around the year 500, Japan began to feel the influence of Chinese culture. Buddhism traveled from China to Japan and became an important religion in the islands. The emperor sent people to China to learn Chinese ways and bring them back to Japan. The Japanese also adopted the Chinese system of writing, painting, and other parts of Chinese culture. Around the late 800s, though, the Japanese stopped sending people to China to learn Chinese culture.

From 794 to 1185, Japan's noble family ruled the country from the capital at Heian. This era represented the peak of Japanese culture, when the people of the court led lives of complex rituals, careful manners, and artistic good taste. Two women writers provide a close view of this refined court life in their books. Over time the power of the emperor declined and nobles with large land holdings began to assert their power. They hired private armies, and these soldiers began to terrorize farmers. For protection, farmers gave up some of their land to the lords. Thus began a time of local power like Europe's Middle Ages. The local lords used a group of trained soldiers called samurai to protect them from attacks by other lords. These samurai followed a strict code of honor. After a period of war, one of these lords arose as the most powerful. The emperor named him the shogun, or superior general of the emperor's army. While the emperor remained in power in name, the new shogun ran the country. This pattern was followed in Japan from 1192 to 1868. Shoguns led a defense of Japan against invasions of the Mongols from China.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Under Tang and Song rulers, China became the most advanced culture in the world. Then fierce warriors from Central Asia swept over China, creating a new empire that encouraged trade. In ruling China, the Mongols reached great heights. Japan developed its own culture based on ideas and practices borrowed from China. Chinese influence extended to Korea and Southeast Asia.