

Classical Civilization: China

During the internal weakening of China's river valley dynasty, the Shang, a family called the Zhou began to rise in power and influence. At first allied with the Shang, they soon grew concerned about Shang corruption and mismanagement. Around 1100 B.C.E. the Zhou overthrew the Shang and set themselves up as the rulers of China. In order to justify this move and shore up their own political legitimacy, the Zhou advocated the idea of the **Mandate of Heaven**. This idea holds that heaven—an impersonal spiritual power—is somehow related to earthly events. This power would grant the right, or mandate, to whomever was most fit to govern earthly affairs thus linking heaven and earth through the ruler. If the ruler failed to live up to standards of fairness and justice, an imbalance would occur, chaos would ensue, and heaven would revoke the mandate given to the ruler. The Zhou used this argument to prove that the Shang no longer had the mandate of heaven which they claimed now fell to themselves. This concept of the Mandate of Heaven is an enduring element of Chinese society.

This transition of power also exemplifies a pattern of political change much different than that in India. In China a ruling dynasty would give in to corruption and weaken. Then, a provincial ruling family would rise in power, challenge the ruling dynasty, and gain supremacy. They would then become the next dynasty and claim the Mandate of Heaven.

The Zhou governed China for centuries through a decentralized political system. As they weakened and collapsed a period of Chinese history began called the **Period of the Warring States**. From roughly 400-200 B.C.E. Chinese civilization fractured into regions characterized by chaos and warring rivalries. Like all civilizations experiencing decline, Chinese thinkers began to ponder the reasons for their predicament; in doing so, they produced a remarkable outpouring of ideas and philosophies which would affect China's classical age and the rest of its history. The most famous ideas to come from this period were **Confucianism**, **Daoism**, and **Legalism**.

Confucius was a teacher of ethical and political ideas that are contained in a work called the **Analects**. His thought is not so much philosophical or religious as it is practical. For years he sought a position in the government but never achieved it. For Confucius, it was not the form of government that was important but rather the proper harmony of human relationships. He believed that the government should be run by "superior individuals" who had a sense of kindness and benevolence and who governed by what they thought to be best for everyone. The subjects in return should respect and support their leader's decisions. Social harmony depended upon everyone accepting their social place and performing its required tasks. When society was held together by personal ties of loyalty and obedience, the intrusion of the state into social affairs would be minimal. Particularly important to Confucius was relationships and respect in the family. But in all cases this was a two-way relation: those in power must act in such a way as to command trust and respect; they must model the behavior of the ideal citizen. Those at the bottom must give them respect and obedience as an act of civic duty. Thus personal character traits were not to be developed for their own sake, but rather as a stabilizing force across society.

A man named **Laozi** offered an alternative to Confucianism. His belief, **Daoism**, held that rather than establish ideal relationships between humans, people should rather cultivate their relationship with nature. Daoists are committed to discovering the Dao, or the Way, a concept that defines explanation or categorization. Regardless, Daoists stressed a life of withdrawal to nature and inner contemplation as an alternative to the Confucian ordering of personal relations.

A third answer to China's troubled times came from those known as Legalists. **Legalism** held that human relations and man's relation to nature were irrelevant to social and political life. Rather, they held that chaos could only be eliminated by a powerful, merciless state. Since only agriculture and a strong military contributed to a healthy state, other diversions, such as poetry, art, trade and philosophical reflection, were discouraged. The state should coerce its subjects to obey by ruthlessly applying a strict code of laws and punishments. Dropping trash in the street, for example, was punishable by having a hand or foot cut off. Although Legalism was unpopular with the people, it was the application of this way of thinking that pulled China out of the Period of the Warring States and began the unification of its Classical Age.

The Period of Warring States ended when the **Qin** dynasty centralized power and destroyed regional

opposition. Although it lasted only 14 years, the Qin dynasty set in place many important aspects of Chinese civilization.

One of the most important things the Qin did was create a **bureaucracy**. Bureaucrats are employees of the state whose position in society, unlike nobles or aristocrats, does not rest on an independent source of wealth or ownership of land. Members of the bureaucracy only had positions and power as granted by the emperor. Land owning aristocrats have large estates and person fortunes at stake, so they have a vested interest in influencing the government in their personal favor. By creating a bureaucracy, the Qin bypassed the aristocrats and governed through those whose position depended on loyal obedience to the state.

In order to bring unity to China, the Qin also built roads and bridges, constructed defensive walls, standardized units of weight and measurement, created a standard currency, and made one common form of Chinese writing. The harsh Legalism of the Qin allowed it to do much during its short reign of 14 years, but this same strict political philosophy also generated much resentment among the common people. As soon as the emperor died, the people revolted and slaughtered many of the remaining Qin officials.

But unlike previous eras, Chinese civilization did not regress into chaos for long. The Han dynasty came to power and ruled China for about 400 years, roughly 200 B.C.E. to 200 C.E. The ability of the Han to maintain a strong central government over such a vast area was greatly facilitated by the Qin reforms under Legalism.

Under the leadership of emperor **Han Wudi**, the Han Dynasty is responsible for some very important innovations that would have a lasting effect on China: the official adoption of Confucianism and the rise of the civil service examinations.

The Han adopted Confucianism because it was the most organized educational network from which they could draw people for the bureaucracy. To make certain new recruits were educated well, they began testing them through a rigorous system of civil service examinations; to be in the Han bureaucracy, one had to demonstrate a mastery of Confucian ideas on these tests. One effect of this was that the Han bureaucracy was filled with people profoundly influenced by Confucian thought: they were taught to model good behavior for those under them and to respect and submit to those in authority over them. Thus Confucianism not only became deeply imbedded in Chinese culture, it also came to re-enforce the political bureaucracy by advocating obedience and benevolent rule.

Han Wudi also expanded the boundaries of imperial China both extending its influence into new realms and bringing new influences into its culture. The Chinese invaded Korea and northern Vietnam, taking with them the values of Confucianism. They also came into contact with Buddhism during this period.

Like the other civilizations, most laborers in China were agricultural and the surplus they supported the rise of craft industries and trade. They learned to forge iron tools and weave silk. The wealth generated by trade, however, created the tensions that would internally weaken the Han and lead, in part, to its downfall.