

Chinese Dynastic and Governmental History

10,000-2,000 BCE
Neolithic Cultures

ca. 2100-1600 BCE
Xia (Hsia) Dynasty (MYTHICAL)

ca. 1600-1050 BCE
Shang Dynasty

One of the Three Dynasties, or San Dai (Xia, Shang, and Zhou), thought to mark the beginning of Chinese civilization: characterized by its writing system, practice of divination, walled cities, bronze technology, and use of horse-drawn chariots.

ca. 1046-256 BCE
Zhou (Chou) Dynasty: Western Zhou (ca. 1046-771 BCE), Eastern Zhou (771-256 BCE)

A hierarchical political and social system with the Zhou royal house at its apex: power was bestowed upon aristocratic families as lords of their domains or principalities. Although often compared to European "feudalism," what actually gave the system cohesion was a hierarchical order of ancestral cults. The system eventually broke down into a competition for power between rival semi-autonomous states in what became known as the Spring and Autumn period (ca. 770-475 BCE) and the Warring States (ca. 475-221 BCE) period. It was during these tumultuous times that Confucius (551-479 BCE) lived.

221-206 BCE
Qin (Ch'in) Dynasty

Created a unitary state by imposing a centralized administration and by standardizing the writing script, weights and measures. Known for its harsh methods of rule, including the suppression of dissenting thought.

206 BCE-220 CE
Han Dynasty: Western/Former Han (206 BCE-9 CE) and Eastern/Later Han (25-220 CE)

Modified and consolidated the foundation of the imperial order. Confucianism was established as orthodoxy and open civil service examinations were introduced. Han power reached Korea and Vietnam. Records of the Historian, which became the model for subsequent official histories, was completed.

220-589 CE
"Period of Disunity" or Six Dynasties Period

The empire was fragmented. The North was dominated by invaders from the borderland and the steppes. The South was ruled by successive "Chinese" dynasties. Buddhism spread.

581-618 CE
Sui Dynasty

China reunified.

618-906
Tang (T'ang) Dynasty

A time of cosmopolitanism and cultural flowering occurred. This period was the height of Buddhist influence in China until its repression around 845. Active territorial expansion until defeated by the Arabs at Talas in 751.

960-1279
Song (Sung) Dynasty: Northern Song (960-1127) and Southern Song (1127-1279)

An era of significant economic and social changes: the monetization of the economy; growth in commerce and maritime trade; urban expansion and technological innovations. The examination system for bureaucratic recruitment of neo-Confucianism was to provide the intellectual underpinning for the political and social order of the late imperial period.

1279-1368
Yuan Dynasty

Founded by the Mongols as part of their conquest of much of the world. Beijing was made the capital. Dramas, such as the famous Story of the Western Wing, flourished.

1368-1644
Ming Dynasty

The first Ming emperor, Hongwu, laid the basis of an authoritarian political culture. Despite early expansion, it was an inward-looking state with an emphasis on its agrarian base. Gradual burgeoning of the commercial sector; important changes in the economy and social relations in the latter part of the dynasty; also a vibrant literary scene as represented by publication of the novel Journey to the West.

1644-1912
Qing (Ch'ing) Dynasty

A Manchu dynasty. Continued the economic developments of the late Ming, leading to prosperity but also complacency, dramatic increase in population and decrease in political authority. The acclaimed novel Dream of the Red Chamber was written in this period. Strains on the polity were intensified by a rapid incorporation of substantial new territories. Its authoritarian structure was subsequently unable to meet the military and cultural challenge of an expansive West. 19th century: Opium Wars and Taiping Rebellion damage China's political strength.

1912-1949

Republic Period

Weak central government following the collapse of the dynastic system in 1911-12; Western influence was shown by the promotion of "science" and "democracy" during the New Culture Movement. Sun Yat-Sen and Chiang Kai-Shek most important rulers. The attempt of the Nationalist government (est. 1928) to bring the entire country under its control was thwarted by both domestic revolts and the Japanese occupation (1937-45). The Nationalists fled to Taiwan after defeat by the Communists.

1949-present

People's Republic of China

Communist government. Mao Ze Dong and Deng Xiaoping most important leaders. The drive for remaking society ended in disasters such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Economic reform toward capitalism since around 1978. 1989: Tiananmen Square massacre. 1997: Britain returned sovereignty of Hong Kong to China.