

## The Dynasties

Now, things happen not only in geographical space, but also in the passage of time. Since we'll be looking at several thousand years of Chinese history in the course of this series, I want to do a very quick run-through of the dynastic periods of Chinese history as a way of orientating our future discussions. Chinese civilization, of course, begins, as civilization everywhere begins, with Neolithic cultures. As we've seen, there were a number of those in different parts of China that came together to create the ancient culture of China.

### **San Dai or the "Three Dynasties"**

Beginning around the start of the second millennium BCE, Chinese historians concentrate on what are called the San Dai, or the Three Dynasties. That is to say that they look at the beginnings of a central tradition of rule. Not that other societies were not going on independently at the same time under their own rulers and with their own histories, but with the San Dai, the Three Dynasties, you get, at least in concept, the idea of a continuous thread of rule that unites China from very ancient times down to the present. The three dynasties in question are the Xia, the Shang, and the Zhou.

### **Xia Dynasty**

The Xia Dynasty is very little known because so far as we know, it was not yet a literate society. There are no writings from the Xia Dynasty and no archaeological remains that are conveniently labeled, "This is the capital of Xia." So archaeologists have hypothesized that certain places that they have excavated in the middle reaches of the Yellow River are in fact the Xia capital. But it is not yet absolutely proven that that is so. The Xia Dynasty is generally taken to have begun sometime around 1950 BCE and to have lasted roughly 400 years.

### **Shang Dynasty**

The next dynasty, the Shang Dynasty, is very much better attested to, in part because it left very rich archaeological remains in the forms of bronzes and other durable goods, but even more because it was the first literate dynasty in Chinese history. The Shang rulers felt a compulsion to consult their ancestors on every possible occasion, sometimes several times a day, over and over again for hundreds of years. The way in which they consulted their ancestors was by making heat induced cracks on flat bones, such as the shoulder blades of oxen. These bones were prepared through a certain procedure, cracked by the application of heat. The sound and shape of the crack would give the diviner a yes or no answer to a question about the king's welfare. These bones were then written upon - sometimes the question, sometimes also the answer, sometimes even the outcome. From vast numbers of inscribed oracle bones, we know a great deal about the rule of the Shang kings, about what they were afraid of, what they wished for, what kind of society they hoped to achieve. The Shang were overthrown in 1046 BCE, by a people who lived to the west of the Shang capital, which was on the north China plain, the flat lands of the flood plain of the Yellow River.

### **Zhou Dynasty**

In the highlands to the west lived the people called the Zhou. We don't know much about their origins, but we know that they began to expand their territory militarily during the last reigns of the Shang period. Finally they instituted a big military push into the north China plain, overwhelmed the Shang capital, and set up their own dynasty. In doing so, they articulated a principal which was to be the basic ideology of Chinese dynasties ever after. That is the idea of the Mandate of Heaven: that heaven itself had chosen the founder of the Zhou Dynasty to institute its rule because of its

virtue. The Zhou ruler said to the surviving nobility of the Shang, “You lost because you have lost your virtue; we won because we were supremely virtuous. Therefore heaven favored us and our victory was inevitable”.

## **Warring States Period**

The Zhou lasted in power for several hundred years and remained on the throne in name for hundreds of years beyond that. But after the eighth century BCE, China began to disintegrate into a large number of competing states. In fact, the period from the fifth century BCE down to the reunification of China in 221 is known in Chinese history as the Warring States Period. There was no central authority; there was a Zhou king but he hardly ruled beyond the suburbs of his own capital. China was organized into militarily powerful, culturally distinct states, each trying to aggrandize its power and territory at the expense of the others. In the warfare of the Warring States Period, one state began to grow larger and larger and more and more successful and therefore more and more militarily powerful; that was a state in the old Zhou heartland – again, the highlands to the west of the Yellow River in the north China plain. That was the state of Qin (the name Qin in fact gives us the word China). So China in a sense begins in 221 BCE with the conquest of all of the territory of the Warring States Period by the king of Qin and his army.

## **Qin Dynasty**

The Qin Dynasty was supposed to last a thousand generations; in fact, it lasted two. It instituted rule by a theory called legalism, one of many political theories that was competing for primacy in early China. Legalism held that if you made the laws clear enough and distinct enough, rewarded people for following the law and punishing them for breaking the law, society would run automatically and the ruler wouldn't have anything to do because law would govern everything. What really happened is that people hated the legalist system because rewards were few and punishments were many. After only fifteen years, after hardships such as the enforced building of great walls and vast irrigation projects, the peasantry of China had had enough.

## **Han Dynasty**

They rebelled and the Qin government collapsed and was replaced by the first of China's true imperial dynasties, the Han Dynasty, which, with a brief interregnum, lasted from 206 BC to 220 AD, more than 400 years. It was one of the most glorious and successful periods of Chinese history, a time in which many of the fundamental innovations that led to imperial government in China were put into place - the examination system, the professional bureaucracy, and the division of China into provinces and counties. It was also a very creative, wealthy, and expansive dynasty. It was under the Han that trade along the Silk Road got going. The Han Dynasty particularly wanted horses. So they were trading silk west to the lands across the Pamir Mountains where there was bloodstock, good stud horses, to bring back to China. That silk made its way west as far as the Roman Empire. But even successful dynasties collapse eventually. The Han Dynasty, after a long period of factionalism and peasant rebellions and civil war, finally collapsed in 220. At that point, no dynasty was able to establish unified rule over all of China.

## **Northern and Southern Dynasties**

First [after the Han], there were three competing kingdoms. That period lasted about 45 years. After the end of the Three Kingdoms period there was what the Chinese called the Northern and Southern Dynasties, or simply the Period of Disunion. It was an interesting period, though, because much of north China during that time was ruled by non-Chinese peoples, peoples whose background was proto-Mongolian or Turkish or some other ethnicity associated with the steppe cultures to the north of China. These were horse riders, conquerors, who came down into northern China, took advantage of China's weakness and established their own dynastic government over north China. Many of them

were enthusiastic proponents of Buddhism, and although politically the Period of Disunion is seen as a great time of weakness for China, culturally China was very strong. It was then that Buddhism really grew and became domesticated within China. The great statuary of China's cave Buddhist temples and grottos dates from the Period of Disunion. The accurate translation of Buddhist texts into Chinese dates from this period. For many people, the disunion of the Northern and Southern Dynasties was an unnatural time – [they believed] there should be a single mandate of heaven, there should be a single power on the throne.

## **Sui Dynasty**

Finally, in 589, a new conqueror arose to establish a dynasty called the Sui. The Sui Dynasty, like the Qin Dynasty, lasted only a short time. It was established in 589 and only lasted to 618. It was too ambitious - there were again large-scale public works projects that taxed the patience and the strength of the peasantry: the grand canal from Hangzhou to Chang'an (present-day Xi'an), the capital, was built at that time. Sui also wanted to conquer Korea and spent many years and many lives and much treasure on a fruitless effort to conquer the Korean Peninsula.

## **Tang Dynasty**

So the Sui Dynasty fell and gave way to another of China's most glorious periods - the Tang Dynasty, established in 618 and ruling China until 907. It's under the Tang Dynasty that Chinese culture reaches a character that is recognizable today as the essence of Chinese culture. Chinese poetry in its full flower dates from the Tang period and all of the most famous poets in Chinese literature are poets of the Tang Dynasty. The thousands and thousands of tomb figures that give us a realistic look at the clothing, the manners, the activities of the people in China date from the Tang. It was truly a glorious time and a time when Chinese power extended far out into Central Asia. China was open to influence from foreign cultures, not just from western Asia, from Iran, and the Turkish people, but also from India and Southeast Asia. During the Tang Dynasty, the capital of Chang'an was certainly the largest and most cosmopolitan city in the world with a population of over one million and resident communities of people from over 40 different countries and language areas from all across Eurasia.

## **Song Dynasty**

The Tang Dynasty collapsed in rebellion as dynasties tend to do, and after a succession of weak and short-lived dynasties, the Song Dynasty came into the throne in 960. Again the Song dynasty contributed something to our mental image of what China is really like. We think of China as seen through the filter of landscape paintings, towering mountains and high waterfalls and little pathways and pavilions tucked here and there among the mountains. Those landscapes were the product of the Song Dynasty, when landscape paintings became a new trend in Chinese art and Chinese scroll painting as we know it ever since then really became the central form of Chinese painting. Chinese porcelain reached a highpoint in the Song Dynasty in the purity of wine and purity of color that had not been matched anywhere in China or elsewhere since then, at least in my view. The Song Dynasty had the interest and distinction of having been culturally strong but militarily weak. It never controlled all of northern China and beginning in the early to mid-thirteenth century the Song Dynasty finally lost almost all of the north of China to the invading Mongols.

## **Yuan Dynasty**

Then finally the Mongol empire under Kublai Khan<sup>1</sup> took over entirely in 1260 and established its own dynasty, the Yuan Dynasty, in 1279. Now, this was a conquest dynasty and the Mongols tried to avoid some of the assimilation

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<sup>1</sup> Various spellings exist for the name of this Mongol leader, including Khubilai Khan and Qubilai Khan. Khubilai is the given name and Khan the title, meaning roughly Great Leader.

problems of previous conquerors, who grew soft as they grew more and more Chinese in their language, manners, and habits. The Mongols tried to keep themselves separate from the Chinese people and therefore keep themselves strong, but what they principally did was keep themselves separate [from] and resented by the Chinese population. The Mongols were very good at conquering on horseback, but they were not so good at ruling from horseback.

## Ming Dynasty

The Mongol Dynasty lasted less than a century before a rebellion led by a genuine peasant, not a member of the ruling class at all, but someone of very humble origins, name Zhu Yuanzhang, in 1368 established the Ming Dynasty. Now, everyone has heard of Ming porcelain. During the Ming we find the great glory of blue and white Chinese porcelain. The exuberance of Chinese scroll painting, not just landscapes, but bamboos, flowers, animals, and portraits of all sorts were done not just by professional painters, but by amateurs, members of the ruling class who were expressing their own cultural sense of belonging to China and sense of participation in the rule of this powerful and mighty and rich country. The Ming had the distinction of being the first recipients of real western influence in China, as Europeans began coming to China in the 1600s. The Ming mostly ignored them. The capital of China at that time was way up in the north in Beijing – preparing, as had always been the case in China, to deal with dangerous barbarians on the *northern* frontier. These sea-born barbarians who showed up on the coast of southeastern China didn't seem to amount to much and were not paid very much attention to, but they were certainly going to make their presence felt in the next dynasty.

## Qing Dynasty

The Ming eventually weakened and were conquered by the Manchus, that horse-riding, non-Chinese, Manchu-speaking people from the northeast who established their own dynasty in 1644 and remained successfully on the throne till 1911. But it was under the Qing that the tide turned from China as the richest, most powerful, most self-sufficient country in the world to a country that eventually became known as the sick man of East Asia, a country so battered by the effects of western imperialism and inability to deal with the new circumstances of western influence that by 1911 the dynasty collapsed of its own weight and most of the people in China at that point said good riddance.

The dynastic system of China was succeeded in 1912 by a republic<sup>2</sup> and in 1949 by the People's Republic of China. We will spend a good deal of time looking at how those periods, no longer dynasties, but new attempts to find successful [forms of] government for China, coped with the new forces of the modern era. So we have some four thousand years of Chinese history to deal with in this series but we can do no more than to pick and choose and look at some of the highlights that will give us something to think about when we look at China today and China in the future.

This concludes another session of our exploration of the landscapes of China. I'm John Major, at Asia Society in New York. Thank you for joining us.

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<sup>2</sup> The revolution that overthrew the Qing Dynasty in 1911 is known as the Xinhai Revolution, for the year according to the traditional Chinese calendar.