Toward the end of the sixth century B.C.E., Chinese society was in a state of increasing disarray. The political principles that had governed society since the founding of the Zhou (JOE) dynasty six centuries earlier were widely ignored, and squabbling principalities scuffled for primacy as the power of the Zhou court steadily declined. The common people groaned under the weight of an oppressive manorial system that left them at the mercy of their aristocratic lords.

In the midst of this turmoil, a wandering scholar who went by the name of Kung fuci, or K’ung Fu-tzu, meaning Master Kung, traveled the length of the kingdom observing events and seeking employment as a political counselor. In the process, he attracted a number of disciples, to whom he expounded a set of ideas that in later years served as the guiding principles for the Chinese Empire. Some of his ideas are strikingly modern in their thrust. Among them is the revolutionary proposition that government depends on the will of the people.

But Master Kung, or Confucius (kun-FOO-shuss), the Latin term by which he is known to much of the world today, saw himself not as a revolutionary, but as a true conservative, seeking to preserve elements in Chinese history that had been neglected by his contemporaries. In his view, the principles that he sought to instill into his society had all been previously established many centuries in the past, during a “golden age” at the dawn of Chinese history when governments supposedly ruled on the basis of high moral principle: “If the government seeks to rule by decrees and the threat of punishment, the people will have no sense of shame; but if they are governed by virtue and a sense of propriety, they will feel shame and seek to behave correctly.”
The Dawn of Chinese Civilization

**FOCUS QUESTION:** How did geography influence the civilization that arose in China?

According to Chinese legend, Chinese society was founded by a series of rulers who brought the first rudiments of civilization to the region nearly five thousand years ago. The first was Fu Xi (foo SHÉE) (Fu Hsi), the ox-tamer, who “knotted cords for hunting and fishing,” domesticated animals, and introduced the beginnings of family life (for an explanation regarding the translation of the Chinese written language, see “A Note to Students About Language and the Dating of Time” on p. xxx). The second was Shen Nong (shun NOONG) (Shen Nung), the divine farmer, who “bent wood for plows and hewed wood for plowshares.” He taught the people the techniques of agriculture. Last came Huang Di (hwahng DEE) (Huang Ti), the Yellow Emperor, who “strung a piece of wood for the bow, and whittled little sticks of wood for the arrows.” Legend credits Huang Di with creating the Chinese system of writing, as well as with inventing the bow and arrow.1 Modern historians, of course, do not accept the literal accuracy of such legends but view them instead as part of the process whereby early peoples attempted to make sense of the world and their role in it. Nevertheless, such re-creations of a mythical past often contain an element of truth. Although there is no clear evidence that the “three sovereigns” actually existed, their achievements do symbolize some of the defining characteristics of Chinese civilization: the interaction between nomadic and agricultural peoples, the importance of the family as the basic unit of Chinese life, and the development of a unique system of writing.

The Land and People of China

Although human communities have existed in China for several hundred thousand years, the first *Homo sapiens* arrived in the area sometime after 40,000 B.C.E. as part of the great migration out of Africa. Around the eighth millennium B.C.E., the early peoples living along the riverbanks of northern and central China began to master the cultivation of crops. A number of these early agricultural settlements were in the neighborhood of the Yellow River, where they gave birth to two Neolithic societies known to archaeologists as the Yangshao (yahng-SHOW “[ow” as in “how”]) and the Longshan (loong-SHAHN) cultures (sometimes identified in terms of their pottery as the painted and black pottery cultures, respectively). Similar communities began to appear in the Yangtze valley in central China and along the coast to the south. The southern settlements were based on the cultivation of rice rather than dry crops such as millet, barley, and wheat (the last was an import from the Middle East in the second millennium B.C.E.), but they were as old as those in the north. Thus, agriculture, and perhaps other elements of early civilization, may have developed spontaneously in several areas of China rather than radiating outward from one central region.

At first, these simple Neolithic communities were hardly more than villages, but as the inhabitants mastered the rudiments of agriculture, they gradually gave rise to more sophisticated and complex societies. In a pattern that we have already seen elsewhere, civilization gradually spread from these nuclear settlements in the valleys of the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers to other lowland areas of eastern and central China. The two great river valleys, then, can be considered the core regions in the development of Chinese civilization (see Map 3.1).

Although these densely cultivated valleys eventually became two of the great food-producing areas of the ancient world, China is more than a land of fertile fields. In fact, only 12 percent of the total land area is arable, compared with 23 percent in the United States. Much of the remainder consists of mountains and deserts that ring the country on its northern and western frontiers.

This often arid and forbidding landscape is a dominant feature of Chinese life and has played a significant role in Chinese history. The geographic barriers served to isolate the Chinese people from advanced agrarian societies in other parts of Asia. The frontier regions in the Gobi (GOH-bee) Desert, Central Asia, and the Tibetan plateau were sparsely inhabited by peoples of Mongolian, Indo-European, or Turkish extraction. Most were pastoral societies, and like the contacts between other ancient river valley civilizations and their neighbors, relations between the Chinese and the steppe...
China under the Shang dynasty

CHAPTER 3

MAP 3.1 Neolithic China. Like the ancient civilizations that arose in North Africa and western Asia, early Chinese society emerged along the banks of two major river systems, the Yellow and the Yangtze. China was separated from the other civilizations by snow-capped mountains and forbidding deserts, however, and thus was compelled to develop essentially on its own, without contacts from other societies going through a similar process.

Based on the discussions in the preceding chapters, what are the advantages and disadvantages of close contact with other human societies?

peoples were intermittent and frequently unstable. Sometimes the two sides engaged in productive trade relations, swapping grain and manufactured goods for hides and other animal products. On other occasions, however, mutual suspicion and contrasting interests led to conflict. Although less numerous than the Chinese, many of the peoples along the frontiers possessed impressive skills in war and were sometimes aggressive in seeking wealth or territory in the settled regions south of the Gobi Desert. Over the next two thousand years, the northern frontier became one of the great fault lines of conflict in Asia as Chinese armies attempted to protect precious farmlands from marauding peoples from beyond the frontier. In turn, nomadic peoples often took offense at Chinese efforts to encroach on their grazing lands. When China was unified and blessed with capable rulers, it could usually keep the nomadic intruders at bay and even bring them under a loose form of Chinese administration. But in times of internal weakness, China was vulnerable to attack from the north, and on several occasions, nomadic peoples succeeded in overthrowing native Chinese rulers and setting up their own dynastic regimes.

From other directions, China normally had little to fear. To the east lay the China Sea, a lair for pirates and the source of powerful typhoons that occasionally ravaged the Chinese coast but otherwise rarely a source of concern. South of the Yangtze River was a hilly region inhabited by a mixture of peoples of varied linguistic and ethnic stock who lived by farming, fishing, or food gathering. They were gradually absorbed in the inexorable expansion of Chinese civilization.

The Shang Dynasty

Historians of China have traditionally dated the beginning of Chinese civilization to the founding of the Xia (shee–AH) (Hsia) dynasty more than four thousand years ago. Although the precise date for the rise of the Xia is in dispute, recent archaeological evidence confirms its existence. Legend maintains that the founder was a ruler named Yu, who is also credited with introducing irrigation and draining the floodwaters that periodically threatened to inundate the North China plain. The Xia dynasty was replaced by a second dynasty, the Shang (SHAHNG), around the sixteenth century B.C.E. The late Shang capital at Anyang (ahn-YAHNG), just north of the Yellow River in north-central China, has been excavated by archaeologists. Among the finds were thousands of so-called oracle bones, ox and chicken bones or turtle shells that were used by Shang rulers for divination and to communicate with the gods. The inscriptions on these oracle bones are the earliest known form of Chinese writing and provide much of our information about the beginnings of civilization in China. They describe a culture gradually emerging from the Neolithic to the early Bronze Age.

POLITICAL ORGANIZATION China under the Shang dynasty was a predominantly agricultural society ruled by an aristocratic class whose major occupation was war and control over key resources such as metals and salt. One ancient chronicler complained that “the big affairs of state consist of sacrifice and soldiery.” Combat was carried on by means of two-horse chariots. The appearance of chariots in China in the mid-second millennium B.C.E. coincides roughly with similar developments elsewhere, leading some historians to suggest that the Shang ruling class may originally have invaded China from elsewhere in Asia. But items found in Shang burial mounds are similar to Longshan pottery, implying that the Shang ruling elites were linear descendants of the indigenous Neolithic peoples in the area. If that was the case, the Shang may have acquired their knowledge of horse-drawn chariots through contact with the peoples of neighboring regions.

Some recent support for that assumption has come from evidence unearthed in the sandy wastes of Xinjiang (SHIN–jyahng), China’s far-northwestern province. There archaeologists have discovered corpses dating back as early as the
The First Villages in Early China. Before the invention of writing systems, early humans sought to record events in their lives by means of pictures. Examples are the Neolithic cave paintings in France and Saharan Africa (see Chapters 1 and 8). Shown here at the right is a Neolithic cave painting of a village of stilt houses in Yunnan province in southern China. Stilt houses are still widely used in parts of southern Asia today as a means of protection against flooding. The smaller photo shows a house in Banpo, an early farming village in central China that was founded perhaps seven thousand years ago. Note that this house is enclosed by walls made of dried mud, a type of dwelling appropriate to a colder climate.

second millennium B.C.E. with physical characteristics resembling those of Europeans. They are also clothed in textiles similar to those worn at the time in Europe, suggesting that they may have been members of an Indo-European migration from areas much farther to the west. If that is the case, they were probably familiar with advances in chariot making that occurred a few hundred years earlier in southern Russia and Kazakhstan (ka-zak-STAN or kuh-zahk-STAHN). By about 2000 B.C.E., spoked wheels were being deposited at grave sites in Ukraine and also in the Gobi Desert, just north of the great bend of the Yellow River. It is thus likely that the new technology became available to the founders of the Shang dynasty and may have aided their rise to power in northern China.

The Shang king ruled with the assistance of a central bureaucracy in the capital city. His realm was divided into a number of territories governed by aristocratic chieftains, but the king appointed these chieftains and could apparently depose them at will. He was also responsible for the defense of the realm and controlled large armies that often fought on the fringes of the kingdom. The transcendent importance of the ruler was graphically displayed in the ritual sacrifices undertaken at his death, when hundreds of his retainers were buried with him in the royal tomb.

As the inscriptions on the oracle bones make clear, the Shang ruling elite believed in the existence of supernatural forces and thought that they could communicate with those forces to obtain divine intervention on matters of this world. In fact, the main purpose of the oracle bones seems to have been to communicate with the gods. Supreme among the heavenly forces was the sky god, known as Di (Ti). Evidence from the oracle bones also suggests that the king was already being viewed as an intermediary between heaven and earth. An early Shang character for king (tē) consists of three horizontal lines...
Shell and Bone Writing. The earliest known form of true writing in China dates back to the Shang dynasty and was inscribed on shells or animal bones. Questions for the gods were scratched on bones, which cracked after being exposed to fire. The cracks were then interpreted by sorcerers. The questions often expressed practical concerns: Will it rain? Will the king be victorious in battle? Will he recover from his illness? Originally composed of pictographs and ideographs four thousand years ago, Chinese writing has evolved into an elaborate set of symbols that combine meaning and pronunciation in a single character.

connected by a single vertical line; the middle horizontal line represents the king’s place between human society and the divine forces in nature.

The early Chinese also had a clear sense of life in the hereafter. Though some of the human sacrifices discovered in the royal tombs were presumably intended to propitiate the gods, others were meant to accompany the king or members of his family on the journey to the next world (see the comparative illustration on p. 69). From this conviction would come the concept of veneration of ancestors (mistakenly known in the West as “ancestor worship”) and the practice, which continues to the present day in many Chinese communities, of burning replicas of physical objects to accompany the departed on their journey to the next world.

SOCIAL STRUCTURES In the Neolithic period, the farming village was apparently the basic social unit of China, at least in the core region of the Yellow River valley. Villages were organized by clans rather than by nuclear family units, and all residents probably took the common clan name of the entire village. In some cases, a village may have included more than one clan. At Banpo (Pan P’o), an archaeological site near the modern city of Xian (shih–AHN) that dates back at least seven thousand years, the houses in the village are separated by a ditch, which some scholars think may have served as a divider between two clans. The individual dwellings at Banpo housed nuclear families, but a larger building in the village was apparently used as a clan meeting hall. The clan-based origins of Chinese society may help explain the continued importance of the joint family in traditional China, as well as the relatively small number of family names in Chinese society. Even today there are only about four hundred commonly used family names in a society of more than one billion people, and a colloquial expression for the common people in China today is “the old hundred names.”

By Shang times, the classes were becoming increasingly differentiated. It is likely that some poorer peasants did not own their farms but were obliged to work the land of the chieftain and other elite families in the village. The aristocrats not only made war and served as officials (indeed, the first Chinese character for official originally meant “warrior”), but they were also the primary landowners. In addition to the aristocratic elite and the peasants, there were a small number of merchants and artisans, as well as slaves, probably consisting primarily of criminals or prisoners taken in battle.

The Shang are perhaps best known for their mastery of the art of casting bronze. Utensils, weapons, and ritual objects made of bronze (see the comparative essay “The Use of Metals” on p. 70) have been found in royal tombs in urban centers throughout the area known to be under Shang influence. It is also clear that the Shang had achieved a fairly sophisticated writing system that would eventually spread throughout East Asia and evolve into the written language that is still used in China today.

THE SHANG DYNASTY: CHINA’S “MOTHER CULTURE”? Until recently, the prevailing wisdom among historians—both Chinese and non-Chinese—was that the Yellow River valley was the ancient heartland of Chinese civilization and that technological and cultural achievements gradually radiated from there to other areas in East Asia. Here, it was thought, occurred the first technological breakthroughs, including the development of a writing system, advanced farming techniques, and the ability to make bronze ritual vessels. Supporting this idea was the fact that the first significant archaeological finds in China, including the last Shang capital at Anyang, were made in that region.

Today, this diffusion hypothesis, as it is sometimes called, is no longer so widely accepted. The remains of early agricultural communities have now been unearthed in the Yangtze River valley and along the southern coast, and a rich trove of bronze vessels has been discovered in grave sites in central Sichuan (suh–CHWAHN) province. Such finds suggest that although the Yellow River civilization may have taken the lead in some areas, such as complex political organization and the development of writing, similar advances were already under way in other parts of China.
The Zhou Dynasty

**FOCUS QUESTION:** What were the major tenets of Confucianism, Legalism, and Daoism, and what role did each play in political and philosophical debates during the Zhou dynasty?

In the eleventh century B.C.E., the Shang dynasty was overthrown by an aggressive young state located to the west of Anyang, the Shang capital, and near the great bend of the Yellow River as it begins to flow directly eastward to the sea. The new dynasty, which called itself the Zhou (Chou), survived for about eight hundred years, making it the longest-lived dynasty in the history of China. According to tradition, the last of the Shang rulers was a tyrant who oppressed the people (Chinese sources assert that he was a degenerate who built “ponds of wine” and ordered the composing of lustful music that “ruined the morale of the nation”), leading the ruler of the principality of Zhou to revolt and establish a new dynasty.

The Zhou located their capital in their home territory, near the present-day city of Xian. Later they established a second capital city at modern Luoyang (LOH-yahng), farther to the east, to administer new territories captured from the Shang. This established a pattern of eastern and western capitals that would endure off and on in China for nearly two thousand years.

**Political Structures**

The Zhou dynasty (1045–221 B.C.E.) adopted the political system of its predecessors, with some changes. The Shang practice of dividing the kingdom into a number of territories governed by officials appointed by the king was continued under the Zhou. At the apex of the government hierarchy was the Zhou king, who was served by a bureaucracy of growing size and complexity. It now included several ministries responsible for rites, education, law, and public works. Beyond the capital, the Zhou kingdom was divided into a number of principalities, governed by members of the hereditary aristocracy, who were appointed by the king and were at least theoretically subordinated to his authority.

**THE MANDATE OF HEAVEN** But the Zhou kings also introduced some innovations. According to the Rites of Zhou, one of the oldest surviving documents on statecraft, the Zhou dynasty ruled China because it possessed the mandate of Heaven. According to this concept, Heaven (now viewed as an impersonal law of nature rather than as an anthropomorphic deity) maintained...
COMPARATIVE ESSAY

The Use of Metals

Around 6000 B.C.E., people in western Asia discovered how to use metals. They soon realized the advantage of using metal instead of stone to make both tools and weapons. Metal could be shaped more precisely, allowing artisans to make more refined tools and weapons with sharper edges and more regular shapes. Copper, silver, and gold, which were commonly found in their elemental form, were the first metals to be used. These were relatively soft and could be easily pounded into different shapes. But an important step was taken when people discovered that a rock that contained metal could be heated to liquefy the metal (a process called smelting). The liquid metal could then be poured into molds of clay or stone to make precisely shaped tools and weapons.

Copper was the first metal to be used in making tools. The first known copper smelting furnace, dated to 3800 B.C.E., was found in the Sinai. At about the same time, however, artisans in Southeast Asia discovered that tin could be added to copper to make bronze. By 3000 B.C.E., artisans in western Asia were also making bronze. Bronze has a lower melting point that makes it easier to cast, but it is also a harder metal than copper and corrodes less. By 1400 B.C.E., the Chinese were making bronze decorative objects as well as battle-axes and helmets. The widespread use of bronze has led historians to speak of the period from around 3000 to 1200 B.C.E. as the Bronze Age, although this is somewhat misleading in that many peoples continued to use stone tools and weapons even after bronze became available.

But there were limitations to the use of bronze. Tin was not as available as copper, so bronze tools and weapons were expensive. After 1200 B.C.E., bronze was increasingly replaced by iron, which was probably first used around 1500 B.C.E. in western Asia, where the Hittites made weapons from it. Between 1500 and 600 B.C.E., ironmaking spread across Europe, North Africa, and Asia. Bronze continued to be used, but mostly for jewelry and other domestic purposes. Iron was used to make tools and weapons with sharp edges. Because iron weapons were cheaper than bronze ones, more warriors could be armed, and wars could be fought on a larger scale.

Iron was handled differently from bronze: it was heated until it could be beaten into a desired shape. Each hammering made the metal stronger. This wrought iron, as it was called, was typical of iron manufacturing in the West until the late Middle Ages. In China, however, the use of heat-resistant clay in the walls of blast furnaces raised temperatures to 1,537 degrees Celsius, enabling artisans already in the fourth century B.C.E. to liquefy iron so that it too could be cast in molds. Europeans would not develop such blast furnaces until the fifteenth century C.E.

Bronze Axhead. This axhead, manufactured during the second millennium B.C.E., was made by pouring liquid metal into an ax-shaped mold of clay or stone. When it had cooled, artisans polished the surface to produce a sharp cutting edge.

What were the advantages of making objects out of bronze versus iron in the ancient world? Which metal ultimately triumphed in China?
disappearance was a consequence of the intellectual and moral weakness of the rulers of the Zhou royal house.

By the sixth century b.c.e., the Zhou dynasty began to decline. As the power of the central government disintegrated, bitter internal rivalries arose among the various principalities, where the governing officials had succeeded in making their positions hereditary at the expense of the king. As the power of these officials grew, they began to regulate the local economy and seek reliable sources of revenue for their expanding armies, such as a uniform tax system and government monopolies on key commodities such as salt and iron. A century later, the Zhou rulers had lost all pretense of authority, and China was divided into a cauldron of squabbling states, an era known to Chinese historians as the "Period of the Warring States" (see "The First Chinese Empire: The Qin Dynasty" later in this chapter).

Economy and Society

During the Zhou dynasty, the essential characteristics of Chinese economic and social institutions began to take shape. The Zhou continued the pattern of land ownership that had existed under the Shang: the peasants worked on lands owned by their lord but also had land that they cultivated for their own use. The practice was called the well-field system because the Chinese character for "well" (井) calls to mind the division of land into nine separate segments. Each peasant family tilled an outer plot for its own use and joined with other families to work the inner one for the hereditary lord (see the box on p. 72). How widely this system was used is unclear, but it represented an ideal described by Confucian scholars of a later day. As the following passage from The Book of Songs indicates, the life of the average farmer was a difficult one. The "big rat" is probably the government or a lord who has imposed high taxes on the peasants.

Big rat, big rat,
Do not eat my millet!
Three years I have served you,
But you will not care for me.
I am going to leave you
And go to that happy land;
Happy land, happy land,
Where I will find my place.  

Trade and manufacturing were carried out by merchants and artisans, who lived in walled towns under the direct control of the local lord. Merchants did not operate independently but were considered the property of the local lord and on occasion could even be bought and sold like chattels. A class of slaves performed a variety of menial tasks and perhaps worked on local irrigation projects. Most of them were probably prisoners of war captured during conflicts with the neighboring principalities. Scholars do not know how extensive slavery was in ancient times, but slaves probably did not constitute a large portion of the total population.

The period of the later Zhou, from the sixth to the third century b.c.e., was an era of significant economic growth and technological innovation, especially in agriculture (see the comparative illustration on p. 73). During that time, large-scale water control projects were undertaken to regulate the flow of rivers and distribute water evenly to the fields, as well as to construct canals to facilitate the transport of goods from one region to another. Perhaps the most impressive technological achievement of the period was the construction of a massive water control project on the Min River, a tributary of the Yangtze. This system of canals and spillways, put into operation by the state of Qin a few years prior to the end of the Zhou dynasty, diverted excess water from the river into the local irrigation network and watered an area populated by as many as 5 million people. The system is still in use today, more than two thousand years later.

Food production was also stimulated by a number of advances in farm technology. By the mid-sixth century b.c.e., the introduction of iron had led to the development of iron plowshares, which permitted deep plowing for the first time. Other innovations dating from the later Zhou were the use of natural fertilizer, the collar harness, and the technique of leaving land fallow to preserve or replenish nutrients in the soil. By the late Zhou dynasty, the cultivation of wet rice had become one of the prime sources of food in China. Although rice was difficult and time-consuming to produce, it replaced other grain crops in areas with a warm climate because of its good taste, relative ease of preparation, and high nutritional value.

The advances in agriculture, which enabled the population of China to rise as high as 20 million people during the late Zhou era, were also undoubtedly a major factor in the growth of commerce and manufacturing. During the late Zhou, economic wealth began to replace noble birth as the prime source of power and influence. Tools made of iron became more common, and trade developed in a variety of useful commodities, including cloth, salt, and manufactured goods.

One of the most important items of trade in ancient China was silk. There is evidence of silkworms being raised as early as the Neolithic period. Remains of silk material have been found on Shang bronzes, and a large number of fragments have been recovered in tombs dating from the mid-Zhou era. Silk cloth was used not only for clothing and quilts but also to wrap the bodies of the dead prior to burial. Fragments have been found throughout Central Asia and as far away as Greece, suggesting that the famous Silk Road stretching from central China westward to the Middle East and the Mediterranean Sea was in operation as early as the fifth century b.c.e. (see Map 5.4 on p. 149 and Chapter 5).

Initially, however, jade was probably a more important item of trade carried along the Silk Road. Blocks of the precious stone were mined in the mountains of northern Tibet as early as the sixth millennium b.c.e. and began to appear in China during the Shang dynasty. Praised by Confucius as a symbol of purity and virtue, jade assumed an almost sacred quality among Chinese during the Zhou dynasty.

With the development of trade and manufacturing, China began to move toward a money economy. The first form of money, as in much of the rest of the world, may have been seashells (the Chinese character for goods or property contains the ideographic symbol for "shell" (贝壳), but by the Zhou dynasty, pieces of iron shaped like a knife or round coins with a hole in the middle so they could be carried in strings of a thousand were being used. Most ordinary Chinese, however, simply used a system of barter. Taxes, rents, and even the salaries of government officials were normally paid in grain.
The Hundred Schools of Ancient Philosophy

In China, as in other great river valley societies, the birth of civilization was accompanied by the emergence of an organized effort to comprehend the nature of the cosmos and the role of human beings within it. Speculation over such questions began in the very early stages of civilization and culminated at the end of the Zhou era in the “hundred schools” of ancient philosophy, a wide-ranging debate over the nature of human beings, society, and the universe.

EARLY BELIEFS

The first hint of religious belief in ancient China comes from relics found in royal tombs of Neolithic times. By then, the Chinese had already developed a religious sense beyond the primitive belief in the existence of spirits in nature. The Shang had begun to believe in the existence of one transcendent god, known as Shang Di, who presided over all the forces of nature. As time went on, the Chinese concept of religion evolved from a vaguely anthropomorphic god to a somewhat more impersonal symbol of universal order known as Heaven (Tian, or T’ien). There was also much speculation among Chinese intellectuals about the nature of the cosmic order. One of the earliest ideas was that the universe was divided into two primary forces of good and evil, light and dark, male and female, called the yang and the yin, represented symbolically by the sun (yang) and the moon (yin). According to this theory, somewhat reminiscent of the religion of Zoroastrianism in Persia, life was a dynamic process of interaction between the forces of yang and yin. Early Chinese could only

In the eighth month spinning is begun; We make dark fabrics and yellow, “With our red dye so bright, We make robes for our young lords.”

In the ninth month we prepare the stockyard, And in the tenth we bring in the harvest. The millets, the early and the late, Together with paddy and hemp, beans and wheat Now we go up to work in the manor. “In the day you gather the thatch-reeds; In the evening twist them into rope; Go quickly on to the roofs; Soon you are to sow the grain.”

In the days of [our] second month we cut the ice with tingling blows; In the days of [our] third month [it is] stored in the icehouse. In the days of [our] fourth month, very early, A lamb with scallions is offered in sacrifice. In the ninth month are shrewd frosts; In the tenth month the stockyard is cleared. With twin pitchers we hold the feast, Killed for it is a young lamb. Up we go into the lord’s hall, Raise the cup of buffalo horn; “Long life for our lord; may he live forever and ever!”

Who is the presumed author of this document? Do you see any indications that men and women had different job responsibilities on the estate? How does the life of these peasants compare with the situation in other ancient civilizations?
Efforts to divine the mysterious purposes of Heaven notwithstanding, Chinese thinking about metaphysical reality also contained a strain of pragmatism, readily apparent in the ideas of the great philosopher Confucius. Confucius was born in the state of Lu, in the modern province of Shandong (SHAHN-dooong), in 551 B.C.E. After reaching maturity, he apparently hoped to find employment as a political adviser in one of the principalities into which China was divided at that time, but he had little success in finding a patron. Nevertheless, his ideas, as contained in the Analects and other works attributed to him, made an indelible mark on Chinese history and culture (see the box on p. 74).

In conversations with his disciples contained in the Analects, Confucius often adopted a detached and almost skeptical view of Heaven. “If you are unable to serve men,” he commented on one occasion, “how can you serve the spirits? If you don’t understand life, how can you understand death?” In many instances, he appeared to advise his followers to revere the deities and the ancestral spirits but to keep them at a distance. Confucius believed it was useless to speculate too much about metaphysical questions. Better by far to assume that there was a rational order to the universe and then concentrate on ordering the affairs of this world.⁶

Confucius’s interest in philosophy, then, was essentially political and ethical. The universe was constructed in such a way that if human beings could act harmoniously in accordance with its purposes, their own affairs would prosper. Much of his concern was with human behavior. The key to proper behavior was to behave in accordance with the Dao (DOW) (Way). Confucius assumed that all human beings had their own Dao, depending on their individual role in life, and it was their duty to follow it. Even the ruler had his own Dao, and he ignored it at his peril, for to do so could mean the loss of the mandate of Heaven. The idea of the Dao is reminiscent of the concept of dharma in ancient India and played a similar role in governing the affairs of society.

Two elements in the Confucian interpretation of the Dao are particularly worthy of mention. The first is the concept of duty. It was the responsibility of all individuals to subordinate their own interests and aspirations to the broader need of the family and the community. Confucius assumed that if each individual worked hard to fulfill his or her assigned destiny, the affairs of society as a whole would prosper as well. In this respect, it was important for the ruler to set a good example. If he followed his “kingly way,” the beneficial effects would radiate throughout society (see the box on p. 75).

The second key element is the idea of humanity, sometimes translated as “human-heartedness.” This concept involves a sense of compassion and empathy for others. It is
The Wit and Wisdom of Confucius

The Analects (Lun Yu), a collection of sayings supposedly uttered by the ancient Chinese philosopher Confucius and drawn up after his death by his disciples, is considered to be a primary source for the Master’s ideas and thought. The degree to which the collection provides an accurate account of his remarks on various subjects has long been a matter of debate among specialists. Some scholars argue that the sayings in the Analects reflect the views of his followers two centuries after his death in the fifth century B.C.E. more than they do those of Confucius himself.

Whatever the truth of this contention, the sayings in the Analects are generally accepted to be representative of Confucius’s own views and have provided moral and philosophical guidance to countless generations of Chinese over the centuries. As such, they have played a major role in shaping the lives and culture of the Chinese people. Presented here are a number of familiar passages from the Analects on a variety of subjects.

The Confucian Analects

On Human Nature
17.2. By their nature, men are quite similar; in practice, they become far apart.
17.3. Only the wisest and the most ignorant of men cannot be changed.
16.9. Confucius said: Those born with innate knowledge are the highest of men; those who become learned are next in line; those who study but fail to learn follow; those who are ignorant yet do not study are the lowest of men.

On Morality
4.16. The moral man seeks righteousness; the immoral man seeks profit.
6.28. The virtuous man thinks of the needs of others before those of his own; he seeks to benefit others before himself.
15.23. Tzu Kung [one of the Master’s disciples] asked if there was one word that could be applied as a standard for virtuous behavior. Confucius replied: It is reciprocity: do not do unto others what you would not wish done to yourself.

On Filial Piety
2.6. What is filial piety? Confucius said: Parents are concerned when their children become ill.
2.5. [Asked about filial piety] Confucius replied: It consists in not being disobedient; when they are alive, parents should be served according to the rules of propriety; after their death, they should be buried correctly and sacrifices should be carried out in a proper manner.

On Religion
13.3. With regard to what he does not know, the superior man reserves judgment.
7.20. The Master did not comment on the supernatural, on feats of strength, on disorder, and on the spirits.
6.20. To meet one’s human obligations, to respect the spirits but maintain distance from them, such indeed may be called wisdom.
11.11. [Asked about serving the spirits of the departed], Confucius replied: If you are unable to serve men, how can you serve the spirits? If you don’t understand life, how can you understand death?

Confucius is viewed by some observers as a reformer, and by others as a conservative. Based on the information available to you in this chapter, how would you classify his ideas, as expressed in the Analects?

Q

similar in some ways to Christian concepts, but with a subtle twist. Where Christian teachings call on human beings to “behave toward others as you would have them behave toward you,” the Confucian maxim is put in a different way: “Do not do unto others what you would not wish done to yourself.” To many Chinese, this attitude symbolizes an element of tolerance in the Chinese character that has not always been practiced in other societies.”
The Way of the Great Learning

Few texts exist today that were written by Confucius himself. Most were written or edited by his disciples. The following selection is from The Great Learning, a text that was probably written two centuries after Confucius’s death. Nevertheless, it illustrates his view that good government begins with the cultivation of individual morality and proper human relationships at the basic level. The idea that the cultivation of the individual is the first step in bringing peace to the world continued to win general approval down to modern times. There are interesting similarities between such ideas and the views expressed in the Indian treatise Arthasastra, discussed in Chapter 2.

The Great Learning

The Way of the Great Learning consists in clearly exemplifying illustrious virtue, in loving the people, and in resting in the highest good.

Only when one knows where one is to rest can one have a fixed purpose. Only with a fixed purpose can one achieve calmness of mind. Only with calmness of mind can one attain serene repose. Only in serene repose can one carry on careful deliberation. Only through careful deliberation can one have achievement. Things have their roots and branches; affairs have their beginning and end. He who knows what comes first and what comes last comes himself near the Way.

The ancients who wished clearly to exemplify illustrious virtue throughout the world would first set up good government in their states. Wishing to govern well their states, they would first regulate their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they would first cultivate their persons. Wishing to cultivate their persons, they would first rectify their minds. Wishing to rectify their minds, they would first seek sincerity in their thoughts. Wishing for sincerity in their thoughts, they would first extend their knowledge. The extension of knowledge lay in the investigation of things. For only when things are investigated is knowledge extended; only when knowledge is extended are thoughts sincere; only when thoughts are sincere are minds rectified; only when minds are rectified are our persons cultivated; only when our persons are cultivated are our families regulated; only when families are regulated are states well governed; and only when states are well governed is there peace in the world.

From the emperor down to the common people, all, without exception, must consider cultivation of the individual character as the root. If the root is in disorder, it is impossible for the branches to be in order. To treat the important as unimportant and to treat the unimportant as important—this should never be. This is called knowing the root; this is called the perfection of knowledge.

Confucius may have considered himself a failure because he never attained the position he wanted, but many of his contemporaries found his ideas appealing, and in the generations after his death, his message spread widely throughout China. Confucius was an outspoken critic of his times and lamented the disappearance of what he regarded as the golden age of the early Zhou. One classical source quoted him as follows:

The practice of the Great Way, the illustrious men of the Three Dynasties—these I shall never know in person. And yet they inspire my ambition. When the Great Way was practiced, the world was shared by all alike. The worthy and the able were promoted to office and practiced good faith and lived in affection. There they did not regard as parents only their own parents, or as sons only their own sons. The aged found a fitting close to their lives, the robust their proper employment; the young were provided with an upbringing and the widow and widower, the orphaned and the sick, with proper care. Men had their talks and women their hearths. They hated to see goods lying about in waste, yet they did not hoard them for themselves; they disliked the thought that their energies were not fully used, yet they used them not for private ends. Therefore all evil plotting was prevented and thieves and rebels did not arise, so that people could leave their outer gates unbolted. This was the age of Grand Unity. 8

Yet Confucius was not just another disgruntled Chinese conservative mourning the passing of the good old days; rather, he was a revolutionary thinker, many of whose key ideas looked forward rather than backward. Perhaps his most striking political idea was that the government should be open to all men of superior quality, not limited to those of noble birth. As one of his disciples reports in the Analects, “The Master said, by their nature, men are quite similar; in practice, they become far apart.”9 Confucius undoubtedly had himself in mind as one of those “superior” men, but the rapacity of the hereditary lords must have added strength to his convictions.

The concept of rule by merit was, of course, not an unfamiliar idea in the China of his day; the Rites of Zhou had clearly stated that the king deserved to rule because of his talent and virtue, not as the result of noble birth. In practice, however, aristocratic privilege must often have opened the doors to political influence, and many of Confucius’s contemporaries must have regarded his appeal for government by talent as both exciting and dangerous. Confucius did not explicitly
During the latter part of the Zhou dynasty, one of the major preoccupations of Chinese philosophers was to determine the essential qualities of human nature. In the Analects, Confucius was cited as asserting that humans’ moral instincts were essentially neutral at birth; their minds must be cultivated to bring out the potential goodness therein. In later years, the master’s disciples elaborated on this issue. The great humanitarian philosopher Mencius maintained that human nature was essentially good. But his rival Xunzi (SHYOON-zuh) (Hsün Tzu) took the opposite tack, arguing that evil is inherent in human nature and could be eradicated only by rigorous training at the hands of an instructor. Later, Xunzi’s views would be adopted by the Legalist philosophers of the Qin dynasty, although his belief in the efficacy of education earned him a place in the community of Confucian scholars.

The Book of Mencius

Mencius said, . . . “The goodness of human nature is like the downward course of water. There is no human being lacking in the tendency to do good, just as there is no water lacking in the tendency to flow downward. Now by striking water and splashing it, you may cause it to go over your head, and by damming and channeling it, you can force it to flow uphill. But is this the nature of water? It is the force that makes this happen. While people can be made to do what is not good, what happens to their nature is like this. . . .

“All human beings have a mind that cannot bear to see the sufferings of others. . . .

“Here is why. . . . Now, if anyone were suddenly to see a child about to fall into a well, his mind would always be filled with alarm, distress, pity, and compassion. That he would react accordingly is not because he would use the opportunity to ingratiate himself with the child’s parents, nor because he would seek commendation from neighbors and friends, nor because he would hate the adverse reputation. From this it may be seen that one who lacks a mind that feels pity and compassion would not be human; one who lacks a mind that feels shame and aversion would not be human; one who lacks a mind that feels modesty and compliance would not be human; and one who lacks a mind that knows right and wrong would not be human.

“The mind’s feeling of pity and compassion is the beginning of humaneness; the mind’s feeling of shame and aversion is the beginning of rightness; the mind’s feeling of modesty and compliance is the beginning of propriety; and the mind’s sense of right and wrong is the beginning of wisdom.”

The Book of Xunzi

Human nature is evil; its goodness derives from conscious activity. Now it is human nature to be born with a fondness for profit. Indulging this leads to contention and strife, and the sense of modesty and yielding with which one was born disappears. One is born with feelings of envy and hate, and, by indulging these, one is led into banditry and theft, so that the sense of loyalty and good faith with which he was born disappears. One is born with the desires of the ears and eyes and with a fondness for beautiful sights and sounds, and by indulging these, one is led to licentiousness and chaos, so that the sense of ritual, rightness, refinement, and principle with which one was born is lost. Hence, following human nature and indulging human emotions will inevitably lead to contention and strife, causing one to rebel against one’s proper duty, reduce principle to chaos, and revert to violence. Therefore one must be transformed by the example of a teacher and guided by the way of ritual and right before one will attain modesty and yielding, accord with refinement and ritual and return to order. From this perspective it is apparent that human nature is evil and that its goodness is the result of conscious activity.

Mencius said, “Now human nature is good, and [when it is not] this is always a result of having lost or destroyed one’s nature.” I say that he was mistaken to take such a view. Now, it is human nature that, as soon as a person is born, he departs from his original substance and from his rational disposition so that he must inevitably lose and destroy them. Seen in this way, it is apparent that human nature is evil.

What arguments do these two Confucian thinkers advance to support their point of view about the essential elements of human nature? In your view, which argument is more persuasive?
could be taught their civic responsibilities by example. He also stressed that the ruler had a duty to govern with compassion:

It was because Chieh and Chou lost the people that they lost the empire, and it was because they lost the hearts of the people that they lost the people. Here is the way to win the empire: win the people and you win the empire. Here is the way to win the people: win their hearts and you win the people. Here is the way to win their hearts: give them and share with them what they like, and do not do to them what they do not like. The people turn to a human ruler as water flows downward or beasts take to wilderness.10

Here is a prescription for political behavior that could win wide support in our own day. Other thinkers, however, rejected Mencius’s rosy view of human nature and argued for a different approach (see the box on p. 76).

LEGALISM A school of thought that became quite popular during the “hundred schools” era in ancient China was the philosophy of Legalism. Taking issue with the view of Mencius and other disciples of Confucius that human nature was essentially good, the Legalists argued that human beings were by nature evil and would follow the correct path only if coerced by harsh laws and stiff punishments. These thinkers were referred to as the School of Law because they rejected the Confucian view that government by “superior men” could solve society’s problems and argued instead for a system of impersonal laws.

The Legalists also disagreed with the Confucian belief that the universe has a moral core. They therefore argued that only firm action by the state could bring about social order. Fear of harsh punishment, more than the promise of material reward, could best motivate the common people to serve the interests of the ruler. Because human nature was essentially corrupt, officials could not be trusted to carry out their duties in a fair and even-handed manner, and only a strong ruler could create an orderly society. All human actions should be subordinated to the effort to create a strong and prosperous state subject to his will.

DAOISM One of the most popular alternatives to Confucianism was the philosophy of Daoism (DOW-iz-uhrm) (frequently spelled Taoism). According to Chinese tradition, the Daoist school was founded by a contemporary of Confucius popularly known as Lao Tzu (LOW (“ow” as in “how”) dzuh) (Lao Zi), or the Old Master. Many modern scholars, however, are skeptical that Lao Tzu actually existed.

Obtaining a clear understanding of the original concepts of Daoism is difficult because its primary document, a short treatise known as the Dao De Jing (DOW deh JING) (sometimes translated as The Way of the Tao), is an enigmatic book whose interpretation has baffled scholars for centuries. The opening line, for example, explains less what the Dao is than what it is not: “The Tao [Way] that can be told of is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal name.”11

Nevertheless, the basic concepts of Daoism are not especially difficult to understand. Like Confucianism, Daoism does not anguish over the underlying meaning of the cosmos. Rather, it attempts to set forth proper forms of behavior for human beings here on earth. In most other respects, however, Daoism presents a view of life and its ultimate meaning that is almost diametrically opposed to that of Confucianism. Whereas Confucian doctrine asserts that it is the duty of human beings to work hard to improve life here on earth, Daoists contend that the true way to interpret the will of Heaven is not action but inaction (wu wei). The best way to act in harmony with the universal order is to act spontaneously and let nature take its course (see the box on p. 78).

Such a message could be very appealing to people who were uncomfortable with the somewhat rigid flavor of the Confucian work ethic and preferred a more individualistic approach. This image would eventually find graphic expression in Chinese landscape painting, which in its classic form would depict naturalistic scenes of mountains, water, and clouds and underscore the fragility and smallness of individual human beings.

Daoism achieved considerable popularity in the waning years of the Zhou dynasty. It was especially popular among intellectuals, who may have found it appealing as an escapist antidote in a world characterized by growing disorder.

POPULAR BELIEFS Daoism also played a second role as a framework for popular spiritualistic and animistic beliefs among the common people. Popular Daoism was less a philosophy about the life of Lao Tzu (shown on the left in the illustration), and it is unlikely that he and Confucius ever met. According to tradition, though, the two held a face-to-face meeting. The discussion must have been interesting, for their views about the nature of reality were diametrically opposed. Nevertheless, the Chinese have managed to preserve both traditions, perhaps a reflection of the dualities represented in the Chinese approach to life. A similar duality existed among Platonists and Aristotelians in ancient Greece (see Chapter 4).
The Daoist Answer to Confucianism

The Dao De Jing (The Way of the Tao) is the great classic of philosophical Daoism (Taoism). Traditionally attributed to the legendary Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu (Old Master), it was probably written during the era of Confucius. This opening passage illustrates two of the key ideas that characterize Daoist belief: it is impossible to define the nature of the universe, and inaction (not Confucian action) is the key to ordering the affairs of human beings.

The Way of the Tao
The Tao that can be told of is not the eternal Tao; The name that can be named is not the eternal name. The Nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth; The Named is the mother of all things.

Therefore let there always be nonbeing, so we may see their subtlety. And let there always be being, so we may see their outcome. The two are the same, But after they are produced, they have different names. They both may be called deep and profound. Deeper and more profound, The door of all subtleties! When the people of the world all know beauty as beauty,

Q What is Lao Tzu, the presumed author of this document, trying to express about the basic nature of the universe? Based on The Great Learning and The Way of the Tao, how do you think the Chinese attempted to understand the order of nature through their philosophies?

There arises the recognition of ugliness. When they all know the good as good, There arises the recognition of evil. Therefore:
Being and nonbeing produce each other; Difficult and easy complete each other; Long and short contrast each other; High and low distinguish each other; Sound and voice harmonize each other; Front and behind accompany each other.

Therefore the sage manages affairs without action And spreads doctrines without words. All things arise, and he does not turn away from them. He produces them but does not take possession of them. He acts but does not rely on his own ability. He accomplishes his task but does not claim credit for it. It is precisely because he does not claim credit that his accomplishment remains with him.

than a religion; it comprised a variety of rituals and behaviors that were regarded as a means of achieving heavenly salvation or even a state of immortality on earth. Daoist sorcerers practiced various types of exercises for training the mind and body in the hope of achieving power, sexual prowess, and long life. It was primarily this form of Daoism that survived into a later age.

The philosophical forms of Confucianism and Daoism did not provide much meaning to the mass of the population, for whom philosophical debate over the ultimate meaning of life was less important than the daily struggle for survival. Even among the elites, interest in the occult and in astrology was high, and many royal courts included a hereditary astrologer to help predict the intentions of the heavenly forces. Throughout the ancient period, magico-religious ideas coexisted with interest in natural science and humanistic philosophy.

For most Chinese, Heaven was not a vague, impersonal law of nature, as it was for many Confucian and Daoist intellectuals. Instead, it was a terrain populated with innumerable gods and spirits of nature, both good and evil, who existed in trees, mountains, and streams as well as in heavenly bodies. As human beings mastered the techniques of farming, they called on divine intervention to guarantee a good harvest. Other gods were responsible for the safety of fishers, transportation workers, or prospective mothers.

Another aspect of popular religion was the belief that the spirits of deceased human beings lived in the atmosphere for a time before ascending to heaven or descending to hell. During that period, surviving family members had to care for the spirits through proper ritual, or they would become evil spirits and haunt the survivors.

Thus, in ancient China, human beings were offered a variety of interpretations of the nature of the universe. Confucianism satisfied the need for a rational doctrine of nation building and social organization at a time when the existing political and social structure was beginning to disintegrate. Philosophical Daoism provided a more sensitive approach to the vicissitudes of fate and nature and a framework for a set of diverse animistic beliefs at the popular level. But neither could satisfy the deeper emotional needs that sometimes inspire the human spirit. Neither could effectively provide solace in a time of sorrow or the hope of a better life in the hereafter. Something else would be needed to fill the gap.
With the possible exception of the nineteenth-century German military strategist Carl von Clausewitz, there is probably no more famous or respected writer on the art of war than the ancient Chinese thinker Sun Tzu (SOON dzhuh). Yet surprisingly little is known about him. Recently discovered evidence suggests that he lived in the fifth century B.C.E., during the chronic conflict of the Period of Warring States, and that he was an early member of an illustrious family of military strategists who advised Zhou rulers for more than two hundred years. But despite the mystery surrounding his life, there is no doubt of his influence on later generations of military planners. Among his most avid followers in our day have been the revolutionary leaders Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh, as well as the Japanese military strategists who planned the attacks on Port Arthur and Pearl Harbor.

The following brief excerpt from his classic, The Art of War, provides a glimmer into the nature of his advice, still so timely today.

Selections from Sun Tzu

Sun Tzu said:

“In general, the method for employing the military is this: . . . Attaining one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the pinnacle of excellence. Subjugating the enemy’s army without fighting is the true pinnacle of excellence. . . .

“Thus the highest realization of warfare is to attack the enemy’s plans; next is to attack their alliances; next to attack their army; and the lowest is to attack their fortified cities.

“This tactic of attacking fortified cities is adopted only when unavoidable. Preparing large movable protective shields, armored assault wagons, and other equipment and devices will require three months. Building earthworks will require another three months to complete. If the general cannot overcome his impatience but instead launches an assault wherein his men swarm over the walls like ants, he will kill one-third of his officers and troops, and the city will still not be taken. This is the disaster that results from attacking [fortified cities].

“Thus, one who excels at employing the military subjugates other people’s armies without engaging in battle, captures other people’s fortified cities without attacking them, and destroys others people’s states without prolonged fighting. He must fight under Heaven with the paramount aim of ‘preservation.’ . . .

“In general, the strategy of employing the military is this: If your strength is ten times theirs, surround them; if five, then attack them; if double, then divide your forces. If you are equal in strength to the enemy, you can engage him. If fewer, you can circumvent him. If outmatched, you can avoid him. . . .

“Thus, there are five factors from which victory can be known:

“One who knows when he can fight, and when he cannot fight, will be victorious.

“One who recognizes how to employ large and small numbers will be victorious.

“One whose upper and lower ranks have the same desires will be victorious.

“One who, fully prepared, awaits the unprepared will be victorious.

“One whose general is capable ad not interfered with by the ruler will be victorious.

“These five are the Way (Tao) to know victory. . . .

“Thus it is said that one who knows the enemy and knows himself will not be endangered in a hundred engagements. One who does not know the enemy but knows himself will sometimes be victorious, sometimes meet with defeat. One who knows neither the enemy nor himself will invariably be defeated in every engagement.’’

Why are the ideas of Sun Tzu about the art of war still so popular among military strategists after 2,500 years? How might he advise U.S. and other statesmen to deal with the problem of international terrorism today?

The First Chinese Empire: The Qin Dynasty

FOCUS QUESTION: How did the first emperor of the Qin dynasty transform the political, social, and economic institutions of early China?

During the last two centuries of the Zhou dynasty (the fourth and third centuries B.C.E.), the authority of the king became increasingly nominal, and several of the small principalities...
CHAPTER 3

POLITICAL STRUCTURES The Qin dynasty transformed Chinese politics. Philosophical doctrines that had proliferated during the late Zhou period were prohibited, and Legalism was adopted as the official ideology. Those who opposed the policies of the new regime were punished and sometimes executed, while books presenting ideas contrary to the official orthodoxy were publicly put to the torch, perhaps the first example of book burning in history (see the box on p. 82).

Legalistic theory gave birth to a number of fundamental administrative and political developments, some of which would survive the Qin and serve as a model for future dynasties. In the first place, unlike the Zhou, the Qin was a highly centralized state. The central bureaucracy was divided into three primary ministries: a civil authority, a military authority, and a censorate, whose inspectors surveyed the efficiency of officials throughout the system. This would later become standard administrative procedure for future Chinese dynasties.

Below the central government were two levels of administration: provinces and counties. Unlike the Zhou system, officials at these levels did not inherit their positions but were appointed by the court and were subject to dismissal at the
Qin Shi Huangdi, who had a passion for centralization, unified the system of weights and measures, standardized the monetary system and the written forms of Chinese characters, and ordered the construction of a system of roads extending throughout the empire. He also attempted to eliminate the remaining powers of the landed aristocrats and divided their estates among the peasants, who were now taxed directly by the state. He thus eliminated potential rivals and secured tax revenues for the central government. Members of the aristocratic clans were required to live in the capital city at Xianyang, near the modern city of Xian.

What factors may have aided Qin in its effort to dominate the region?

**SOCIETY AND THE ECONOMY**

Qin Shi Huangdi, who had a passion for centralization, unified the system of weights and measures, standardized the monetary system and the written forms of Chinese characters, and ordered the construction of a system of roads extending throughout the empire. He also attempted to eliminate the remaining powers of the landed aristocrats and divided their estates among the peasants, who were now taxed directly by the state. He thus eliminated potential rivals and secured tax revenues for the central government. Members of the aristocratic clans were required to live in the capital city at Xianyang (shi-AHN-yahng) (Hsien-yang), just north of modern Xian, so that the court could monitor their activities. Such a system may not have been advantageous to the peasants in all respects, however, since the central government could now collect taxes more effectively and mobilize the peasants for military service and for various public works projects.

The Qin dynasty was equally unsympathetic to the merchants, whom it viewed as parasites. Private commercial activities were severely restricted and heavily taxed, and many vital forms of commerce and manufacturing, including mining, wine making, and the distribution of salt, were placed under a government monopoly.

Qin Shi Huangdi was equally aggressive in foreign affairs. His armies continued the gradual advance to the south that had taken place during the final years of the Zhou dynasty, extending the border of China to the edge of the Red River in modern Vietnam. To supply the Qin armies operating in the area, a canal was dug that provided direct inland navigation from the Yangtze River in central China to what is now the modern city of Guangzhou (gwaHNG-JOE) (Canton) in the south.

**BEYOND THE FRONTIER: THE NOMADIC PEOPLES AND THE GREAT WALL**

The main area of concern for the Qin emperor, however, was in the north, where a nomadic people, known to the Chinese as the Xiongnu (SHYAHNG-noo) (Hsiung-nu) and possibly related to the Huns (see Chapter 5) or to Indo-European-speaking people in the area, had become increasingly active in the area of the Gobi Desert. The area north of the Yellow River had been sparsely inhabited since prehistoric times. During the Qin period, the climate of northern China was somewhat milder and moister than it is today, and parts of the region were heavily forested. The local population probably lived by hunting and fishing, practicing limited forms of agriculture, or herding animals such as cattle or sheep.

As the climate gradually became drier, people were forced to rely increasingly on animal husbandry as a means of livelihood. Their response was to master the art of riding on horseback and to adopt the nomadic life. Organized loosely into communities consisting of a number of kinship groups, they ranged far and wide in search of pasture for their herds of cattle, goats, or sheep. As they moved seasonally from one pasture to another, they often traveled several hundred miles carrying their goods and their circular felt tents, called yurts.

But the new way of life presented its own challenges. Increased food production led to a growing population, which in times of drought outstripped the available resources. Rival groups then competed for the best pastures. After they mastered the art of fighting on horseback in the middle of the first millennium B.C.E., territorial warfare became commonplace throughout the entire frontier region, from the Pacific Ocean to Central Asia.

By the end of the Zhou dynasty in the third century B.C.E., the nomadic Xiongnu had unified many of the groups operating in the region and began to pose a serious threat to the security of China’s northern frontier. A number of Chinese principalities in the area began to build walls and fortifications to keep them out, but warriors on horseback possessed significant advantages over the infantry of the Chinese.

Qin Shi Huangdi’s answer to the problem was to strengthen the walls to keep the marauders out. In Sima Qian’s words:

First Emperor of the Ch’in dispatched Meng T’ien to lead a force of a hundred thousand men north to attack the barbarians. He...
Memorandum on the Burning of Books

Li Su, who is quoted in the following passage, was a chief minister of the First Emperor of Qin. An exponent of Legalism, Li Su hoped to eliminate all rival theories of government. His recommendation to the emperor on how to accomplish this was recorded by the Han dynasty historian Sima Qian. The emperor approved the proposal and ordered all books contrary to the spirit of Legalist ideology to be destroyed on pain of death. Fortunately, some texts were preserved by being hidden or even memorized by their owners and were thus available to later generations. For centuries afterward, the First Emperor of Qin and his minister were singled out for criticism because of their intolerance and their effort to control the minds of their subjects. Totalitarianism, it seems, is not a modern concept.

Sima Qian, Historical Records

In earlier times the empire disintegrated and fell into disorder, and no one was capable of unifying it. Thereupon the various feudal lords rose to power. In their discourses they all praised the past in order to disparage the present and embellished empty words to confuse the truth. Everyone cherished his own favorite school of learning and criticized what had been instituted by the authorities. But at present Your Majesty possesses a unified empire, has regulated the distinctions of black and white, and has firmly established for yourself a position of sole supremacy. And yet these independent schools, joining with each other, criticize the codes of laws and instructions. Hearing of the promulgation of a decree, they criticize it, each from the standpoint of his own school. At home they disapprove of it in their hearts; going out they criticize it in the thoroughfare. They seek a reputation by discrediting their sovereign; they appear superior by expressing contrary views, and they lead the lowly multitude in the spreading of slander. If such license is not prohibited, the sovereign power will decline above and partisan factions will form below. It would be well to prohibit this.

Your servant suggests that all books in the imperial archives, save the memoirs of Ch’in, be burned. All persons in the empire, except members of the Academy of Learned Scholars, in possession of the Book of Odes, the Book of History, and discourses of the hundred philosophers should take them to the local governors and have them indiscriminately burned. Those who dare to talk to each other about the Book of Odes and the Book of History should be executed and their bodies exposed in the marketplace. Anyone referring to the past to criticize the present should, together with all members of his family, be put to death. Officials who fail to report cases that have come under their attention are equally guilty. After thirty days from the time of issuing the decree, those who have not destroyed their books are to be branded and sent to build the Great Wall. Books not to be destroyed will be those on medicine and pharmacy, divination by the tortoise and milfoil, and agriculture and arboriculture. People wishing to pursue learning should take the officials as their teachers.

Why did the Legalist thinker Li Su believe that his proposal to destroy dangerous ideas was justified? Are there examples of similar thinking in our own time? Are there occasions when it might be permissible to outlaw unpopular ideas?

seized control of all the lands south of the Yellow River and established border defenses along the river, constructing forty-four walled district cities overlooking the river and manning them with convict laborers transported to the border for garrison duty. Thus, he utilized the natural mountain barriers to establish the border defenses, scooping out the valleys and constructing ramparts and building installations at other points where they were needed. The whole line of defenses stretched over ten thousand li [a li is one-third of a mile] from Lin-t’ao to Liao-tung and even extended across the Yellow River and through Yang-shan and Pei-chia. Today, of course, we know Qin Shi Huangdi’s project as the Great Wall, which extends nearly 4,000 miles from the sandy wastes of Central Asia to the sea. It is constructed of massive granite blocks, and its top is wide enough to serve as a roadway for horse-drawn chariots. Although the wall that appears in most photographs today was built 1,500 years after the Qin, during the Ming dynasty, some of the walls built by the Qin remain standing. Their construction was a massive project that required the efforts of thousands of laborers, many of whom met their deaths there and, according to legend, are buried within the wall.

THE FALL OF THE QIN The Legalist system put in place by the First Emperor of Qin was designed to achieve maximum efficiency as well as total security for the state. It did neither. Qin Shi Huangdi was apparently aware of the dangers of factions within the imperial family and established a class of eunuchs (castrated males) who served as personal attendants for himself and female members of the royal family. The original idea may have
been to restrict the influence of male courtiers, and the eunuch system later became a standard feature of the Chinese imperial system. But as confidential advisers to the royal family, eunuchs were in a position of influence. The rivalry between the “inner” imperial court and the “outer” court of bureaucratic officials led to tensions that persisted until the end of the imperial system.

By ruthlessly gathering control over the empire into his own hands, Qin Shi Huangdi had hoped to establish a rule that, in the words of Sima Qian, “would be enjoyed by his sons for ten thousand generations.” In fact, his centralizing zeal alienated many key groups. Landed aristocrats and Confucian intellectuals, as well as the common people, groaned under the censorship of thought and speech, harsh taxes, and forced labor projects. “He killed men,” recounted the historian, “as though he thought he could never finish, he punished men as though he were afraid he would never get around to them all, and the whole world revolted against him.” Shortly after the emperor died in 210 B.C.E., the dynasty descended into factional rivalry, and four years later it was overthrown.

The disappearance of the Qin brought an end to an experiment in absolute rule that later Chinese historians would view as a betrayal of humanistic Confucian principles. But in another sense, the Qin system was a response—though somewhat extreme—to the problems of administering a large and increasingly complex society. Although later rulers would denounce Legalism and enthrone Confucianism as the new state orthodoxy, in practice they would make use of a number of the key tenets of Legalism to administer the empire and control the behavior of their subjects (see Chapters 5 and 10).

ARE ALL HYDRAULIC SOCIETIES DESPOTIC? Thus, the Qin dynasty’s single-minded effort to bring about the total regimentation of Chinese society left a mixed legacy for later generations. Some observers, notably the China scholar Karl Wittfogel, have speculated that the need to establish and regulate a vast public irrigation network, as had been created in China under the Zhou dynasty, led naturally to the emergence of a form of Oriental despotism that would henceforth be applied in all such hydraulic societies. Recent evidence, however, disputes this view, suggesting that the emergence of strong central government followed, rather than preceded, the establishment of a large irrigation system, which often began as a result of local initiatives rather than as a product of central planning. The preference for autocratic rule is probably better explained by the desire to limit the emergence of powerful regional landed interests and maintain control over a vast empire.

Daily Life in Ancient China

**FOCUS QUESTION:** What were the key aspects of social and economic life in early China?

Few social institutions have been as closely identified with China as the family. As in most agricultural civilizations, the family served as the basic economic and social unit in society. In traditional China, however, it took on an almost sacred quality as a microcosm of the entire social order.

**The Role of the Family**

In Neolithic times, the farm village, organized around the clan, was the basic social unit in China, at least in the core region of the Yellow River valley. Even then, however, the smaller family unit was becoming more important, at least among the nobility, who attached considerable significance to the veneration of their ancestors.

During the Zhou dynasty, the family took on increasing importance, in part because of the need for cooperation in agriculture. Rice had become the primary crop along the Yangtze River and in the provinces to the south because of its taste, its productivity, and its high nutrient value. But the cultivation of rice is highly labor-intensive. The seedlings must be planted in several inches of water in a nursery bed and then transferred individually to the paddy beds, which must be irrigated constantly. During the harvest, the stalks must be cut and the kernels carefully separated from the stalks and husks. As a result, children—and the labor they supplied—were considered essential to the survival of the family, not only during their youthful years but also later, when sons were expected to provide for their parents. Loyalty to family members came to be considered even more important than loyalty to the broader community or the state. Confucius commented that it is the mark of a civilized society that a son should protect his father even if the latter has committed a crime against the community.

At the crux of the concept of family was the idea of filial piety, which called on all members of the family to subordinate their personal needs and desires to the patriarchal head of the family. More broadly, it created a hierarchical system in which every family member had a place. All Chinese learned the five relationships that were the key to a proper social order. The son was subordinate to the father, the wife to her husband, the younger brother to the older brother, and all were subject to their king. The final relationship was the proper one between friend and friend. Only if all members of the family and the community as a whole behaved in a properly filial manner would society function effectively.

A stable family system based on obedient and hardworking members can serve as a bulwark for an efficient government, but putting loyalty to the family and the clan over loyalty to the state can also present a threat to a centralizing monarch. For that reason, the Qin dynasty attempted to destroy the clan...
system in China and assert the primacy of the state. Legalists even imposed heavy taxes on any family with more than two adult sons in order to break down the family concept. The Qin reportedly also originated the practice of organizing several family units into larger groups of five and ten families that would exercise mutual control and surveillance. Later dynasties continued the practice under the name of the Bao-jia (BOW-jah [“ow” as in “how”]) (Pao-chia) system.

But the efforts of the Qin to eradicate or at least reduce the importance of the family system ran against tradition and the dynamics of the Chinese economy, and under the Han dynasty, which followed the Qin, the family revived and increased in importance. With official encouragement, the family system began to take on the character that it would possess until our own day. The family was not only the basic economic unit; it was also the basic social unit for education, religious observances, and training in ethical principles.

**Lifestyles**

We know much more about the lifestyle of the elites than that of the common people in ancient China. The first houses were probably constructed of wooden planks, but later Chinese mastered the art of building in tile and brick. By the first millennium B.C.E., most public buildings and the houses of the wealthy were probably constructed in this manner. The latter often had several wings surrounding a central courtyard to provide space for several generations under one roof, a style that continued down to modern times. By the second century B.C.E., most Chinese, however, probably lived in simple houses of mud, wooden planks, or brick with thatch or occasionally tile roofs. But in some areas, especially the loess (LESS) (a type of soil common in North China) regions of northern China, cave dwelling remained common down to modern times. The most famous cave dweller of modern times was Mao Zedong, who lived in a cave in Yan’an (yuh-NAHN) during his long struggle against Chiang Kai-shek.

Chinese houses usually had little furniture; most people squatted or sat with their legs spread out on the packed-mud floor. Chairs were apparently not introduced until the sixth or seventh century C.E. Clothing was simple, consisting of cotton trousers and shirts in the summer and wool or burlap in the winter.

The staple foods were millet in the north and rice in the south. Other common foods were wheat, barley, soybeans, mustard greens, and bamboo shoots. In early times, such foods were often consumed in a porridge, but by the Zhou dynasty, stir-frying in a wok was becoming common. When possible, the Chinese family would vary its diet of grain foods with vegetables, fruit (including pears, peaches, apricots, and plums), and fish or meat; but for most, such additions to the daily plate of rice, millet, or soybeans were a rare luxury.

Alcohol in the form of ale was drunk at least by the higher classes and by the early Zhou era had already begun to inspire official concern. According to the Book of History, “King Wen admonished . . . the young nobles . . . that they should not ordinarily use spirits; and throughout all the states he required that they should be drunk only on occasion of sacrifices, and that then virtue should preside so that there might be no drunkenness.” For the poorer classes, alcohol in any form was probably a rare luxury. Chinese legend hints that tea—a plant originally found in upland regions in southern China and Southeast Asia—was introduced by the...
mythical emperor Shen Nong. In fact, however, tea drinking did not become widespread in China until around 500 C.E. By then tea was lauded for its medicinal qualities and its capacity to soothe the spirit.

Cities

With the rise to power of the Qin, cities began to take on the central importance they would hold through later Chinese history. Urban centers were divided into neighborhoods—perhaps a forerunner of the grid pattern assumed by imperial cities under later dynasties—as a means of facilitating control over the population. As mentioned earlier, landed aristocrats, many of them former opponents of the Qin, were forcibly resettled in the new capital of Xianyang—a pattern that we shall see repeated, notably in France and Japan, in later centuries. Their villas and gardens aped the splendor of the imperial palace, which formed the centerpiece of the urban landscape.

Under the Qin, as never before, cities became the cultural hub of Chinese society, although their residents made up only a tiny proportion of the total population. In the crowded streets, haughty nobles sought to avoid rubbing shoulders with commoners, while merchants, workers, wandering gangs, and prostitutes relentlessly imitated the mannerisms of the elite. As a poem of the time satirically noted:

> In the city, if they love to have their hair dressed up high,  
> Then everywhere else they dress their hair an inch higher.  
> In the city, if they love to enlarge their eyebrows,  
> Then everywhere else they will make their eyebrows cover half their foreheads.  
> In the city, if they love large sleeves,  
> Then everywhere else they will use up whole bolts of silk.  

The Humble Estate: Women in Ancient China

Male dominance was a key element in the social system of ancient China. As in many traditional societies, the male was considered of transcendent importance because of his role as food procurer or, in the case of farming communities, food producer. In ancient China, men worked in the fields and women raised children and served in the home. This differential in gender roles goes back to prehistoric times and is embedded in Chinese creation myths. According to legend, Fu Xi’s wife Nu Wa (nüo WAH) assisted her husband in organizing society by establishing the institution of marriage and the family. Yet Nu Wa was not just a household drudge. After Fu Xi’s death, she became China’s first female sovereign.

During ancient times, women apparently did not normally occupy formal positions of authority, but they often became a force in politics, especially at court, where wives of the ruler or other female members of the royal family were often influential in palace intrigues. Such activities were frowned on, however, as the following passage from The Book of Songs attests:

> A clever man builds a city,  
> A clever woman lays one low; 

With all her qualifications, that clever woman  
Is but an ill-omened bird.  
A woman with a long tongue  
Is a flight of steps leading to calamity;  
For disorder does not come from heaven,  
But is brought about by women.  
Among those who cannot be trained or taught  
Are women and eunuchs.  

The nature of gender relationships was also graphically demonstrated in the Chinese written language. The character for man (亻) combines the symbols for strength and rice field, while the character for woman (女) represents a person in a posture of deference and respect. The character for peace (安) is a woman under a roof. A wife is symbolized by a woman with a broom. Male chauvinism has deep linguistic roots in China.

Confucian thought, while not denigrating the importance of women as mothers and homemakers, accepted the dual roles of men and women in Chinese society. Men governed society. They carried on family ritual through the veneration of ancestors. They were the warriors, scholars, and ministers. Their dominant role was firmly enshrined in the legal system. Men were permitted to have more than one wife and to divorce a spouse who did not produce a male child. Women were denied the right to own property, and there was no dowry system in ancient China that would have provided the wife with a degree of financial security from her husband and his family. As the third-century C.E. poet Fu Xuan (foo SHWAHN), a woman, lamented:

> How sad it is to be a woman  
> Nothing on earth is held so cheap.  
> No one is glad when a girl is born.  
> By her the family sets no store.  
> No one cries when she leaves her home  
> Sudden as clouds when the rain stops.  

Chinese Culture

FOCUS QUESTIONS: What were the chief characteristics of the Chinese arts and writing system? How did they differ from those in Egypt and Mesopotamia?

Modern knowledge about artistic achievements in ancient civilizations is limited because often little has survived the ravages of time. Fortunately, many ancient civilizations, such as Egypt and Mesopotamia, were located in relatively arid areas where many artifacts were preserved, even over thousands of years. In more humid regions, such as China and South Asia, the cultural residue left by the civilizations of antiquity has been adversely affected by climate.

As a result, relatively little remains of the cultural achievements of the prehistoric Chinese aside from Neolithic pottery and the relics found at the site of the Shang dynasty capital at Anyang. In recent years, a rich trove from the time of the Qin Empire has been unearthed near the tomb of Qin Shi
Huangdi near Xian and at Han tombs nearby. But little remains of the literature of ancient China and almost none of the painting, architecture, and music.

**Metalwork and Sculpture**

Discoveries at archaeological sites indicate that ancient China was a society rich in cultural achievement. The pottery found at Neolithic sites such as Longshan and Yangshao exhibits a freshness and vitality of form and design, and the ornaments, such as rings and beads, show a strong aesthetic sense.

**BRONZE CASTING** The pace of Chinese cultural development began to quicken during the Shang dynasty, which ruled in northern China from the sixteenth to the eleventh century B.C.E. At that time, objects cast in bronze began to appear. Various bronze vessels were produced for use in preparing and serving food and drink in the ancestral rites. Later vessels were used for decoration or for dining at court.

The method of casting used was one reason for the extraordinary quality of Shang bronze work. Bronze workers in most ancient civilizations used the lost-wax method, in which a model was first made in wax. After a clay mold had been formed around it, the model was heated so that the wax would melt away, and the empty space was filled with molten metal. In China, clay molds composed of several sections were tightly fitted together prior to the introduction of the liquid bronze. This technique, which had evolved from ceramic techniques used during the Neolithic period, enabled the artisans to apply the design directly to the mold and thus contributed to the clarity of line and rich surface decoration of the Shang bronzes.

Bronze casting became a large-scale business, and more than ten thousand vessels of an incredible variety of form and design survive today. Factories were located not only in the Yellow River valley but also in Sichuan province, in southern China. The art of bronze working continued into the Zhou dynasty, but the quality and originality declined. The Shang bronzes remain the pinnacle of creative art in ancient China.

One reason for the decline of bronze casting in China was the rise in popularity of iron. Ironmaking developed in China around the ninth or eighth century B.C.E., much later than in the Middle East, where it had been mastered almost a thousand years earlier. Once familiar with the process, however, the Chinese quickly moved to the forefront. Ironworkers in Europe and the Middle East, lacking the technology to achieve the high temperatures necessary to melt iron ore for casting, were forced to work with wrought iron, a cumbersome and expensive process. By the fourth century B.C.E., the Chinese had invented the technique of the blast furnace, powered by a worker operating a bellows. They were therefore able to manufacture cast iron ritual vessels and agricultural tools centuries before an equivalent technology appeared in the West.

Another reason for the deterioration of the bronze-casting tradition was the development of cheaper materials such as lacquerware and ceramics. Lacquer, made from resins obtained from the juices of sumac trees native to the region, had been produced since Neolithic times, and by the second century B.C.E. it had become a popular method of applying a hard coating to objects made of wood or fabric. Pottery, too, had existed since early times, but technological advances led to the production of a high-quality form of pottery covered with a brown or gray-green glaze, the latter known popularly as celadon. By the end of the first millennium B.C.E., both lacquerware and pottery had replaced bronze in popularity, much as plastic goods have replaced more expensive materials in our own time.

**THE FIRST EMPEROR’S TOMB** In 1974, in a remarkable discovery, farmers digging a well about 35 miles east of Xian unearthed a number of terra-cotta figures in an underground pit about one mile east of the burial mound of the First Emperor of Qin. Chinese archaeologists sent to work at the site discovered a vast terra-cotta army that they believed was a recreation of Qin Shi Huangdi’s imperial guard, which was to accompany the emperor on his journey to the next world.
One of the astounding features of the terra-cotta army is its size. The army is enclosed in four pits that were originally encased in a wooden framework, which has disintegrated. More than a thousand figures have been unearthed in the first pit, along with horses, wooden chariots, and seven thousand bronze weapons. Archaeologists estimate that there are more than six thousand figures in that pit alone.

Equally impressive is the quality of the work. Slightly larger than life size, the figures were molded of finely textured clay and then fired and painted. The detail on the uniforms is realistic and sophisticated, but the most striking feature is the individuality of the facial features of the soldiers. Apparently, ten different head shapes were used and were then modeled further by hand to reflect the variety of ethnic groups and personality types in the army.

The discovery of the terra-cotta army also shows that the Chinese had come a long way from the human sacrifices that had taken place at the death of Shang sovereigns more than a thousand years earlier. But the project must have been ruinously expensive and is additional evidence of the burden the Qin ruler imposed on his subjects. One historian has estimated that one-third of the national income in Qin times may have been spent on preparations for the ruler’s afterlife. The emperor’s mausoleum has not yet been unearthed, but it is enclosed in a mound nearly 250 feet high surrounded by a rectangular wall extending for nearly 4 miles. According to the Han historian Sima Qian, the ceiling was a replica of the heavens, while the floor contained a relief model of the entire Qin kingdom, with rivers flowing in mercury. According to tradition, traps were set within the mausoleum to prevent intruders, and the workers applying the final touches were buried alive in the tomb with its secrets.

### Language and Literature

Precisely when writing developed in China cannot be determined, but certainly by Shang times, as the oracle bones demonstrate, the Chinese had developed a simple but functional script. Like many other languages of antiquity, it was primarily ideographic and pictographic in form. Symbols, usually called “characters,” were created to represent an idea or to form a picture of the object to be represented. For example, the Chinese characters for mountain (山), the sun (日), and the moon (月) were meant to represent the objects themselves. Other characters, such as “big” (大) (a man with his arms outstretched), represent an idea. The character for “east” (東) symbolizes the sun coming up behind the trees.

Each character, of course, would be given a sound by the speaker when pronounced. In other cultures, this process led to the abandonment of the system of ideographs and the adoption of a written language based on phonetic symbols. The Chinese language, however, has never entirely abandoned its original ideographic format, although the phonetic element has developed into a significant part of the individual character. In that sense, the Chinese written language is virtually unique in the world today.

One reason the language retained its ideographic quality may have been the aesthetics of the written characters. By the time of the Qin dynasty, if not earlier, the written language came to be seen as an art form as well as a means of...
communication, and calligraphy became one of the most prized forms of painting in China.

Even more important, if the written language had developed in the direction of a phonetic alphabet, it could no longer have served as the written system for all the peoples of the expanding Chinese civilization. Although the vast majority spoke a tongue derived from a parent Sinitic language (a system distinguished by variations in pitch, a characteristic that gives Chinese its lilting quality even today), the languages spoken in various regions of the country differed from each other in pronunciation and to a lesser degree in vocabulary and syntax; for the most part, they were (and are today) mutually unintelligible.

The Chinese answer to this problem was to give all the spoken languages the same writing system. Although any character might be pronounced differently in different regions of China, that character would be written the same way (after the standardization undertaken under the Qin). Written characters could therefore be read by educated Chinese from one end of the country to the other. This became the language of the bureaucracy and the vehicle for the transmission of Chinese culture from the Great Wall to the southern border and beyond. The written language was not identical to the spoken form, however; it eventually evolved its own vocabulary and grammatical structure, and as a result, users of written Chinese required special training.

The earliest extant form of Chinese literature dates from the Zhou dynasty. It was written on silk or strips of bamboo and consisted primarily of historical records such as the Rites of Zhou, philosophical treatises such as the Analects and The Way of the Tao, and poetry, as recorded in The Book of Songs and the Song of the South (see the box on p. 89). In later years, when Confucian principles had been elevated to a state ideology, the key works identified with the Confucian school were integrated into a set of so-called Confucian Classics. These works became required reading for generations of Chinese schoolchildren and introduced them to the forms of behavior that would be required of them as adults.

Music in the Confucian Era. According to Confucius, “If a man lack benevolence, what has he to do with music?” The purpose of music, to followers of the Master, was to instill in the listener a proper respect for ethical conduct. Foremost among the instruments in the Confucian era were bronze bells. Shown here is a collection of bells dating from the Zhou dynasty. At the left, a performer is playing a stringed instrument, one of many types of instruments that eventually replaced the bell in popularity. The performer in the center is striking the bells with a wooden mallet.
Music

From early times in China, music was viewed not just as an aesthetic pleasure but also as a means of achieving political order and refining the human character. In fact, music may have originated as an accompaniment to sacred rituals at the royal court. According to the Historical Records, written during the Han dynasty, “When our sage-kings of the past instituted rites and music, their objective was far from making people indulge in the . . . amusements of singing and dancing. . . . Music is produced to purify the heart, and rites introduced to rectify the behavior.”19 Eventually, however, music began to be appreciated for its own sake as well as to accompany singing and dancing.

A wide variety of musical instruments were used, including flutes, various stringed instruments, bells and chimes, drums, and gourds. Bells cast in bronze were first used as musical instruments in the Shang period; they were hung in rows and struck with a wooden mallet. The finest were produced during the mid-Zhou era and are considered among the best examples of early bronze work in China. Some weighed more than two tons and, in combination as shown in the photo on p. 88, covered a range of several octaves. Bronze bells have not been found in any other contemporary civilization and are considered one of the great cultural achievements of ancient China. The largest known bell dating from the Roman Empire, for example, is less than 3 inches high.

Love Spurned in Ancient China

The Book of Songs: The Odes

You seemed a guileless youth enough,
Offering for silk your woven stuff;
But silk was not required by you;
I was the silk you had in view.
With you I crossed the ford, and while
We wandered on for many a mile
I said, “I do not wish delay,
But friends must fix our wedding-day. . . .
Oh, do not let my words give pain,
But with the autumn come again.”

And then I used to watch and wait
To see you passing through the gate;
And sometimes, when I watched in vain,
My tears would flow like falling rain;
But when I saw my darling boy,
I laughed and cried aloud for joy.
The fortune-tellers, you declared,
Had all pronounced us duly paired;
“Then bring a carriage,” I replied,
“And I’ll away to be your bride.”

The mulberry tree upon the ground,
Now sheds its yellow leaves around.
Three years have slipped away from me
Since first I shared your poverty;

And now again, alas the day!
Back through the ford I take my way.

My heart is still unchanged, but you
Have uttered words now proved untrue;
And you have left me to deplore
A love that can be mine no more.

For three long years I was your wife,
And led in truth a toilsome life;
Early to rise and late to bed,
Each day alike passed o’er my head.
I honestly fulfilled my part,
And you—well, you have broke my heart.
The truth my brothers will not know,
So all the more their gibes will flow.
I grieve in silence and repine
That such a wretched fate is mine.

Ah, hand in hand to face old age!—
Instead, I turn a bitter page.
O for the riverbanks of yore;
O for the much-loved marshy shore;
The hours of girlhood, with my hair
Ungathered, as we lingered there.
The words we spoke, that seemed so true,
I little thought that I should rue;
I little thought the vows we swore
Would some day bind us two no more.

It has been said that traditional Chinese thought lacked a sense of tragedy similar to the great dramatic tragedies of ancient Greece. Does this passage qualify as tragedy? If not, why not?
By the late Zhou era, bells had begun to give way as the instrument of choice to strings and wind instruments, and the purpose of music shifted from ceremony to entertainment. This led conservative critics to rail against the onset of an age of debauchery.

Ancient historians stressed the relationship between music and court life, but it is highly probable that music, singing, and dancing were equally popular among the common people. The Book of History, purporting to describe conditions in the late third millennium B.C.E., suggests that ballads emanating from the popular culture were welcomed at court. Nevertheless, court music and popular music differed in several respects. Among other things, popular music was more likely to be motivated by the desire for pleasure than for the purpose of law and order and moral uplift. Those differences continued to be reflected in the evolution of music in China down to modern times.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Of the great classical civilizations discussed in Part I of this book, China was the last to come into full flower. By the time the Shang began to emerge as an organized state, the societies in Mesopotamia and the Nile valley had already reached an advanced level of civilization. Unfortunately, not enough is known about the early stages of these civilizations to allow us to determine why some developed earlier than others, but one likely reason for China’s comparatively late arrival was that it was virtually isolated from other emerging centers of culture elsewhere in the world and thus was compelled to develop essentially on its own. Only at the end of the first millennium B.C.E. did China come into regular contact with other civilizations in South Asia, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean.

Once embarked on its own path toward the creation of a complex society, however, China achieved results that were in all respects the equal of its counterparts elsewhere. By the rise of the first unified empire in the late third century B.C.E., the state extended from the edge of the Gobi Desert in the north to the subtropical regions near the borders of modern Vietnam in the south. Chinese philosophers had engaged in debate over intricate questions relating to human nature and the state of the universe, and China’s artistic and technological achievements—especially in terms of bronze casting and the terra-cotta figures entombed in Qin Shi Huangdi’s mausoleum—were unsurpassed throughout the world.

Meanwhile, another great civilization was beginning to take form on the northern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Unlike China and the other ancient societies discussed thus far, this new civilization in Europe was based as much on trade as on agriculture. Yet the political and cultural achievements of ancient Greece were the equal of any of the great human experiments that had preceded it and soon began to exert a significant impact on the rest of the ancient world.

CHAPTER TIMELINE
Upon Reflection

Q What were some of the key contributions in political structures, social organization, and culture that the Shang dynasty bequeathed to its successor, the Zhou dynasty? Does the Shang deserve to be called the “mother culture” of China?

Q What kinds of relationships did the Chinese people have with the pastoral peoples living along the frontier? How did these relationships compare with those experienced by advanced societies in North Africa and Western Asia?

Q What contributions did the ancient Chinese people make in the field of metallurgy? How do their achievements compare with developments in ancient Egypt and the Middle East?

Key Terms

Yangshao (p. 65)
Longshan (p. 65)
veneration of ancestors (p. 68)
diffusion hypothesis (p. 68)
mandate of Heaven (p. 69)
well-field system (p. 71)
Dao (p. 73)
Legalism (p. 77)
Confucianism (p. 77)
eunuchs (p. 82)
Oriental despotism (p. 83)
hydraulic societies (p. 83)
filial piety (p. 83)
five relationships (p. 83)
Bao-jia system (p. 84)

Suggested Reading


The period of the Neolithic era and the Shang dynasty has received increasing attention in recent years. For an impressively documented and annotated overview, see K. C. Chang et al., The Formation of Chinese Civilization: An Archaeological Perspective (New Haven, Conn., 2005), and R. Thorp, China in the Early Bronze Age (Philadelphia, 2005). Also see D. Keightley, The Ancestral Landscape: Time, Space, and Continuity in Late Shang China (Berkeley, Calif., 2005).


Environmental issues are explored in M. Elvin, The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China (New Haven, Conn., 2004).