

Chapter 4

Blueprint for Empire: China, 1200 B.C.E.–220 C.E.

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Chapter Introduction

In 221 B.C.E., the **First Emperor of the Qin dynasty (Founder of the Qin dynasty (221–207 B.C.E.) and the first ruler to unify ancient China. Eliminated regional differences by creating a single body of law and standardizing weights and measures.)** (259–210 B.C.E.) united China for the first time and implemented a blueprint for empire that helped to keep China together for much of the following two thousand years. The future emperor, named Zheng (JUHNŒ), was born in the Qin (CHIN) territory in the town of Xianyang (SHYEN-yahnŒ) in Shaanxi (SHAHN-shee) province, western China. Prince Zheng's father, one of more than twenty sons of a regional ruler in west China, lived as a hostage in a city 360 miles (580 km) to the east because it was customary for younger sons to be sent to the courts of allied rulers. Two years after Zheng's birth, during an attack on this city, his father escaped home, and his mother and the young prince went into hiding. Six years later they returned to Xianyang, and in 246 B.C.E., on the death of his father, Prince Zheng ascended to the Qin throne at the age of thirteen. For the first nine years he governed with the help of adult advisers until he became ruler in his own right at the age of twenty-two.

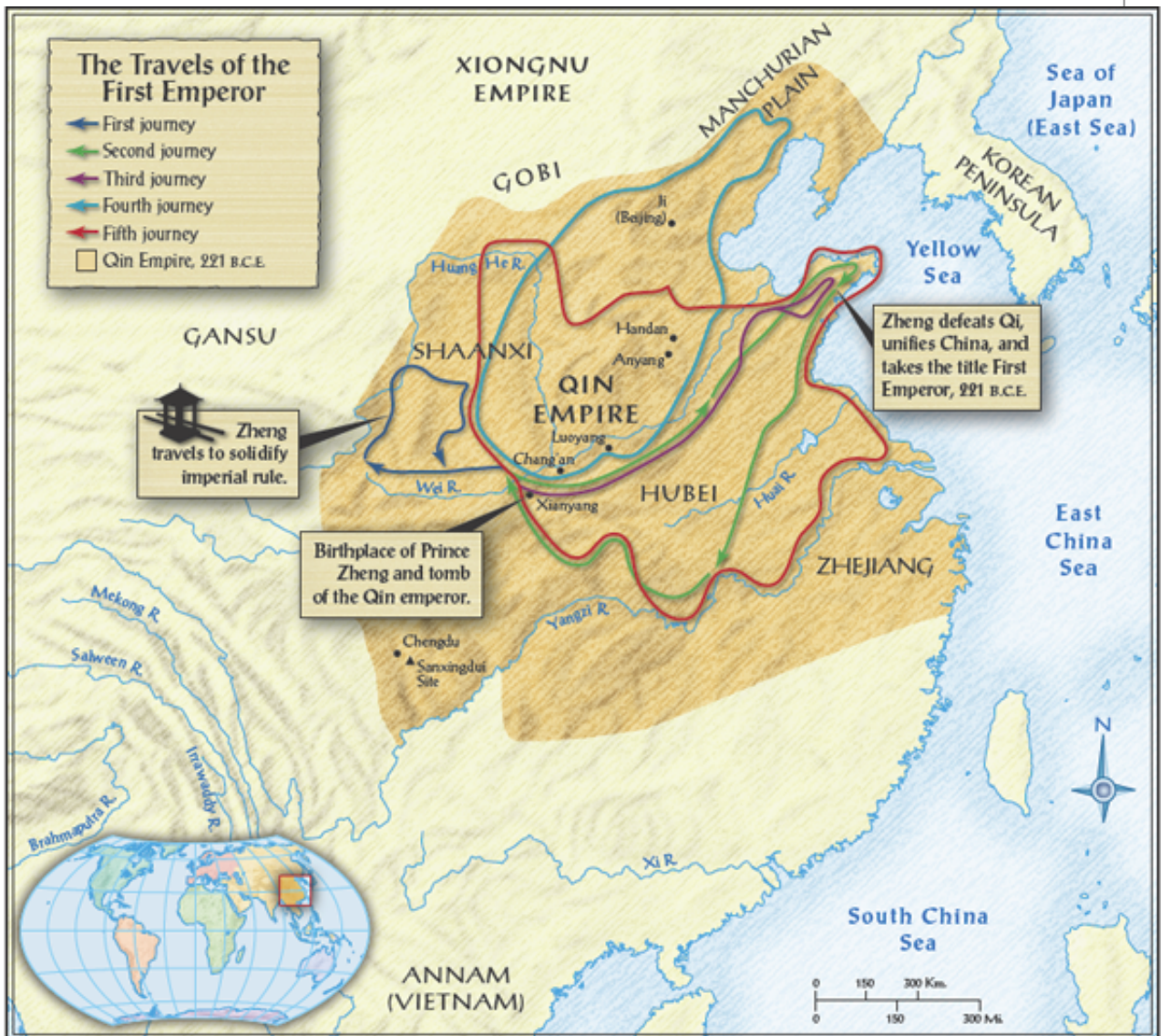
During his reign he went on five different expeditions. At the top of each mountain he climbed, he erected a stone tablet describing his many accomplishments and asserting widespread support for his dynasty. Unlike Ashoka's pillar and stone inscriptions, the Qin tablets were placed on remote mountaintops where the intended audience of ancestors could view them. One of these tablets read as follows:

In His twenty-sixth year [221 B.C.E.] He first unified All under Heaven—There was none who was not respectful and submissive. He personally tours the distant multitudes, Ascends this Grand Mountain And all round surveys the world at the eastern extremity. May later ages respect and follow the decrees He bequeaths And forever accept His solemn warnings. *

First Emperor of the Qin Dynasty



(British Library, London/HIP/Art Resource, NY)



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The new emperor traveled overland in a sedan-chair carried by his servants and along rivers by boat. By the time he finished his last journey, he had crisscrossed much of the territory north of the Yangzi (YAHNG-zuh) River in modern-day China.

His unusual childhood must have affected Prince Zheng, but surviving sources convey little about his personality except to document his single-minded ambition. After taking the throne, he led the Qin armies on a series of brilliant military campaigns. They fought with the same weapons as their enemies—crossbows, bronze armor, shields, and daggers—but the Qin army was a meritocracy. A skilled soldier, no matter how low-ranking his parents, could rise to become a general, while the son of a noble family, if not a good fighter, would remain a common foot soldier for life.

The Qin was the first dynasty to vanquish all of its rivals, including six independent kingdoms, and unite China under a single person's rule. The First Emperor eliminated regional differences by creating a single body of law for all his subjects, standardizing all weights and measures, and even mandating a single axle width for the ox- and horse-drawn carts. He coined a new title, *First Emperor (Shi Huangdi)*, because he felt that the word *king* did not accurately convey his august position. The First Emperor intentionally stayed remote from his subjects so that they would respect and obey him.

On his deathbed, the First Emperor urged that his descendants rule forever, or “ten thousand years” in Chinese phrasing. Instead, peasant uprisings brought his dynasty to an end in three years. The succeeding dynasty, the Han dynasty, denounced Qin brutality but used Qin governance to rule for four centuries. Subsequent Chinese rulers who aspired to reunify the empire always looked to the Han as their model. Unlike India, which remained politically disunited for most of its history (see [Chapter 3](#)), the Chinese empire endured for over two thousand years. Whenever it fell apart, a new emperor put it back together.

Focus Questions

What different elements of Chinese civilization took shape between 1200 and 221 B.C.E.?

What were the most important measures in the Qin blueprint for empire?

How did the Han rulers modify the Qin blueprint, particularly regarding administrative structure and the recruitment and promotion of officials?

Which neighboring peoples in Central, East, and Southeast Asia did the Han dynasty conquer? Why was the impact of Chinese rule limited?

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4-1 The Origins of Chinese Civilization, 1200–221 B.C.E.

Agriculture developed independently in several different regions in China circa 7000 B.C.E. In each region, as elsewhere in the world, people began to harvest seeds occasionally before progressing to full-time agriculture. By 1200 B.C.E., several independent cultural centers had emerged. One, the Shang (SHAHNG) kingdom based in the Yellow River (Huang He) Valley, developed the Chinese writing system. Many elements of Chinese civilization—the writing system, the worship of ancestors, and the Confucian and Daoist systems of belief—developed in the years before China was united in 221 B.C.E.

Chapter 4: Blueprint for Empire: China, 1200 B.C.E.–220 C.E.: 4-1a Early Agriculture, Technology, and Cuisine to 1200 B.C.E.
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4-1a Early Agriculture, Technology, and Cuisine to 1200 B.C.E.

North China was particularly suited for early agriculture because a layer of fine yellow dirt, called loess (LESS), covers the entire Yellow River Valley, and few trees grow there. The river carries large quantities of loess from the west and deposits new layers each year in the last 500 miles (900 km) before the Pacific Ocean. As a result, the riverbed is constantly rising, often to a level higher than the surrounding fields. Sometimes called “China's River of Sorrow,” the Yellow River has been dangerously floodprone throughout recorded history.

Three major climatic zones extend east and west across China. Less than 20 inches (50 cm) of rain falls each year on the region north of the Huai (HWHY) River; about 40 inches (1 m) per year drops on the middle band along the Yangzi River; and over 80 inches (2 m) a year pours on the southernmost band of China and Hong Kong. This differential pattern of rainfall is due to the monsoon winds off the ocean: the water-laden winds first cross south China, where they drop much of their water; by the time they reach the north, they are carrying much less water. The climate of the Yellow River was probably hotter and wetter than it is today. Elephants and rhinoceros both lived there as late as 1000 B.C.E.

Sometime around 8000 B.C.E., the residents of north China began to deliberately cultivate millet, a domesticated grass with seeds that can be made into gruel, baked as bread, or cooked as noodles. Wheat and millet cultivation extended as far north as Manchuria and as far south as Zhejiang (JEH-jeeahng), near the mouth of China's other great river, the Yangzi, where in 7000 B.C.E. the first rice was planted. As in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and

India, some communities turned to full-time agriculture while others continued to forage for food (see [Chapters 2 and 3](#)).

The different implements found in various regions suggest great cultural diversity within China between 7000 and 2000 B.C.E. Around 4500 B.C.E., those living in the Yangzi River delta raised silkworms and spun silk. Around 3000 B.C.E., craftsmen in the same region sanded chunks of jade to make exquisite jade tubes. On the Shandong peninsula, far to the west, two early urban centers emerged around 2500 B.C.E., with three layers of smaller settlements around them, suggesting an interlocking city system.

These different peoples started out as small, egalitarian tribal groups who farmed intermittently. They evolved to larger settled groups with clearly demarcated social levels living in large urban settlements, demonstrating all the elements of complex society described in [Chapter 2](#).

Like the Mesopotamians, the early Chinese lived inside walled cities. Starting around 2000 B.C.E., they made machetes, shovels, and plow-blades from bronze. Ancient Chinese bronze casters mastered the exacting technology of mixing copper, tin, and lead in differing ratios to cast harder and softer bronze objects: daggers had to be hard, while mirrors could only be polished sufficiently to see one's reflection if they were soft.

The early Chinese conducted frequent rituals in which they made offerings of food and drink. Whether for ritual offerings or daily use, they used two types of vessels for foodstuffs: flat bronze vessels for grain (usually wheat or millet) and baskets and wooden and pottery vessels for meat and vegetables. This division of foods between starch and dishes made from cut-up meat and vegetables continues among Chinese chefs to the present day, an example of a characteristic cultural practice that originated in this early time. Combining component parts in various ways to produce a slightly different product each time, the chef tosses precut meat and vegetables into a wok, stir-fries them, and uses an array of sauces to make a large number of dishes, each with a different name and recognizable taste.

Shang dynasty cooks used many of the same tools as today's cooks—knives, stirring utensils, and bronze cooking pots. However, rather than stir-frying, they steamed and braised food. Those who presided over Shang rituals used chopsticks, one of the hallmarks of East Asian culture, to move food from large serving vessels to smaller plates. People then ate the food with their hands. Ordinary diners began to use chopsticks as eating utensils sometime around 200 B.C.E., the time of the first stir-fried food.

Chapter 4: Blueprint for Empire: China, 1200 B.C.E.–220 C.E.: 4-1b Early Chinese Writing in the Shang Dynasty, ca. 1200 B.C.E.
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4-1b Early Chinese Writing in the Shang Dynasty, ca. 1200 B.C.E.

As modern Chinese cuisine has an ancient history, so too do Chinese characters, which constitute the world's writing system with the longest history of continuous use. When did the Chinese first speak Chinese? Archaeologists cannot be certain, because the only certain

evidence about ancient language is the presence of writing. The first recognizable Chinese characters appeared on bones dating to around 1200 B.C.E. (Some pots dating to circa 2000 B.C.E. are illustrated with different pictures, but these were probably potters' marks and not written characters.) The bones came from near the modern city of Anyang (AHN-yahng) in the central Chinese province of Henan (HUH-nahn), the core region of China's first historic dynasty, the **Shang dynasty** ([China's first historic dynasty. The earliest surviving records date to 1200 B.C.E., during the Shang. The Shang king ruled a small area in the vicinity of modern Anyang, in Henan province, and granted lands to allies in noble families.](#)) (1766–1045 B.C.E.). The discovery and deciphering of these bones, first found in 1899, mark one of the great intellectual breakthroughs in twentieth-century China.

Many ancient peoples around the world used oracles to consult higher powers, and scholars call the excavated bones “[oracle bones \(The earliest surviving written records in China, scratched onto cattle shoulder blades and turtle shell bottoms, or plastrons, to record the diviners' interpretations of the future.\)](#)” because the Shang ruler used them to forecast the future. To do so the Shang placed a heated poker on cattle shoulder blades and turtle shell bottoms, or plastrons, and interpreted the resulting cracks. They then recorded on the bone the name of the ancestor they had consulted, the topic of inquiry, and the outcome. It was an extremely difficult feat, and we still do not know how the ancient Chinese incised characters on these bones with the bronze tools available to them.

The Earliest Records of Chinese Writing

Starting around 1200 B.C.E., ancient Chinese kings used the clavicle bones of cattle (as shown here) and the bottom of turtle shells to ask their ancestors to advise them on the outcomes of future events, including battles, sacrifices, their wives' pregnancies, and even their own toothaches. After applying heat, the fortune-tellers interpreted the resulting cracks and wrote their predictions—in the most ancient form of Chinese characters—directly on the bones and turtle shells.



[Lowell Georgia/Corbis]

(Lowell Georgia/Corbis)

Since 1900 more than 200,000 oracle bones, both whole and fragmented, have been excavated in China. The quantities are immense—1,300 oracle bones concern rainfall in a single king's reign. Their language is grammatically complex, suggesting that the Shang scribes had been writing for some time, possibly on perishable materials like wood. Shang dynasty characters, like their modern equivalents, have two elements: a radical, which suggests the broad field of meaning, and a phonetic symbol, which indicates sound. Like Arabic numerals, Chinese characters retain the same meaning even if pronounced differently: 3 means the number “three” even if some readers say “trois” or “drei.” (See the feature “[World History in Today's World: Inputting Chinese Characters.](#)”)

World History in Today's World

Inputting Chinese Characters

Before the advent of computers, many reformers called for the abolition of Chinese characters and their replacement with an alphabet. A major problem was typesetting: a Chinese newspaper font had over seven thousand different characters, and typing them was slow and costly. In many cases the typist had to spend valuable time searching through drawers of type for a rare character.

Computers have made it much easier to type Chinese. Most people input Chinese

characters by pronunciation. Since a single pronunciation can refer to a number of different words (characters), typing the pronunciation of one character can generate as many as a hundred choices: you then choose the character you need from an on-screen selection that offers the most frequently used characters first with unusual characters later. Since the computer remembers the characters you frequently use, the longer you work on a given computer, the faster you can type. The latest computers and smartphones also recognize handwriting so that you can copy an unknown character on a keypad and the computer will identify the character.

But the fastest way to input, used by professional typists, is to use the shape of the character, not the sound. One popular system organizes characters by stroke: all characters that start with a given stroke form a group, and the typist chooses the correct character. Today, the most skilled Chinese typists can input at a rate of over one hundred characters per minute, about the same as for English.

Most helpful to scholars of ancient Chinese characters are online dictionaries of ancient Chinese characters that allow you to look up a single character and see all the different ways it was written in the past. Take the character wang 王, for example, which means “king” and appears in the photograph of the oracle bone. In this case the oracle bone character looks just like the modern character, which has three parallel horizontal lines bisected by a vertical stroke, but the “Chinese Etymology” website developed by Richard Sears, a nonlinguist based in Tennessee, documents over four hundred variants of the character used in the past three thousand years.

Source: <http://www.chineseetymology.org>.

During the Shang dynasty only the king and his scribes could read and write characters. Presenting the world from the king's vantage point, some oracle bones treat affairs of state, like the outcomes of battles, but many more touch on individual matters, such as his wife's pregnancy or his own aching teeth. The major religion of the time was **ancestor worship** ([The belief in China that dead ancestors could intercede in human affairs on behalf of the living. Marked by frequent rituals in which the living offered food and drink to the ancestors in the hope of receiving help.](#)). The Shang kings believed that their recently dead ancestors could intercede with the more powerful long-dead on behalf of the living.

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4-1c Shang Dynasty Relations with Other Peoples

Historians of China have ingeniously combined the information in oracle bones with careful analysis of Shang archaeological sites to piece together how Shang government and society functioned between 1200 and 1000 B.C.E. Before the bones were studied, the main source for early Chinese history was a book entitled *Records of the Grand Historian*, written

in the first century B.C.E. by **Sima Qian** ([The author of *Records of the Grand Historian, a history of China from ancient legendary times to the first century B.C.E.*](#)) (SUH-mah CHEE-EN) (145-ca. 90 B.C.E.). Combining information drawn from several extant chronicles, Sima Qian wrote a history of China from its legendary founding sage emperors through to his lifetime. He gave the founding date of the Shang dynasty as 1766 B.C.E. and listed the names of the Shang kings but provided little detail about them. Setting a pattern for all future historians, Sima Qian believed that there could be only one legitimate ruler of China at any time and omitted any discussion of regional rulers who coexisted with the Shang and other dynasties.

In fact, though, the Shang exercised direct control over a relatively small area, some 125 miles (200 km) from east to west, and the Shang king sometimes traveled as far as 400 miles (650 km) away to fight enemy peoples. Beyond the small area under direct Shang control lived many different non-Shang peoples whose names appear on the oracle bones but about whom little is known. Shang kings did not have a fixed capital but simply moved camp from one place to another to conduct military campaigns against these other peoples.

Early Chinese Bronzeworking

The ancient Chinese combined copper, tin, and lead to make intricate bronze vessels like this wine container, which dates to circa 1050 B.C.E. and was found buried in the hills of Hunan (HOO-nan), in southern China. Analysts are not sure of the relationship between the tiger-like beast and the man it embraces. The man's serene face suggests that the beast is communicating some kind of teaching—not devouring him.

(Musée Cernuschi, Paris/Scala/Art Resource, NY)



(Musée Cernuschi, Paris/Scala/Art Resource, NY)

Many oracle bones describe battles between the Shang and their enemies. When the Shang defeated an enemy, they took thousands of captives. The fortunate worked as laborers, and the less fortunate were killed as an offering. One oracle bone asks the ancestors' opinion about the number of human sacrifices necessary—ten? twenty? thirty?—and gives the name of the conquered people.

Shang subjects interred their kings in large tombs with hundreds of sacrificed corpses. Even in death they observed a hierarchy. Placed near the Shang king were those who accompanied him in death, with their own entourages of corpses and lavish grave goods. Royal guards were also buried intact, but the lowest-ranking corpses, most likely prisoners of war, had their heads and limbs severed.

The Shang were but one of many peoples living in China around 1200 B.C.E. Yet since only the Shang left written records, we know much less about the other peoples. Fortunately an extraordinary archaeological find at the Sanxingdui (SAHN-shing-dway) site near Chengdu (CHUHNG-dew), in Sichuan (SUH-chwan) province, offers a glimpse of one of the peoples contemporary with the Shang. Inside the ancient city walls, archaeologists found two grave pits filled with bronze statues, bronze masks, and elephant tusks that had been burnt and

cut into sections. Like the Shang, the people at the Sanxingdui site lived in small walled settlements.

The people of Sanxingdui also made bronze masks more than a yard across with huge protruding eyes, whose significance no one can explain satisfactorily. Whereas the Shang made no human statues, the bronze metallurgists at Sanxingdui did. Unlike the Shang, the people at Sanxingdui do not seem to have practiced human sacrifice, nor do they appear to have had a writing system, although some archaeologists hope in the future to find samples of their writing.

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4-1d The Zhou Dynasty, 1045–256 B.C.E.

The oracle bones are most plentiful during the period from 1200 to 1000 B.C.E. and diminish in quantity soon after 1000 B.C.E. In 1045 B.C.E. a new dynasty, the [Zhou dynasty](#) ([The successor dynasty to the Shang that gained the Mandate of Heaven and the right to rule, according to later Chinese historians. Although depicted by later generations as an ideal age, the Zhou witnessed considerable conflict.](#)), overthrew the Shang. The Grand Historian Sima Qian wrote the earliest detailed account of the Zhou (JOE) conquest, long after the fact, in the first century B.C.E. Claiming that 48,000 Zhou troops were able to defeat 700,000 Shang troops because the Shang ruler was corrupt and decadent, Sima Qian alleged that the last Shang ruler killed his enemies and roasted them on a rack or cut them into mincemeat before eating them. Historians question his account because of his clear bias against the Shang.

Sima Qian's description set a pattern followed by all subsequent historians: vilifying the last emperor of a fallen dynasty and glorifying the founder of the next. According to Sima Qian, the Zhou king was able to overthrow the Shang because he had obtained the [Mandate of Heaven](#) ([The Chinese belief that Heaven, the generalized forces of the cosmos \(not the abode of the dead\), chose the rightful ruler. China's rulers believed that Heaven would send signs before withdrawing its mandate.](#)). A new god, worshiped by the Zhou ruling house but not previously worshiped by the Shang, Heaven represented the generalized forces of the cosmos, rather than the abode of the dead. China's rulers believed that Heaven would send signs—terrible storms, unusual astronomical events, famines, even peasant rebellions—before withdrawing its mandate. But because the recipient of the Mandate of Heaven could only be known after the fact, it often served as a retrospective justification for overthrowing a dynasty by force.

Many other states coexisted with the Zhou dynasty (1045–256 B.C.E.), the most important being the Qin, who would first unify China. The long period of the Zhou dynasty is usually divided into the Western Zhou, 1045–771 B.C.E., when the capital was located in the Wei (WAY) River Valley, and the Eastern Zhou, from 771 to 256 B.C.E., because the second Zhou capital was east of the first.

During Zhou rule, the people writing Chinese characters gradually settled more and more

territory at the expense of other peoples. Because the final centuries of the Zhou were particularly violent, the period from 481 to 221 B.C.E. is commonly called the Warring States Period. Yet constant warfare brought benefits, such as the diffusion of new technology. As in India, the spread of iron tools throughout China enabled people to plow the land more deeply and to settle in new areas. Agricultural productivity increased, and the first money—in the shape of knives and spades but not round coins—circulated around 500 B.C.E., also at roughly the same time as in India.

Changes in warfare brought massive social change. Since the time of the Shang, battles had been fought with chariots, and only boys who grew up in wealthy households had the time and the resources to learn how to guide a galloping horse pulling a chariot with three men into battle. But in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E., as they went farther south, armies began to fight battles in muddy terrain where chariots could not go. The most successful generals were those, regardless of family background, who could effectively lead armies of ten thousand foot soldiers into battle. At this time ambitious young men studied strategy and general comportment with tutors, one of whom became China's most famous teacher, [Confucius \(551–479 B.C.E.\) A teacher who made his living by tutoring students. Known only through *The Analects*, the record of conversations with his students that they wrote down after his death.](#) (551–479 B.C.E.).

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4-1e Confucianism

Confucius was born in 551 B.C.E. in Shandong (SHAHN-dohng) province. His family name was Kong (KOHNG); his given name, Qiu (CHEE-OH). (*Confucius* is the English translation of *Kong Fuzi* [FOO-zuh], or Master Kong, but most Chinese refer to him as Kongzi [KOHNG-zuh], which also means Master Kong.) Confucius's students have left us the only record of his thinking, a series of conversations he had with them, which are called *The Analects*, meaning “discussions and conversations.” Recently scholars have begun to question the authenticity of the later *Analects* (especially [chapters 10–20](#)), but they agree that the first nine chapters probably date to an earlier time, perhaps just after Confucius's death in 479 B.C.E.

Some recent archaeological discoveries of philosophical writings on bamboo slips contain exact phrases from *The Analects*. These finds show that Confucius was only one of many teachers active at the time, and archaeologists are hopeful that they will unearth more texts showing exactly how *The Analects* took shape.

[Confucianism \(The term for the main tenets of the thought of Confucius, which emphasized the role of ritual in bringing out people's inner humanity \(a quality translated variously as “benevolence,” “goodness,” or “man at his best”\).\)](#) is the term used for the main tenets of Confucius's thought. The optimistic tone of *The Analects* will strike any reader. Acutely aware of living in a politically unstable era, Confucius did not advocate violence. Instead, he emphasized the need to perform ritual correctly. Ritual is crucial because it allows the gentleman, the frequent recipient of Confucius's teachings, to express his inner

humanity (a quality sometimes translated as “benevolence,” “goodness,” or “man at his best”). Since Confucius is speaking to his disciples, he rarely explains what kind of rituals he means, but he mentions sacrificing animals, playing music, and performing dances.

Confucius's teachings do not resemble a religion so much as an ethical system. Filial piety, or respect for one's parents, is its cornerstone. If children obey their parents and the ruler follows Confucian teachings, the country will right itself because an inspiring example will lead people toward the good. (See the feature “[Movement of Ideas Through Primary Sources: The Analects and Sima Qian's Letter to Ren An.](#)”)

Confucius was also famous for his refusal to comment on either the supernatural or the afterlife:

Zilu [ZUH-lu; a disciple] asked how to serve the spirits and gods. The Master [Confucius] said: “You are not yet able to serve men, how could you serve the spirits?”

Zilu said: “May I ask you about death?”

*The Master said: “You do not yet know life, how could you know death?” **

If we define religion as the belief in the supernatural, then Confucianism does not seem to qualify. But if we consider religion as the offering of rituals at different turning points in one's life—birth, marriage, and death—then Confucianism qualifies as a religion.

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4-1f Daoism

Many of Confucius's followers were also familiar with the teachings of [Daoism \(A Chinese belief system dating back to at least 300 B.C.E. that emphasized the “Way,” a concept expressed in Chinese as “dao.” The Way of the early Daoist teachers included meditation, breathing techniques, and special eating regimes.\)](#) (DOW-is-uhm) (alternate spelling Taoism), the other major belief system of China before unification in 221 B.C.E. The earliest Daoist texts excavated so far, dated to 300 B.C.E., were found in tombs alongside Confucian texts, an indication that the deceased did not necessarily think of Daoism and Confucianism as separate religions. Both Confucius and the leading Daoist teachers spoke about the “Way,” a concept for which they used the same word, *dao* (DOW).

For Confucius, the Way denoted using ritual to bring out one's inner humanity. In contrast, the Way of the early Daoist teachers included meditation, breathing techniques, and special eating regimes. They believed that if one learned to control one's breath or the life-force present in each person, one could attain superhuman powers and possibly immortality. Some said that immortals shed their human bodies much as butterflies cast off pupas. Such people were called Perfect Men. One early Daoist text, *Zhuangzi* (JUAHNG-zuh), named for

the author of its teachings, Master Zhuang (JUAHNG), describes such people: “*The Perfect Man is godlike. Though the great swamps blaze, they cannot burn him; though the great rivers freeze, they cannot chill him.*” *

Funny and ironic, *Zhuangzi* describes many paradoxes, and the question of knowledge—of how we know what we think we know—permeates the text. One anecdote describes how Zhuang dreamt he was a happy butterfly. When he awoke he was himself, “*But he didn't know if he was Zhuang Zhou [Zhuangzi] who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Zhuang Zhou.*”

Zhuangzi often mocks those who fear death because they cannot know what death is actually like; he dreams that a talking skull asks him, “*Why would I throw away more happiness than that of a king on a throne and take on the troubles of a human being again?*” *Zhuangzi's* amusing tales underline how profoundly gloomy was the Daoist view of death, which pictured it as a series of underground prisons from which no one could escape.

The other well-known Daoist classic, *The Way and Integrity Classic*, or *Daodejing* (DOW-deh-jing), combines the teachings of several different masters into one volume. It urges rulers to allow things to follow their natural course, or *wuwei* (WOO-way), often misleadingly translated as “nonaction”: “*Nothing under heaven is softer or weaker than water, and yet nothing is better for attacking what is hard and strong, because of its immutability.*” * In the centuries leading up to 221 B.C.E., no Daoist church had a recognized leader, but many Daoist masters had disciples, and *Zhuangzi* and *The Way and Integrity Classic* offer a glimpse of the wide variety of teachings circulating alongside Confucian teachings in China at that time.

Chapter 4: Blueprint for Empire: China, 1200 B.C.E.–220 C.E.: 4-2 Qin Rulers Unify China, 359–207 B.C.E.
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4-2 Qin Rulers Unify China, 359–207 B.C.E.

While Confucian and Daoist thinkers were proposing abstract solutions to end the endemic warfare, a third school, the Legalists, took an entirely different approach based on their experience governing the Qin homeland in western China. In 359 B.C.E., the statesman Shang Yang (SHAHNG yahng), the major adviser to the Qin ruler, implemented a series of reforms reorganizing the army and redefining the tax obligations of all citizens. Those reforms made the Qin more powerful than any of the other regional states in China, and it gradually began to conquer its neighbors. The First Emperor implemented Shang Yang's blueprint for rule both as the regional ruler of the Qin and as emperor after the unification of China in 221 B.C.E.

Chapter 4: Blueprint for Empire: China, 1200 B.C.E.–220 C.E.: 4-2a Prime Minister Shang Yang's Reforms, 359–221 B.C.E.
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4-2a Prime Minister Shang Yang's Reforms, 359–221 B.C.E.

In 359 B.C.E., Prime Minister Shang Yang focused on the territory under direct Qin rule. The government sent officials to register every household in the Qin realm, creating a direct link between each subject and the ruler. Once a boy resident in the Qin region reached the age of sixteen or seventeen and a height of 5 feet (1.5 m), he had to serve in the military, pay land taxes (a fixed share of the crop), and perform labor service, usually building roads, each year. To encourage people to inform on each other, Shang Yang divided the population into mutual responsibility groups of five and ten: if someone committed a crime but was not apprehended, everyone in the group was punished.

Movement of Ideas Through Primary Sources

***The Analects* and Sima Qian's Letter to Ren An**

Unlike Buddhism, which has the first sermon of the Buddha (see [Chapter 3](#)), Confucianism has no short text that summarizes its main teachings. Throughout history students read and memorized ***The Analects*** because it was thought to be the only text that quoted Confucius directly. Each chapter contains ten to twenty short passages, often dialogues between Confucius and a student, and each passage is numbered. The first chapter introduces the most important Confucian teachings, including respect for one's parents, or filial piety.

Living more than three hundred years after Confucius's death, the Grand Historian Sima Qian wrestled with the issue of how to best observe the tenets of filial piety. Convicted of treason because he defended a general who had surrendered to the Xiongnu, he was offered a choice: he could commit suicide or he could undergo castration. In the excerpts from this letter to his friend Ren An, whom he called Shaoqing (shaow-ching), he explains why he chose castration even though it brought shame to his ancestors. According to Confucian teachings, one's body was a gift from one's parents, and each person was obliged to protect his body from any mutilation. But Sima Qian's father had begun ***The Records of the Grand Historian***, and he chose physical punishment so that he could complete his father's project.

Chapter One of *The Analects*

- 1.1. The Master said: "To learn something and then to put it into practice at the right time: is this not a joy? To have friends coming from afar: is this not a delight? Not to be upset when one's merits are ignored: is this not the mark of a gentleman?"
- 1.2. Master You said: "A man who respects his parents and his elders would hardly be inclined to defy his superiors. A man who is not inclined to defy his superiors will never foment a rebellion. A gentleman works at the root. Once the root is secured, the Way unfolds. To respect parents and elders is the root of humanity."
- 1.3. The Master said: "Clever talk and affected manners are seldom signs of

goodness.”

1.4. Master Zeng said: “I examine myself three times a day. When dealing on behalf of others, have I been trustworthy? In intercourse with my friends, have I been faithful? Have I practiced what I was taught?”

1.5. The Master said: “To govern a state of middle size, one must dispatch business with dignity and good faith; be thrifty and love all men; mobilize the people only at the right times.”

1.6. The Master said: “At home, a young man must respect his parents; abroad, he must respect his elders. He should talk little, but with good faith; love all people, but associate with the virtuous. Having done this, if he still has energy to spare, let him study literature.”

1.7. Zixia said: “A man who values virtue more than good looks, who devotes all his energy to serving his father and mother, who is willing to give his life for his sovereign, who in intercourse with friends is true to his word—even though some may call him uneducated, I still maintain he is an educated man.”

1.8. The Master said: “A gentleman who lacks gravity has no authority and his learning will remain shallow. A gentleman puts loyalty and faithfulness foremost; he does not befriend his moral inferiors. When he commits a fault, he is not afraid to amend his ways.”

1.9. Master Zeng said: “When the dead are honored and the memory of remote ancestors is kept alive, a people's virtue is at its fullest.”

1.10. Ziqing asked Zigong: “When the Master arrives in another country, he always becomes informed about its politics. Does he ask for such information, or is it given him?”

Zigong replied: “The Master obtains it by being cordial, kind, courteous, temperate, and deferential. The Master has a way of enquiring which is quite different from other people's, is it not?”

1.11. The Master said: “When the father is alive, watch the son's aspirations. When the father is dead, watch the son's actions. If three years later, the son has not veered from the father's way, he may be called a dutiful son indeed.”

1.12. Master You said: “When practicing the ritual, what matters most is harmony. This is what made the beauty of the way of the ancient kings; it

inspired their every move, great or small. Yet they knew where to stop: harmony cannot be sought for its own sake, it must always be subordinated to the ritual; otherwise it would not do.”

1.13. Master You said: “If your promises conform to what is right, you will be able to keep your word. If your manners conform to the ritual, you will be able to keep shame and disgrace at bay. The best support is provided by one's own kinsmen.”

1.14. The Master said: “A gentleman eats without stuffing his belly; chooses a dwelling without demanding comfort; is diligent in his office and prudent in his speech; seeks the company of the virtuous in order to straighten his own ways. Of such a man, one may truly say that he is fond of learning.”

1.15. Zigong said: “‘Poor without servility; rich without arrogance.’ How is that?”

The Master said: “Not bad, but better still: ‘Poor, yet cheerful; rich, yet considerate.’”

Zigong said: “In the *Poems*, it is said: ‘Like carving horn, like sculpting ivory, like cutting jade, like polishing stone.’ Is this not the same idea?”

The Master said: “Ah, one can really begin to discuss the *Poems* with you! I tell you one thing, and you can figure out the rest.”

1.16. The Master said: “Don't worry if people don't recognize your merits; worry that you may not recognize theirs.”

Sima Qian's Letter to Ren An

A man has only one death. That death may be as weighty as Mount Tai, or it may be as light as a goose feather. It all depends on the way he uses it. Above all, a man must bring no shame to his forebears. Next he must not shame his person, or be shameful in his countenance, or in his words. Below such a one is he who suffers the shame of being bound, and next he who bears the shame of prison clothing.... Lowest of all is the dire penalty of castration, the “punishment of rottenness”! ...

It is the nature of every man to love life and hate death, to think of his parents and look after his wife and children. Only when he is moved by higher principles is this not so. Then there are things that he must do. Now I have been most unfortunate, for I lost my parents very early. With no brothers or sisters, I have been left alone and orphaned. And you yourself, Shaoqing, have seen me with my wife and child and know I would not let thoughts of them deter me. Yet the brave man does not necessarily die for honor, while even the coward may fulfill his duty. Each takes a

different way to exert himself. Though I might be weak and cowardly and seek shamelessly to prolong my life, I know full well the difference between what ought to be followed and what rejected.... But the reason I have not refused to bear these ills and have continued to live, dwelling in vileness and disgrace without taking leave, is that I grieve that I have things in my heart that I have not been able to express fully, and I am ashamed to think that after I am gone my writings will not be known to posterity.

Questions for Analysis

According to The Analects, how should a gentleman conduct himself? How should a son treat his parents?

According to Sima Qian, how should a virtuous person live? Why does he choose castration over suicide?

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Most people in ancient China took it for granted that the son of a noble was destined to rule and the son of a peasant was not, but the Legalists disagreed. Renouncing a special status for “gentlemen,” they believed that the ruler should recruit the best men to staff his army and his government. In keeping with [Legalism \(A school of thought, originating in the fourth century B.C.E. and associated with Qin dynasty rulers, that emphasized promotion for officials and soldiers alike on the basis of merit and job performance, not heredity.\)](#), Qin officials recognized no hereditary titles, not even for members of the ruler's family.

Instead the Qin officials introduced a strict meritocracy, which made their army the strongest in China. A newly recruited soldier might start at the lowest rank, but if he succeeded in battle, he could rise in rank and thereby raise the stature of his household. Because Qin rules tolerated no value judgments, which could be biased, a soldier had to present the heads of all those enemy soldiers he had killed before he could advance. The more heads he presented, the higher he rose in the army. This reorganization succeeded brilliantly because each soldier had a strong incentive to fight. Starting in 316 B.C.E., the Qin polity began to conquer neighboring lands and implement Shang Yang's measures in each new region.

Legalist philosophers valued the contributions of the farmer-soldiers most highly because they paid taxes and were the backbone of the army. Accordingly, Legalist thinkers ranked peasants just under government officials, or scholars, who could read and write. Because artisans made objects peasants needed, like baskets and tools, they ranked third, and merchants, who neither worked the land nor manufactured the goods they traded, ranked

at the bottom of society.

This ranking is prescriptive, reflecting how Legalist thinkers thought society should be, not descriptive, how it actually was. Any Chinese peasant would gladly have changed places with a merchant because merchants did not perform arduous physical labor and could afford better clothes and food. Although the Legalist ranking, like the explanation of varna in the Indian “Hymn of the Primeval Man” (see [Chapter 3](#)), did not reflect reality, it persisted throughout Chinese history.

Chapter 4: Blueprint for Empire: China, 1200 B.C.E.–220 C.E.: 4-2b The Policies of the First Emperor, 221–210 B.C.E.

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4-2b The Policies of the First Emperor, 221–210 B.C.E.

In 246 B.C.E., Prince Zheng, the future First Emperor, ascended to the Qin throne and launched a series of military conquests that culminated with the defeat of his final rival, the ruler of Qi (modern-day Shandong), in 221 B.C.E. Prince Zheng then named himself First Emperor. Determining what happened during the Qin founder's eleven-year reign (221–210 B.C.E.) poses great challenges because immediately after his death Sima Qian portrayed him as one of the worst tyrants in Chinese history who murdered his opponents, suppressed all learning, and adamantly opposed Confucian virtues. This view of the First Emperor prevails today, but the evidence *from* his reign (as opposed to that composed *after* it) suggests that the First Emperor conceived of himself as a virtuous ruler along Confucian lines.

After 221 B.C.E., the stone tablets the emperor placed on high mountaintops recorded his view of his reign:

The way of good rule is advanced and enacted;
The various professions achieve their proper place,
And all find rule and model.
His great principle is superb and shining. *

Each line invoked Confucian learning. “Superb and shining” is a title used by the first ruler of the Zhou, and the First Emperor adopted it because he, too, hoped to be perceived as the virtuous founder of a new dynasty.

To compose the stone inscriptions, the Qin emperor commissioned a team of scholars who drew on all the classical learning of China's different regions that had taken shape in the previous millennium, including Confucius's teachings. One of the inscriptions claims, “*The way of filial piety is brilliantly manifest and shining!*” * According to Confucian teachings, the ruler's main role was to lead his subjects in ritual, and the Qin emperor assumed this role each time he put up a stone tablet.

The Qin emperor placed these monuments in the far corners of his realm to demonstrate that he directed all of his subjects, both those in the Qin homeland and those recently

conquered, in correct ritual observance. Unlike the Ashokan inscriptions in different languages, all the Qin inscriptions were written in Chinese because the Qin enforced linguistic standardization throughout their empire. And whereas Ashoka's inscriptions were phrased colloquially, the Qin inscriptions were rigidly formal, consisting of thirty-six or seventy-two lines, each with exactly four characters. The inscriptions use the characteristic Chinese technique of manufacture: their authors placed component parts, or characters, in various combinations to produce a slightly different text for each inscription. Although Ashoka's inscriptions were completed within the Qin emperor's lifetime, northern India lay some 1,000 miles (1,600 km) from the western edge of the Qin emperor's realm, and there is no evidence that the Mauryans inspired the First Emperor.

Qin dynasty sources demonstrate clearly that the First Emperor exercised far more control over his subjects than had his predecessors. Using government registers listing all able-bodied men, the First Emperor initiated several enormous public works projects, including 4,000 miles (6,400 km) of roads, roughly as many as the Romans built, * and long walls of pounded earth, the most readily available building material. The Qin emperor also used conscript labor to build his tomb, where he was buried in 210 B.C.E. (See the feature “[Visual Evidence in Primary Sources: The Terracotta Warriors of the Qin Founder's Tomb.](#)”)

Many Qin subjects left their homes either to perform labor service on these different projects or to serve in the army, which had several hundred thousand conscripts and traveled as far north as modern-day Mongolia and as far south as Vietnam (as discussed later in this chapter). The central government sent supplies overland to its armies on the roads it built, but when the armies traveled too far, it became difficult to sustain their supply lines, and many died far from home in unsuccessful military campaigns.

Chapter 4: Blueprint for Empire: China, 1200 B.C.E.–220 C.E.: 4-2c Legalism and the Laws of the Qin Dynasty
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4-2c Legalism and the Laws of the Qin Dynasty

The Qin ruler viewed the establishment of laws as one of his most important accomplishments. According to one inscription, he “*created the regulations and illuminated the laws*” * as soon as he became emperor. Viewing law as a tool for strengthening the realm, the Legalists advocated treating all men identically, regardless of birth, because they believed that only the systematic application of one set of laws could control man's inherently evil nature. Subjects could not use law to challenge their ruler's authority because the only law for Legalists was the law of the ruler. They did not acknowledge the existence of a higher, divine law.

The Great Wall Then and Now

Few people realize that the Great Wall that we see today was built during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), not during the Qin dynasty (221–207 B.C.E.). The Qin emperor ordered the construction of the Great Wall by linking together many pre-existing dirt walls. In the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries C.E., the Ming built with

stone along the foundations of the Qin dirt walls. The remains of the Qin wall, which was made largely from pounded earth, survive in only a few places in China.



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In place for only fourteen years, the **Qin dynasty (221–207 B.C.E.)** The first dynasty to rule over a unified China; heavily influenced by Legalist teachings that promoted soldiers and officials strictly on the basis of accomplishment, not birth. (221–207 B.C.E.) did not have time to develop a governmental system for all of China, but it did create a basic framework. The First Emperor appointed a prime minister as the top official in his government. Different departments in the capital administered the emperor's staff, the military, and revenue. The Qin divided the empire into over forty military districts called commanderies, each headed by a governor and a military commander. They in turn were divided into districts, the smallest unit of the Qin government, which were governed by magistrates with the help of clerks. All these officials were charged with carrying out the new laws of the Qin.

Later historians described Qin laws as arbitrary and overly harsh; they were also surprisingly detailed, clearly the product of a government deeply concerned with following legal procedures carefully. Archaeologists working in Shuihudi (SHWAY-who-dee) town, in Hubei (WHO-bay) province, found a partial set of Qin dynasty laws dating to 217 B.C.E. in the tomb of a low-ranking clerk. This set of model cases illustrating legal procedures was written on bamboo slips preserved in stagnant water, with holes punched into them. They were then sewn together to form sheets that could be rolled up, similar to a modern placemat made from cord and reeds.

Each model case described in the Shuihudi materials is equally complex, pointing to the existence of established procedures for officials to follow before reaching a judgment. One

text begins as follows:

*Report. A, the wife of a commoner of X village, made a denunciation, saying, "I, A, had been pregnant for six months. Yesterday, in the daytime, I fought with the adult woman C of the same village. I, A, and C grabbed each other by the hair. C threw me, A, over and drove me back. A fellow-villager, D, came to the rescue and separated C and me, A. As soon as I, A, had reached my house, I felt ill and my belly hurt; yesterday evening the child miscarried." **

The text provides detailed instructions for investigating such a case. The legal clerk had to examine the fetus and consult with the local midwife; he also had to interrogate A and the members of her household to determine her condition.

The Shuihudi tomb also contained sections of the Qin legal code that make fine distinctions: the penalties for manslaughter (inadvertently killing someone) were lighter than those for deliberate murder. The determination of manslaughter hinged on whether the assailant had used an object lying at hand or had concealed his weapon, which indicated intent to murder. The fine legal distinctions among different types of murder resemble those in Hammurabi's laws (see [Chapter 2](#)). However, whereas in Babylon an assembly decided whether the accused was guilty of murder, in China the presiding official or clerk determined an individual's guilt.

Qin punishments were grisly. One could have one's foot cut off or one's nose severed for various offenses, and many of those sentenced to hard labor were not "complete," meaning that they were missing a limb. But if we consider the punishments in use elsewhere in the world at the time, such as Roman crucifixion, the Qin punishments were not unusual.

Chapter 4: Blueprint for Empire: China, 1200 B.C.E.–220 C.E.: 4-3 The Han Empire, 206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.
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4-3 The Han Empire, 206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.

The Qin dynasty came to a sudden end in 207 B.C.E. with the suicide of the First Emperor's son. The following year, in 206 B.C.E., the new emperor founded the [Han dynasty \(206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.\)](#) [The immediate successor to the Qin dynasty. Han rulers denounced Legalist governance but adopted much of the Qin blueprint for empire. Because of its long rule, the Han dynasty was a model for all subsequent dynasties.](#) . Although the Han founder always depicted the Qin as a brutal dynasty, he drew on many Legalist precedents to create a blueprint that allowed him and his descendants to rule for four hundred years. The Han modified the Qin structure of central and local government and developed a mechanism for recruiting officials that linked education with bureaucratic advancement for the first time in Chinese history. Starting in 140 B.C.E. and continuing throughout the dynasty, Han emperors encouraged students and future officials to study the Confucian classics. The dynasty's support of learning encouraged the spread of Confucianism

throughout the empire. The Confucian emphasis on education was so strong that the Chinese of that era schooled not only their sons but also, when they could, their daughters. Yet because the Han continued many policies of the Qin, it was a Legalist dynasty with a Confucian veneer.

Chapter 4: Blueprint for Empire: China, 1200 B.C.E.–220 C.E.: 4-3a Han Government and the Imperial Bureaucracy
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4-3a Han Government and the Imperial Bureaucracy

After the death of the First Emperor, some regions, sensing weakness at the center, rebelled against the unpopular second Qin emperor. Eventually one man, formerly a low-ranking official under the Qin named Liu Bang (LEO bahng) (r. 206–195 B.C.E.), emerged as leader of the rebels and founded the Han dynasty in 206 B.C.E. Liu Bang was one of only two emperors (the other founded the Ming dynasty in 1368) to be born as a commoner. When he and his forces entered the Qin capital, he assured the capital's residents:

Visual Evidence in Primary Sources

The Terracotta Warriors of the Qin Founder's Tomb

The Qin emperor's tomb, sometimes called the eighth wonder of the world, was discovered in 1973 by a farmer digging a well. The enormous tomb is so big that archaeologists have to dig test pits to probe its dimensions. Test pit #1, shown to the right, contains over seven thousand soldiers of four types—foot soldiers, archers, charioteers, and soldiers riding on horseback—who staffed the emperor's terracotta army. Because the Qin emperor expected the afterlife to be exactly the same as his life, his tomb formed a miniaturized world in which he could pursue his usual activities, including commanding his troops in battle.

The terracotta warriors do not resemble the figurines placed in any Chinese tomb before or since, prompting much speculation about the identity of their creators. One intriguing possibility, recently proposed, is that the emperor used his plumbers, because the soldiers' legs greatly resemble clay water pipes found in the ruins of the Qin palace.

Over one thousand soldiers bear labels stamped into the clay by eighty-five foremen, who were presumably responsible for supervising their construction. One estimate suggests that it took eleven years for these foremen, each supervising some ten men, to make the entire army of over seven thousand figures. *

How did the Qin craftsmen make so many different soldiers in such a short time? As chefs in today's Chinese restaurants work with ingredients, they arranged thousands of prefabricated parts in various combinations to make a slightly different product each time. Archaeologists have identified two types of feet, three types of shoes and four types of boots, two types of legs, eight types of torso, and two types of armor used to make the mass-produced soldiers, whose bodies range

from 5 feet 11 inches to 6 feet 5 inches (180 to 195 cm) tall.

Once a soldier's body was completed, a craftsman used clay to make his facial features. All the soldiers have individual faces, as if the craftsmen worked from living models. Yet the faces are idealized: no soldier has any wounds or scars. When the soldiers were completed, craftsmen painted them with bright colors, most of which have flaked off on the surrounding dirt.

The core of the tomb, where the Qin emperor himself was buried, has yet to be excavated, but writing one hundred years later, Sima Qian described it: "Artisans were ordered to install mechanically triggered crossbows set to shoot any intruder. With mercury the various waterways of the empire, the Yangzi and Yellow Rivers, and even the great ocean itself were created and made to flow and circulate mechanically." * Sima Qian also claimed that the son of the Qin founder ordered that the craftsmen who worked on the tomb be buried alive so that the tomb's exact location would remain secret. Archaeologists have not found human remains, but they continue to announce new discoveries, most recently of clay wrestlers and tumblers who performed for the emperor's pleasure in the next world.

Question for Analysis

How do the terracotta warriors illustrate the Chinese technique of using prefabricated component parts to mass-produce multiple objects that differ from each other?

This ordinary soldier's head was made by combining molded forms of the front and the back and smoothing them together. Like all Chinese, he did not cut his hair, considered to be a gift from his parents, but bound it in intricate patterns on the back and top of his head.

A roof of wooden beams was originally built over the entire army and then covered with mats, a layer of sand and chalk, and finally a layer of dirt.

His headdress indicates that this figure is an officer. This group of nine statues includes at least three officers who stand at the front of their unit so that they can lead their subordinates into battle.

This missing head reveals how the hollow statues were made. The armor, lower skirt, and legs were made from sheets of clay in a construction technique originally used by palace plumbers for water pipes.



Each Qin soldier wore a uniform consisting of a gown to the knees, leather armor on the upper torso, short pants, leg guards, and a headdress (never a helmet).

This officer's hands originally held weapons, most likely wooden spears or staffs, which have since disintegrated.

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*You elders have long suffered under the harsh laws of Qin.... I make an agreement with you that the law shall consist of only three sections: He who kills others shall die; he who harms others or steals from them shall incur appropriate punishment. For the rest, all other Qin laws shall be abolished. **

Like a modern politician's campaign promise, this statement does not provide an accurate description of Han law, which actually retained many provisions of Qin law.

When the Han forces took power, they faced the immediate problem of staffing a government large enough to govern the empire. They adopted the Legalist structure of a central government with the emperor at the head and a prime minister (sometimes called a chancellor) as the top official. Underneath the prime minister were three main divisions: collection of taxes, supervision of the military, and recruitment of personnel.

The Han dynasty ruled for four hundred years, with only one interruption by a relative of the empress, named Wang Mang (WAHNG mahng), who founded his own short-lived Xin (SHIN) (“new”) dynasty (9–23 C.E.). During the first two hundred years of the Han, called the Former Han or the Western Han (206 B.C.E.–9 C.E.), the capital was in Chang'an (CHAHNG-ahn). After Wang Mang was deposed, the original ruling family of the Han dynasty governed from the new capital of Luoyang (LWAW-yahng). The Later Han (25–220 C.E.) is also called the Eastern Han because Luoyang was some 300 miles (500 km) east of Chang'an.

The Han empire exercised varying amounts of control over the 60 million people under its rule. Immediately after taking over, the Han founder ceded about half of Qin territory to independent kings. He divided the remaining territory into one hundred commanderies and subdivided them into fifteen hundred prefectures, where a magistrate registered the population, collected revenues, judged legal disputes, and maintained irrigation works.

To get a government position during the Han dynasty, the first step was to get a referral. Men already serving in the government suggested younger men of good reputation, usually from wealthy families with large landholdings, to staff lower positions in prefectural offices. There they could learn how government functioned. The Han was the first Chinese dynasty to require that officials study classical writings on ritual, history, and poetry, as well as *The Analects*. Although these texts did not teach the nuts-and-bolts workings of local government, which remained Legalist in all but name, officials embraced the Confucian view that knowledge of these classic texts would produce more virtuous, and thus better, officials.

In 124 B.C.E., one of the most powerful Han emperors, Emperor Wu (also known as Han Wudi) (r. 140–87 B.C.E.), established the [Imperial Academy \(Established in 124 B.C.E. by the Han emperor, Emperor Wu \(r. 140–87 B.C.E.\), to encourage the study of Confucian texts.\)](#) to encourage the study of Confucian texts. At first the Academy consisted of five scholars, called Academicians, who specialized in the study of a given text, and the fifty students who studied with them. Within one hundred years the number of students at the Academy ballooned to several thousand. Ambitious young men already in the government realized that knowledge of Confucian texts, demonstrated by success in examinations conducted by the Imperial Academy, could advance their careers.

The study of Confucian texts was aided by the invention of paper. The earliest examples of Chinese paper found by archaeologists date to the second century B.C.E. Ragpickers who washed and recycled old fabric left fibers on a screen to dry and accidentally discovered how to make paper. Initially, the Chinese used paper for wrapping fragile items, not as a

writing material. But by 200 C.E. paper production had increased so much that people used paper, not bamboo slips, for letter writing and books.

With the adoption of paper as the primary writing material, the culture of learning in China shifted from an oral to a written one. In the early years, Han dynasty teachers taught students to memorize texts and recite them orally, but by the end of the dynasty they were reading books. When one poet in the first century B.C.E. submitted a written poem to the court as a gift, the emperor could not imagine that someone would commit a poem to writing without first reciting it in person. By the end of the dynasty, though, writing literary works on paper without reciting them had become commonplace. Paper was one of China's most important inventions; it spread from China to the Islamic world in the eighth century C.E. and finally to Europe only in the eleventh century.

Chapter 4: Blueprint for Empire: China, 1200 B.C.E.–220 C.E.: 4-3b Ban Zhao's Lessons for Women
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4-3b Ban Zhao's Lessons for Women

During the first century C.E., the Later Han capital of Luoyang became an important literary center where young men came to study. One of the most famous literary families was that of the poet and historian Ban Biao (BAHN-beeow) (d. 54 C.E.), who had three children: twin boys and a daughter. One of the boys followed in his father's footsteps, while his twin became a successful general. Their sister, **Ban Zhao (45–120 C.E.) A historian and the author of *Lessons for Women*, a book that counseled women to serve men and advocated education for girls starting at the age of seven.** (BAHN jow) (ca. 45–120 C.E.), was the most famous woman writer of her day. She is best known for her work *Lessons for Women*, which Chinese girls continued to read for centuries after her death.

Ban Zhao wrote *Lessons for Women* when in her mid-fifties. It contained everything she would like to have known when she married at age fourteen. Ban Zhao's main theme is clear: women exist to serve their husbands and their in-laws, whom they should always obey and with whom they should never quarrel. Yet Ban Zhao's ideal woman was also literate. She began her book by advising her readers to copy down her instructions, sure evidence that they could read and write. She criticized men who taught only their sons to read:

*Yet only to teach men and not to teach women—is that not ignoring the essential relation between them? ... It is the rule to begin to teach children to read at the age of eight years.... Only why should it not be that girls' education as well as boys' be according to this principle? **

This is an eloquent call to teach girls to read at the same age as boys (age seven; eight in Chinese reckoning includes the time in the womb).

We must remember that Ban Zhao differed from her contemporaries in several ways. For

one, she had studied with her father the historian and was sufficiently skilled that she completed his manuscript after he died. When married, she bore children, but she was widowed at a young age and became a tutor to the women at the imperial court. When a woman took power as regent, Ban Zhao advised her on matters of state.

Ban Zhao and the female regent did not have typical careers. Still, their unusual lives show that it was possible for women to take on male roles under certain circumstances. The literacy rate during the first century could not have exceeded 10 percent among men, but *Lessons for Women* was read, and Ban Zhao's ideal of literate women stayed alive in subsequent centuries. Well-off families made every effort to educate their daughters, if only to allow them to study a few years with their brothers' tutors; of course, few laboring people could afford to do so.

Chapter 4: Blueprint for Empire: China, 1200 B.C.E.–220 C.E.: 4-4 Extending Han Rule to Mongolia, Vietnam, and Korea
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4-4 Extending Han Rule to Mongolia, Vietnam, and Korea

As the Qin and Han dynasties left their successors with a blueprint of how to govern the empire, the territories they conquered established boundaries that would define Chinese territory for centuries to come. After conquering six independent kingdoms to form their empire, the Qin controlled most of the land watered by the Yellow and Yangzi Rivers. Compare Qin dynasty China with Han dynasty China (see [Map 4.1](#)). The most visible difference is that the Han rulers controlled a narrow stretch of territory in the northwest, now Gansu (GAHN-sue) province and the Xinjiang (SHIN-jyahng) Autonomous Region. Han armies also extended the empire's borders northeast to control much of the Korean peninsula and south to modern-day Vietnam.

Map 4.1

The Han Empire at Its Greatest Extent, ca. 50 B.C.E.

The Han dynasty inherited all the territory of its predecessor, the Qin dynasty, and its powerful armies conquered new territory to the north in the Korean peninsula, to the west in the Taklamakan Desert, and to the south in modern-day Vietnam.



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Chapter 4: Blueprint for Empire: China, 1200 B.C.E.–220 C.E.: 4-4a Conflict and Contact: The Han Dynasty and the Xiongnu Nomads, 201–60 B.C.E.

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4-4a Conflict and Contact: The Han Dynasty and the Xiongnu Nomads, 201–60 B.C.E.

The Han dynasty gained much of this territory during its wars between 201 and 60 B.C.E. with the **Xiongnu** (Nomadic people north of China whose military strength derived from brilliant horsemanship. Defeated the Han dynasty in battle until 60 B.C.E., when their federation broke apart.) (SHEE-AWNG-new), a northern nomadic people who moved across modern-day Mongolia in search of grass to feed their sheep and horses. Only the Xiongnu had an army sufficiently powerful to threaten the Han, and they tried to conquer Chinese territory for the first century and a half of Han rule. Their military strength derived from their quick-footed horses and brilliant horsemanship, which enabled them to defeat the Chinese in battle after battle.

Having formed a confederation of the different tribal peoples living in Mongolia in Qin

times, the Xiongnu fought their first battle with the Han soon after the founding of the dynasty. The Xiongnu won and after a temporary peace continued to launch military campaigns into China.

In 139 B.C.E. Emperor Wu dispatched an envoy named Zhang Qian (JAHNG chee-en) to Central Asia to persuade the Yuezhi (YOU-EH-juh) people to enter into an alliance against the Xiongnu. Zhang Qian reached the Yuezhi only after being held hostage by the Xiongnu for ten years. Although he failed to secure an alliance against the Xiongnu, he visited local markets and, to his surprise, saw Chinese goods for sale, certain evidence that merchants carrying Chinese goods had preceded him. Today most Chinese regard Zhang Qian as the person who discovered the Silk Road (see [Chapter 8](#)).

The Xiongnu supplied the Chinese with animals, hides, and semiprecious gems, particularly jade; in return the Chinese traded silk. The Chinese never succeeded, at least within the Chinese heartland, in breeding horses as strong as those the Xiongnu bred in the Mongolian steppe, probably because they did not have comparable grasslands. The Xiongnu threat came to a sudden end in 60 B.C.E. because the huge Xiongnu confederation broke apart into five warring groups. Other nomadic peoples living in the grasslands to the north, like the Mongols, would intermittently threaten later dynasties.

Chapter 4: Blueprint for Empire: China, 1200 B.C.E.–220 C.E.: 4-4b Han Expansion to the North, Northwest, and South
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4-4b Han Expansion to the North, Northwest, and South

The Han dynasty ruled China for over four hundred years. In certain periods, it was too weak to conquer new territories, but in other periods, particularly during the long reign of Emperor Wu, the army was so strong that the emperor conquered new lands. Once the Han army had conquered a certain region, it established garrisons in the major towns. Chinese officials and merchants in these towns led Chinese-style lives, eating Chinese food and speaking Chinese, while the indigenous peoples largely continued to live as they had before. The officials living in the garrison towns exercised only tenuous control over the indigenous peoples, and if a local army retook a city, Chinese control could end suddenly. Han armies managed to take parts of the Taklamakan Desert, Korea, and Vietnam, but they ruled these borderlands only briefly. After 127 C.E., only a Han garrison at the city of Dunhuang (DUHN-hwahng), the outermost point of Chinese control, remained as the staging point for going farther west.

A Korean National Treasure

This basket was found in the Chinese garrison town of Lelang, near Pyongyang in modern North Korea. Measuring 16 inches (39 cm) long and 9 inches (22 cm) high, the central band uses lacquer paint to depict ninety-four different paragons of filial piety and labels each in Chinese characters (a detail is shown here). These figures performed various good deeds for the benefit of their parents. The basket documents the spread of Confucianism to the Korean peninsula in the first and

second Centuries C.E.



(Central Historical Museum, Pyongyang, North Korea/Werner Forman/Art Resource, NY)

(Central Historical Museum, Pyongyang, North Korea/Werner Forman/Art Resource, NY)

The region south of China, extending from modern-day Fujian (FOO-jee-en) province to Vietnam, differed from the northwest because one could reach it overland or, more easily, by sea. Much like camel caravans visited oases in their voyage west across the Taklamakan Desert, small boats, many propelled by oars, visited ports on the South China Sea, which offered a chance to rest, trade, and buy provisions for the next leg of the journey. Like all the rivers in Vietnam, the most important river, the Red River, drained from the mountains in the west to the South China Sea. High mountain chains separated the different river valleys, making overland transport much more difficult than sea travel.

The modern Chinese provinces of Guangdong (GWAHNG-dohng), Guangxi (GWAHNG-shee), and Yunnan (YUHN-nahn) were home to a regional people that the Chinese called Yue (YOU-EH), the ancestors of the Vietnamese. The Yue people had early (about 8000 B.C.E.) developed the cultivation of rice and were also avid sailors.

When the Qin armies conquered Vietnam before 207 B.C.E., they established centers of Chinese control in garrison towns. After 207 B.C.E., an independent kingdom also ruled by a Chinese leader, called the Southern Kingdom of Yue (Nam Viet), took over from the Qin. The kingdom was home to fishermen and traders who specialized in unusual goods like ivory tusks, pearls, tortoise shells, and slaves. After several attempts, the Han armies defeated this ruler and established garrison towns in 110 B.C.E.

While Vietnam marked the southern extent of Han territory, Korea marked the northern extent. Korea did not receive as much rainfall as Vietnam, and its climate was much cooler. Large, dense forests covered the region, and most early settlements were along rivers or on the coast, where residents could easily fish. Before 300 B.C.E., the region was home to several tribal confederations; then, during the third century B.C.E., the Old Choson (JOE-sohn) kingdom united much of the Korean peninsula north of the Han River, in what is today's North Korea. Qin armies defeated the Old Choson kingdom, and Han armies again conquered the region in 108 B.C.E., soon after gaining control of China.

Officials and merchants lived in a garrison city located in modern-day Pyongyang (BYOHNG-yahng), but the people outside the garrison were much less affected by the Chinese presence. Large, wealthy graves suggest that the people living on the Korean peninsula believed that the dead would travel to another realm. In one region they were buried with large bird wings so that they could fly to the next world.

In later periods (see [Chapter 8](#)), these three regions—northwest China, Vietnam, and Korea—would all join the Chinese cultural sphere and adopt the Chinese writing system. But during the Qin and Han dynasties Chinese influence was limited because the Chinese presence consisted only of military garrisons.

Chapter 4: Blueprint for Empire: China, 1200 B.C.E.–220 C.E.: 4-5 Chapter Review
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4-5 Chapter Review

4-5a Context and Connections The Significance of Ancient China in World History

The clearest indication of the First Emperor's Legacy is the words we use even now for “China” and “Chinese.” *China* entered English via the Sanskrit word *Chee-na*, the Indian pronunciation of Qin. Following the Lead of the First Emperor, the Qin and Han dynasties created a blueprint for imperial rule that Lasted for two thousand years. In the centuries after the fall of the Han, China was not always unified. But subsequent Chinese rulers always aspired to reunify the empire and conceived of China's physical borders as Largely those of the Han dynasty at its greatest extent.

The Qin dynasty begun by the First Emperor introduced a centralized administration headed by the emperor, recorded the population in household registers, systematized weights and measures, and promoted officials strictly on the basis of merit. The Qin also had a ceremonial state, as the emperor's sacrifices showed, but these measures affected everyone Living in Qin territory and had far greater impact than any actions of the Mauryan dynasty in India (see [Chapter 3](#)).

The Han dynasty made one important change: officials had to pass examinations testing their knowledge of Confucianism before they could attain higher office. The Han extended its military control far to the west, establishing more sustained contacts with the peoples Living along the Silk Road. Use of this route continued in Later periods, peaking in the sixth through eighth centuries (see [Chapter 8](#)).

The Qin/Han blueprint for rule kept China unified for most of its Long history. Even before the Qin unified China, the Chinese shared a cuisine, belief in the tenets of Confucianism, and a common writing system, which has remained in use, with some modifications, for over three thousand years. These all made China easier to unify than neighboring India. Just as a Chinese chef combines different precut ingredients to make distinctive dishes, other ancient innovations often made use of component parts to make final products that all varied slightly.

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China's path to complex society followed the same pattern as in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and India, all societies on the Eurasian landmass (see [Chapters 2 and 3](#)). In about 8000 B.C.E. the Chinese began to cultivate millet and wheat in the north, and in 7000 B.C.E. they first grew rice in the south. Chinese farmers domesticated cattle, oxen, and horses to work the land, and they made agricultural implements—plows, shovels, machetes—first of stone and then, around 2000 B.C.E., of bronze. Agriculture arose first in river valleys, and farmers used plows to prepare the land for seed, wheeled carts to carry things, and domesticated animals to work the land. Similarly, metallurgists learned how to work bronze before they mastered the higher temperatures necessary to smelt iron. In both China and India, iron replaced bronze around 500 B.C.E., the time when the first coins circulated. The next chapter will examine the experience of people living in the Americas and the Pacific islands, whose history took an entirely different course.

Voyages on the Web: First Emperor of the Qin Dynasty

The Voyages Map App follows the traveler's journeys using interactive study tools, including 360-degree panoramic views of historic sites, zoomable maps, audio summaries, flash cards, and quizzes.



4-5b Key Terms

- **First Emperor of the Qin dynasty** (Founder of the Qin dynasty (221–207 B.C.E.) and the first ruler to unify ancient China. Eliminated regional differences by creating a single body of law and standardizing weights and measures.)
- **Shang dynasty** (China's first historic dynasty. The earliest surviving records date to 1200 B.C.E., during the Shang. The Shang king ruled a small area in the vicinity of modern Anyang, in Henan province, and granted lands to allies in noble families.)
- **oracle bones** (The earliest surviving written records in China, scratched onto cattle shoulder blades and turtle shell bottoms, or plastrons, to record the diviners' interpretations of the future.)
- **ancestor worship** (The belief in China that dead ancestors could intercede in human affairs on behalf of the living. Marked by frequent rituals in which the living offered food and drink to the ancestors in the hope of receiving help.)
- **Sima Qian** (The author of *Records of the Grand Historian*, a history of China from ancient legendary times to the first century B.C.E.)
- **Zhou dynasty** (The successor dynasty to the Shang that gained the Mandate of Heaven and the right to rule, according to later Chinese historians. Although depicted by later generations as an ideal age, the Zhou witnessed considerable conflict.)
- **Mandate of Heaven** (The Chinese belief that Heaven, the generalized forces of the cosmos (not the abode of the dead), chose the rightful ruler. China's rulers believed that Heaven would send signs before withdrawing its mandate.)
- **Confucius** ((551–479 B.C.E.) A teacher who made his living by tutoring students. Known only through *The Analects*, the record of conversations with his students that they wrote down after his death.)
- **Confucianism** (The term for the main tenets of the thought of Confucius, which emphasized the role of ritual in bringing out people's inner humanity (a quality translated variously as “benevolence,” “goodness,” or “man at his best”).)
- **Daoism** (A Chinese belief system dating back to at least 300 B.C.E. that emphasized the “Way,” a concept expressed in Chinese as “dao.” The Way of the early Daoist teachers included meditation, breathing techniques, and special eating regimes.)
- **Legalism** (A school of thought, originating in the fourth century B.C.E. and associated with Qin dynasty rulers, that emphasized promotion for officials and soldiers alike on the basis of merit and job performance, not heredity.)
- **Qin dynasty** ((221–207 B.C.E.) The first dynasty to rule over a unified China; heavily influenced by Legalist teachings that promoted soldiers and officials strictly on the basis of accomplishment, not birth.)

- **Han dynasty** ((206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.) The immediate successor to the Qin dynasty. Han rulers denounced Legalist governance but adopted much of the Qin blueprint for empire. Because of its long rule, the Han dynasty was a model for all subsequent dynasties.)
- **Imperial Academy** (Established in 124 B.C.E. by the Han emperor, Emperor Wu (r. 140–87 B.C.E.), to encourage the study of Confucian texts.)
- **Ban Zhao** ((45–120 C.E.) A historian and the author of *Lessons for Women*, a book that counseled women to serve men and advocated education for girls starting at the age of seven.)
- **Xiongnu** (Nomadic people north of China whose military strength derived from brilliant horsemanship. Defeated the Han dynasty in battle until 60 B.C.E., when their federation broke apart.)

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