

Timeline of Chinese History



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Introduction

In reviewing the following timelines of Chinese history and dynasties, note the patterns evident in the Han and that recur over the course of Chinese history:

- ⌘ The cycle of long periods of political unity (the Han, Tang, Song, Ming, and Qing dynasties each govern for 250-300 years) are interspersed by periods of political disunity;
- ⌘ Note the pattern of territorial pressure and incursions from China's north by nomadic groups, who are attracted by the wealth of the settled, agricultural civilization of China. The most illustrative examples are those of the Mongols, who conquer China and establish the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368 C.E.), and of the Manchus, who again conquer China and establish the last dynasty, the Qing, that rules for 300 years (1644-1911 C.E.). Each of these invaders rules through the Chinese bureaucracy, leading to the expression that China "sinicizes its conquerors."
- ⌘ Note the patterns of cultural continuity: the evolution of the bureaucratic structure -- the civil service examination system, the scholar-gentry who sit for exams and staff the civil administration; the refinement of the Confucian classics as the basis of education and elite selection; the growth of commercial activity and the development of a unified and sophisticated marketing system over the vast, economically diverse area of China; the tendency toward political unification and reunification.
- ⌘ Note the pattern of dynastic formation, ascendance, and decline, which is often referred to as the "dynastic cycle." The last years of many dynasties were marked by inefficient administration and corruption, which, when compounded by natural calamities such as flood or droughts, led to social unrest among the population. Movements and rebellions incorporating popular religious ideas took place in the last years of the Han, Yuan, and Qing dynasties, while political rebellions brought down the Tang and Ming dynasties. (This is when the Chinese often say a dynasty has lost the "Mandate of Heaven.")

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		China's Dynasties	Capitals
1200	1122?	Shang	Zhengzhou/Chengchow
		Zhou/Chou	Anyang
600			

		Confucius	
		Warring States	
	221	Qin/Ch'in	Chang'an/Ch'angan (today's Xi'an/Sian)
	206	unification	
B.C./			
A.D.		Han	Xi'an
		Confucianism est'd.	
			Luoyang
	222	Six Dynasties	
		central govt. decline	
		Buddhism intro'd.	
600	589	Sui	Chang'an (Xi'an)
		second unification	
		Tang/T'ang	Chang'an
	907		
		Song/Sung	
	1127	Northern Song	Kaifeng
		Southern Song	Hangzhou/Hangchow
1200			
	1279	Yuan (Mongols)	Beijing
	1368	Ming	Nanjing
	1644	Qing/Ch'ing (Manchus)	Beijing
1800			Beijing
	1912	Republic	Nanjing
	1949	People's Republic	Beijing
2000			

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B.C.E.

5000 Neolithic cultures

3000 **Xia/Hsia Dynasty** (ca. 2200-1750)

1800 **Shang Dynasty** (ca. 1750-1100)

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

1200 **Zhou/Chou Dynasty: Western Zhou** (ca. 1100-771) **Eastern Zhou** (771-256)

A hierarchical political and social system with the Zhou royal house at its apex: power was bestowed upon aristocratic families as lords of their domains or principalities. Although often compared to European "feudalism," what actually gave the system

cohesion was a hierarchical order of ancestral cults. The system eventually broke down into a competition for power between rival semi-autonomous states in what became known as the Spring and Autumn period (722-481) and the Warring States (403-221) period. It was during these tumultuous times that Confucius (551-479) lived.

300 **Qin/Ch'in Dynasty** (221-206)

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

C.E.

Han Dynasty: Western Han (202 B.C.E.- 9 C.E.) and **Eastern Han** (25 C.E.- 220 C.E.)

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

Period of Disunity (220-581)

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

600 **Sui Dynasty** (581-618)

China reunified.

700 **Tang/T'ang Dynasty** (618-906)

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

1000 **Song/Sung Dynasty: Northern Song** (960-1126) and **Southern Song** (1127-1279)

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

1200 **Yuan Dynasty** (1271-1368)

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

1400 **Ming Dynasty** (1368-1644)

The first Ming emperor, Hongwu, laid the basis of an authoritarian political culture. Despite early expansion, it was an inward-looking state with an emphasis on its

agrarian base. Gradual burgeoning of the commercial sector; important changes in the economy and social relations in the latter part of the dynasty; also a vibrant literary scene as represented by publication of the novel *Journey to the West*.

1700 **Qing/Ch'ing Dynasty** (1644-1912)

A Manchu dynasty. Continued the economic developments of the late Ming, leading to prosperity but also complacency and a dramatic increase in population. The acclaimed novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* was written in this period. Strains on the polity were intensified by a rapid incorporation of substantial new territories. Its authoritarian structure was subsequently unable to meet the military and cultural challenge of an expansive West.

Twentieth Century

Republic (1912-1949)

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

People's Republic (1949-)

Communist government. The drive for remaking society ended in disasters such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Economic reform and political retrenchment since around 1978.

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