

## Politics in China - Dynasties

### What characteristics defined the civilization that developed in China under its early rulers?

When compared to modern civilizations and nation-states, China has the clearest **traditional** link with its past. Already set in motion during the classical period, China's government followed a **dynastic** pattern. A king and his family would rule through an initially vigorous period of flourishing in which **strong political and cultural institutions** and **economic growth** would bring prosperity to China's subjects, followed by a period of decline in which tax revenues decreased while social divisions increased. Eventually **internal rebellions or foreign invasions** would help to usher in a new dynasty and this **cyclical** pattern would start anew.

DATES	DYNASTY (or Period)	NOTABLE NAMES	KEY EVENTS AND CHARACTERISTICS
2100 BCE – 1600 BCE	<b>XIA (HSIA)</b>	Yu, who passed it on to his son Qi	Brought peace and order to China
1600 BCE – 1050 BCE	<b>SHANG</b>	Tang	Writing systems based on pictographs, divination, walled cities, bronze technology, horse drawn warriors, built empire
1046 BCE – 256 BCE	<b>ZHOU</b>	Wu Confucius	Hierarchical political and social systems based on ancestry, aristocratic ruling families, similar to European city-states and feudalism, centralized power, Mandate of Heaven
475 BCE – 221 BCE	<b>ERA OF WARRING STATES</b>		Empire divided by regions as competing rulers fought for control all claiming the "Mandate from Heaven"
221 BCE – 206 BCE	<b>QIN (CH'IN)</b>	Qin Shi Huangdi	Unitary and centralized administration, standardized writing, weights and measures, harsh rule, suppression of dissenting opinions, Great Wall
206 BCE – 220 CE	<b>HAN</b>	Han Wudi (Wuti)	Established Confucianism, imperial order, civil service exams, national university, expanded into Korea, Vietnam
220 CE – 589 CE	<b>SIX DYNASTIES</b>	3 Kingdoms Jin Dynasty Northern and Southern Dynasties	Empire fragmented, Buddhism introduced
581 CE – 618 CE	<b>SUI</b>	Wendi	Reunified the empire

## Document A: Textbook

Qin Shi Huang imposed a new order on China. He ended the power of the local lords by taking land from many of them and imposing a tax on landowners. He appointed educated men instead of nobles as officials to run his government.

Qin even imposed censorship, clamping down on scholars who discussed books and ideas. In 213 B.C. he ordered all books burned except those about “practical” subjects like agriculture, medicine, and magic. In this way he hoped to break people’s ties to the past so they would not criticize the present. About 460 scholars resisted and were executed.

Qin’s subjects saw him as a cruel **tyrant** who had lost the **Mandate of Heaven**. Nobles were angry because he had destroyed the **aristocracy**; scholars detested him for the burning of books; and peasants hated his forced-labor gangs. In 210 B.C. Qin died, and soon the dynasty itself came to an end. Even so, the rule of the Qin established foundations for the Chinese state that would last 2,000 years.

In 207 B.C. Liu Bang overthrew the Qin. A military official from a peasant background, Liu defeated his most powerful rival in 202 B.C. and declared himself the emperor of a new dynasty, the Han. The Han governed China until A.D. 220, more than 400 years. The Han emperors used Qin forms of centralized power, but without the harshness of Qin rule.

**Source:** Farah & Karls, *World History: The Human Experience*, (New York: Glencoe McGraw-Hill, 2001).

### Vocabulary

tyrant: a cruel and unfair ruler

Mandate of Heaven: ancient Chinese belief that monarchs received their power to rule from heaven

aristocracy: a form of government in which power is held by a small group of privileged individuals

## Document B: Confucian Essay

*Jia Yi was a Confucian poet and statesman of the Han dynasty who lived from approximately 200 to 168 BCE. Below are excerpts from his essay “The Faults of Qin.”*

---

Chen She was a man who grew up in humble circumstances . . . and was a mere hired field hand and roving **conscript** of mediocre talent. . . . Yet, even stumbling as he did amidst the ranks of common soldiers and shuffling through the fields, he called forth a tired motley crowd and led a mob of several hundred to turn upon the Qin. . . . They had the whole world come to them like gathering clouds. . . . These men of courage from the East rose together, and in the end they defeated and extinguished the House of Qin. . . .

Chen She’s weapons made of farm implements and thorny tree branches were no match in battle against spears and **halberds**, his roving conscripts in no way compared to the armies of the nine states. . . . Qin, from a tiny base, had become a great power, ruling the land and receiving **homage** from all quarters for a hundred-odd years. Yet a single common person could nevertheless challenge this empire and cause its ancestral temples to topple and its ruler to die at the hand of others, a laughing-stock in the eyes of all. Why? Because the ruler lacked humaneness and rightness; because preserving power differs fundamentally from seizing power. . . .

Had the Second Emperor been even a mediocre ruler who knew how to employ local and capable persons . . . ; had he divided the land and appointed deserving officials . . . ; had he emptied the prisons and reduced harsh punishments . . . ; had he only reduced taxation and statutes to alleviate oppression . . . ; had he indeed fulfilled the wishes of the multitudes and bestowed high virtue on them, he would have certainly brought peace and quiet to the world.

**Source:** *Jia Yi, “The Faults of Qin.”*

### **Vocabulary**

conscript: someone who is required to join the military

halberd: a weapon that is a combined spear and battle ax

homage: respect or honor

## Document C: Newspaper Article

*The following newspaper article was written in China during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976 CE), a time of very severe government censorship. People who criticized the government were often punished by the state. The article's author analyzes Confucian criticism of Qin and the fall of the empire.*

---

On the question of the causes of the downfall of the Qin dynasty, the first **fallacy fabricated** by the reactionary Confucian scholars was the “theory that the Legalist line destroyed Qin.” . . .

Actually the opposite was true. Originally, Qin was a small feudal state in the western part of China. Until the early years of the Warring States period, it was still rather backward, and was looked upon by the various eastern states as a “barbarian” country. Later, Qin . . . implemented the Legalist line and, as a consequence, rapidly became strong and prosperous. Qin Shi Huang was an outstanding statesman of the Legalist school. Within a short period of time he unified the six states and established the first centralized feudal state. . . .

However, Qin Shi Huang had one great flaw: he did not strike at the opposition hard enough, or suppress them thoroughly. After the establishment of the Qin dynasty, he forcibly moved 120,000 influential and wealthy families from all parts of the country to Xiangyang, thus forcing them to move far away from their old homes . . . But the Qin government did not adopt effective measures for exercising dictatorship over these reactionary slave owners.

**Source:** T'an Hsiao-Wen, “A Refutation of Some Confucian Fallacies Concerning the Causes of the Downfall of the Ch'in Dyansty,” *Kuang-ming jih-pao (Enlightenment Daily)*, September 1, 1974, Beijing.

### **Vocabulary**

fallacy: a false idea

fabricated: made up