

# Classical Civilization: China

## Patterns in Classical China

- Three dynastic cycles cover the many centuries of classical China: the **Zhou**, the **Qin**, and the **Han**.
- Political instability and frequent invasions caused the decline of the Zhou Dynasty and promoted debate over China's political and social ills.
- In the last centuries of the later Zhou era, some of China's greatest thinkers, including **Confucius**, tried different ways to restore order and social harmony. Central to culture were the family, **filial piety**, harmony, reciprocal social relationships, and deference to social superiors.
- **Shi Huangdi**, the brutal founder of the Qin Dynasty, centralized power in China, and began construction of the **Great Wall**.
- **Wu Ti**, most famous of the Han rulers, supported Confucianism and promoted peace.

## Political Institutions

- For most of recorded history, the Chinese people have been the most tightly governed people in any large society in the world.
- Political institutions became one of classical China's hallmarks. Among the most permanent aspects of Chinese culture was the belief in the unity and the desirability of a **central government** in the hands of an **emperor** assisted by an **educated, professional bureaucracy**.

## Religion and Culture

- Chinese culture began coalescing during the last, calamitous centuries of Zhou rule. During this time, three critical secular philosophies arose, each of which emphasized the role of **education** to achieve social ends.
- **Confucianism**, an ethical system based on relationships and personal virtue, became the predominant philosophy.
- **Legalism** countered Confucianism by favoring an authoritarian state and harsh rule.
- **Daoism** taught harmony with nature and humble living. **Laozi** was Daoism's most popular figure.
- Art in classical China was mostly decorative, and appeared in many forms, including **calligraphy**, carved jade and ivory, and silk screens.
- Science and mathematics emphasized the practical over the theoretical, and the ancient Chinese were particularly adept at **astronomy**.

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## Economy and Society

- China's classical economy focused on **agriculture**. All Chinese philosophies extolled the virtues of the peasants and their world.
- **Sharp class division existed** between 1) the landowning aristocracy and educated bureaucrats—Mandarins, 2) the laboring masses, peasants, and urban artisans, and 3) the “mean” people, or those without meaningful skills.
- The state also fostered an extensive **internal trade**, even while maintaining some ambivalence about merchants and commercial values.
- Technological advances were plentiful, including ox-drawn plows, water-powered mills, and **paper**.
- Socially China was **hierarchical, deferential, and patriarchal**, and tight family structure was valued.

## How Chinese Civilization Fits Together

- China's **politics and culture meshed readily**, especially around the emergence of a Confucian bureaucracy.
- Economic innovation did not disrupt the emphasis on order and stability, and family structures were closely linked to political and cultural goals.
- Classical Chinese civilization evolved with very **little outside contact**. Though internal disagreement existed, most Chinese saw the world as a large island of civilization (China) surrounded by barbarians with nothing to offer save periodic invasions.

## Multiple-Choice Questions

- By encouraging settlers to move into the Yangtze River valley, the Zhou rulers
  - provoked centuries of conflict with outside invaders.
  - produced population growth but also complicated problems of central rule.
  - promoted the early cultivation of wood pulp for paper products.
  - promulgated diseases like yellow fever, then kept population growth in check.
  - programmed future generations of Chinese to obey the dictates of the highly centralized state.
- Confucianism and Daoism
  - were officially sanctioned doctrines of the Qin and Han emperors.
  - are religions, which developed in classical China.
  - emphasized the needs of the individual over the welfare of the state.
  - had little influence upon China and Chinese society until the late 900s C.E.
  - originated as responses to societal problems during times of disruption.
- Confucian social relationships
  - established a hierarchy and insisted upon reciprocal duties between people.
  - taught its practitioners to seek inner harmony with the natural way.
  - used rewards for correct behavior and punishments for transgressions.
  - were based on universal love and forgiveness.
  - stressed the welfare and the interests of the state.
- The doctrine sponsored by the Qin Dynasty to support its state
  - encouraged education, new ideas, and tolerated criticism of the state.

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- (B) broke the power of vassals in order to enhance the power of the emperor.
- (C) paid the northern nomadic groups tribute to prevent invasions.
- (D) tolerated local lords performing functions for the central government.
- (E) used reciprocal social arrangements and scholar-officials as bureaucrats.
5. Which of the following groups would have most likely supported the Qin Dynasty?
- (A) Confucian scholars
- (B) peasant laborers
- (C) trained bureaucrats from non-aristocratic groups
- (D) traditional aristocrats who lost their lands and positions
- (E) Daoist priests
6. During the Han Dynasty, scholar officials
- (A) lost their governmental offices to aristocrats.
- (B) came increasingly from the merchant and peasant classes.
- (C) utilized Legalism as a ruling doctrine.
- (D) insisted on harsh law codes to maintain control.
- (E) instituted a system of examination to prepare professional civil servants.
7. Although they varied greatly in wealth and social status in China,
- (A) the commoners, especially the peasants, remained the largest group.
- (B) the scholar bureaucrats cooperated to limit the influence of the ruler.
- (C) aristocrats owned all of the land.
- (D) women had many legal rights and protections.
- (E) urban artisans and merchants dominated Chinese society.
8. Chinese women in the Classical Age
- (A) were free to choose the men they would marry.
- (B) could become scholar-gentry provided they passed the state exams.
- (C) were legally subordinated to fathers and husbands at all class levels.
- (D) dominated the intellectual and artistic activities of China.
- (E) varied greatly in status, influence, and rights.
9. Despite their material success and increased wealth,
- (A) foreigners were prohibited from settling in China.
- (B) Chinese rulers were isolated from the masses and did not intervene in government.
- (C) Chinese aristocrats had no influence within the government.
- (D) merchants in China ranked below peasants and had little societal influence.
- (E) the scholar-gentry were prohibited from owning land.
10. Chinese belief systems differ from single deity religions and polytheism most in
- (A) their secular emphasis and lack of identifiable gods to worship.
- (B) emphasizing correct behavior and performance of rituals and rites.
- (C) concentrating on the need for the gods' saving grace.
- (D) supporting a relative legal and social equality for women.
- (E) deifying nature.

**Free-Response Question**

*In what ways did the three philosophical movements of classical China shape its civilization?*

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## ANSWERS AND EXPLANATIONS

### *Multiple-Choice Questions*

- **1. (B) is correct.** The Yangtze River Valley provided two types of rich agricultural land (wheat in the north, and rice in the south) that encouraged population growth.
- **2. (E) is correct.** Both of these philosophies arose as responses to the uncertainty of the late Zhou period. Legalism was a later development.
- **3. (A) is correct.** At the heart of Confucianism is a system of mutually beneficial relationships based on societal status: “do unto others as your status and theirs dictates.”
- **4. (B) is correct.** Centralization of power was a key tenet of Shi Huangdi and the Qin rulers.
- **5. (C) is correct.** The Qin Dynasty sought to break traditional aristocratic power, attacked formal culture, and taxed and overworked many peasants. Educated bureaucrats without aristocratic ties owed their power to the emperor and were less likely to rebel.
- **6. (E) is correct.** The civil service examination first developed under the Han is one of the quintessential features of Chinese culture.
- **7. (A) is correct.** Commoners and peasants, some of whom owned their own land, made up the vast majority of the population. The landowning gentry accounted for only 2% of the populace; the “mean” class was another minority group.
- **8. (C) is correct.** The Chinese culture was patriarchal, relying on primogeniture and other traditions that benefited men.
- **9. (D) is correct.** The merchant class’s low prestige was in large part a product of the Confucian distaste for lives of moneymaking.
- **10. (A) is correct.** Though Confucius and Laozi (for example) both espoused belief in a supernatural world, they preferred to emphasize proper conduct in secular society.

### *Free-Response Essay Sample Response*

*In what ways did the three philosophical movements of classical China shape its civilization?*

Confucianism, Legalism, and Daoism each had an important effect on classical Chinese civilization.

Confucianism helped to curb political disorder by stressing respect for one’s superiors, a modest life for those in power, and proper manners for all. It also organized familial relationships, promoted a cohesive bureaucracy, and influenced literary traditions. Though it never had widespread appeal, Legalism’s emphasis on authoritarian tactics influenced political decision making in China. Daoism brought a different ethical focus and a more elaborate spirituality, which caused a durable division in Chinese philosophy.