

PART II

THE CLASSICAL PERIOD, 1000 B.C.E.-500 C.E.: UNITING LARGE REGIONS

Summary. The major development during the classical period was the formation of large regional civilizations in China, India, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East. These areas had by far the largest concentration of population. Furthermore, the influence these civilizations extended into surrounding regions outside their direct control. Much of the development of each civilization was separate and the establishment of distinctive cultural and institutional patterns was a key legacy of this period. One of the triggers for the clear transition into the classical period was the introduction of iron tools and weapons. With this development each classical civilization developed its own social structure, religion, political system, system of science, and style of art. While the introduction of iron in the classical period, the period itself did not witness sweeping technological developments. Patriarchal culture prevailed with a new emphasis on the respect for the achievement of old age.

CHAPTER 2

Classical Civilization: China

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Patterns in Classical China. Three dynastic cycles—the Zhou, the Qin, and the Han—covered many centuries of classical China. The dynastic patterns begun in classical Chinese history lasted until the early part of the 20th century. A family of kings, called a “dynasty,” began ruling China with great vigor, developing solid political institutions and encouraging active economies. Each dynasty over time grew weaker, tax revenues declined, and social divisions occurred as the population outstripped available resources. In addition, internal rebellions and sometimes invasions from the outside contributed to each dynasty’s decline. As the ruling dynasty began to falter, usually another one arose from the family of a successful general, invader, or peasant, and the pattern started anew.

The Zhou dynasty (1029-258 B.C.E.) expanded the territorial boundaries of China by seizing the Yangzi River valley. The territory from the Yangzi to the Huanghe is often called the “Middle Kingdom,” blessed with rich cropland. They promoted Mandarin as the standard language. The Zhou did not establish a strong central government but ruled instead through alliances with regional princes and noble families. This led to vulnerabilities that plagued the Zhou: The regional princes solidified their power and disregarded the central government. When the Zhou began to fail, philosophers sought to explain the political confusion. One of these, Confucius, became one of the most important thinkers in Chinese history. His orderly social and political philosophy became an important doctrine of the Qin and Han dynasties.

The next dynasty, the Qin (221-202 B.C.E.), was begun by the brutal but effective emperor Shi Huangdi. He consolidated his power, built the Great Wall, conducted a census, standardized weights and measures, and extended the borders of his realm to Hong Kong and northern Vietnam. Upon his death, massive revolts broke out and by 202 B.C.E., the Han dynasty (202 B.C.E.-220 C.E.) was established. The Han rulers lessened the brutality of the Qin but maintained its centralized rule. Early Han leaders, like Wu Ti, expanded Chinese territory and set up formal training, based on Confucian philosophy, for bureaucrats. During a long decline, the Han faced invasions and eventually fell to outside forces, especially the Huns. By the 6th century C.E., the Han too collapsed, but not before they had established distinctive political and cultural values that lasted into the 20th century.

Political Institutions. Throughout the Qin and Han periods, the Chinese state bureaucracy expanded its powers significantly. By the end of the Han dynasty, China had roughly 130,000 bureaucrats all trained by the government to carry out the emperor’s policies. Tax collections and annual mandatory labor services ensured the central government held some power over almost every person in the Middle Kingdom, something no other large government accomplished until the twentieth century.

Religion and Culture. Like many civilizations, China did not produce a unitary belief system. Confucianism and Daoism were two of the major systems that competed for the loyalties of various Chinese communities during the years of the classical period. Kung Fuzi (Confucius) lived from roughly 551 to 478 B.C.E. He was not a religious leader but rather saw himself as a

defender of Chinese tradition and espoused a secular system of ethics. Personal virtue, he believed, would lead to solid political institutions. Both rulers and the ruled should act with respect, humility, and self-control. Classical China also produced a more religious philosophy called Daoism, which embraced harmony in nature. According to this movement, politics, learning, and the general conditions in this world were of little importance. Over time, individuals embraced aspects of both philosophies, and also Buddhism. Chinese art then was largely decorative, stressing detail and craftsmanship. Artistic styles often reflected the geometric qualities of the symbols of Chinese writing. The practical application of science superseded learning for learning's sake. Chinese astronomers developed accurate calendars. Scholars studied the mathematics of music. This practical focus contrasted with the more abstract approach to science applied by the Greeks.

Economy and Society. As in many societies, there were large gaps between China's upper class (about 2 percent of the population) and the peasant farmers. Officially there were three main social groups in classical China. The land-owning aristocracy and the bureaucrats formed the top group. Far below them were the laboring peasants and urban artisans. At the bottom of society were the "mean people," those who performed unskilled labor. Trade became increasingly important, particularly in the Han period. Technology is where the classical Chinese clearly excelled. Many developments of this era were centuries ahead of the rest of the world. Tight-knit family structures were similar to those in other civilizations, except that parents wielded much higher levels of authority over their children. Women were subordinate to men but had clearly defined roles in the family and in larger society.

In Depth: Women in Patriarchal Societies. Agricultural societies were usually patriarchal, and as they developed the status of women generally deteriorated. Marriages were arranged for women by their parents, and husbands had authority over their wives and children. Later, law codes ensured basic protections but also featured limits to and inferiority of women. There were, of course, exceptions. The Egyptians had powerful queens, and Jewish law traced lineage through mothers. Patriarchy responded to economic and legal conditions in agricultural civilizations and often deepened over time. In many societies, women held power through religious functions and had authority over daughters-in-law and unmarried daughters.

How Chinese Civilization Fits Together. China's politics and culture were, to them, two sides of the same coin, especially after the Confucian bureaucracy developed, emphasizing order and stability. Classical Chinese technology, religion, philosophy, and political structure evolved with little outside contact. Political stability aided economic growth, and the government took a direct role in agricultural and economic growth. Science focused on practical applications of technology that fostered economic development. Unsurprisingly, the Chinese saw their political and social lives as a whole. There was divergence, however, such as in the differing philosophies of Confucianism, Daoism, and eventually Buddhism. Despite these and other divisions, the synthesis of Chinese life accounts for the durability of Chinese values and for its general invulnerability to outside influence. Classical India was just as vital a civilization but didn't weave its institutions into society as fully, and produced a more disparate outcome.

Global Connections: Classical China and the World. Chinese civilization was the longest lasting in world history and one of the most creative and influential. They created the best-run

bureaucracy and a whole range of technologies, and they were the source of the world's largest trade network, the Silk Road. Silk Road networks provided the framework for later global trading patterns.

KEY TERMS

Zhou dynasty: (1122 - 256 B.C.E.) First of Chinese classical civilizations. Ruled through alliances with regional princes. Extended territory to Yangzi River and promoted standard Mandarin Chinese language.

Qin Shi Huangdi and the Qin dynasty: (221-202 B.C.E.) The Qin dynasty was characterized by the centralization of state rule that resulted in the elimination of local and regional political competitors. It expanded the boundaries of China to include Hong Kong. The Great Wall of China was built in this era.

Shi Huangdi: China's "First Emperor" who gave that country its name. Under his brutal rule, Hong Kong was annexed and the Great Wall of China was built.

Han dynasty: (202 B.C.E.-220 C.E.) Followed the Qin dynasty. Expanded China's possessions to include Korea, Indochina, and central Asia. Era generally characterized by stability, prosperity, and peace. Contemporary of and often compared to the Roman Empire.

Wu Ti: Best-known Han ruler. Supported Confucianism in the state bureaucracy.

Mandarin: Mandarin became the official state language of the Zhou dynasty and as such was the most-used state language in the world. Helped bring greater cultural unity to classical China.

Dynasty: A time period during which a family rules through a succession of members.

Mandate of Heaven: Confucian idea in which a good ruler was thought to have a divine right to rule.

Era of Warring States: (402 – 201 B.C.E.) Time period between the Zhou and Qin dynasties in which regional rulers formed independent armies and reduced emperors to little more than figureheads.

Great Wall: Stone wall extending across northern China, built during the Qin dynasty as a defense against northern nomads

Legalism: Philosophy that gained ground during the Zhou and was dominant during the Qin dynasty which was rooted in the belief that laws should replace morality and a ruler must provide discipline to maintain order.

Mandarins: Educated bureaucrats who were one of the three main social groups of ancient China.

"Mean People": General category of people identified as ancient China's lowest social group who performed unskilled labor.

Patriarchalism: Ideas that social organization should be ordered with the male as the head of the family and institutions.

Confucius, a.k.a. Kung Fuzi: (c. 551-478 B.C.E.) Chinese philosopher who wrote an elaborate political philosophy that became the core of China's cultural and political thinking for centuries. Those who adopted his teachings saw him not as a deity but as a master of ethics.

Daoism: A spiritual alternative to Confucianism that emphasized the harmony in nature and life. True understanding comes from withdrawing from the world and contemplating the life force.

Silk Road: The most famous of the trading routes established by pastoral nomads connecting the Chinese, Indian, Persian, and Mediterranean civilizations; transmitted goods and ideas among civilizations.