

# Dynasty After Dynasty

## Dynasty:

We often hear of the word "Dynasty" being mentioned when we hear something about China. What does it mean? Dynasty simply means a strong or powerful family that is able to maintain control over a country or region for a long period of time. There were many dynasties in China and several of them held control over China for many hundreds of years, passing down the control from father to son or uncle to nephew, etc.

## SHANG

**Who were these people:** archaeologists have no records before the Shang dynasty. Many remains have been discovered such as painted pottery pieces belonging to a group of people called the Shang people. These two ancient cultures have no written record of leaders and government, but artifacts that have been found tell archeologists that they were probably farmers who planted crops and raised animals.

**Writing System:** The Shang ruled a broad area of northern China and made many advances. The Shang created China's first writing system. This system used more than 2,000 symbols to express words or ideas. Although the system has gone through changes over the years, the Chinese symbols used today are based on those of the Shang period. Shang writing has been found on thousands of cattle bones and turtle shells.

**Predicting the Future:** Priests had carved questions about the future on bones or shells, which were then heated, causing them to crack. The priests believed they could "read" these cracks to predict the future. The bones were called oracle bones because an oracle is a prediction.

**Achievements:** In addition to writing, the Shang also made other achievements. Artisans made beautiful bronze containers for cooking and religious ceremonies. They also made axes, knives, and ornaments from jade, a hard gemstone. The military developed war chariots, powerful bows, and bronze body armor. Shang astrologers developed a calendar based on the cycles of the moon.

## ZHOU

**Establishment of the Dynasty:** The land of Zhou was a vassal state of the Shang Dynasty. A powerful leader of the Zhou named Wen Wang began to plan to overthrow the Shang Dynasty. It took many years, but finally Wen Wang's son, Wu Wang, led an army across the Yellow River to defeat the King of the Shang Dynasty. King Wu established a new dynasty, the Zhou Dynasty.

**Government:** The early leaders of the Zhou Dynasty introduced the idea of the "Mandate of Heaven". This concept taught that the leaders gained their authority to rule from the gods. They believed that when the Zhou overthrew the Shang Dynasty, this was because the Shang had become corrupt and the gods allowed them to fall. The government of the Zhou was based on the feudal system. The emperor divided the land into fiefs that were usually ruled by his relatives. The nobles who ruled the fiefs basically owned the farmers who worked their lands.

**Daily Life:** The nobles, priests, and the king or emperor and his family, lived in splendor. Craftsmen and merchants were not treated very well. The merchants and craftsmen lived outside the city walls in mud huts. In small villages scattered around the countryside lived the lowest class of people, the peasants. Most of the ancient Chinese people during Zhou times were peasants or farmers. Their life was very hard. Each was farmed by a peasant family. In exchange for working all the time, the peasants got to keep some of the food they produced. If they were caught hoarding extra food to feed their families, they were killed.

## QIN

**Road to Power:** During the warring States period, the state of Qin (chīn), in the northwestern part of China, developed into one of the strongest powers. It had a centralized government and a strong military. Under the leadership of Qin Shi Huang Di, the Qin armies slowly defeated the other rival states and united China under one rule.

**Strong Leadership:** Qin Shi Huang Di became the first emperor of the Qin dynasty. Soon he established a strong central government that helped unify China under his control. Qin Shi Huang Di practiced an approach to government that was founded on a philosophy called legalism. Legalism emphasized strict laws and an efficient government. He was a harsh ruler. He had his political rivals and those he saw as opponents executed. To help maintain a well-run empire, Qin Shi Huang Di standardized currency, weights and measures, and the writing system throughout China. He also supported many civic improvements, including the construction of large irrigation systems and a large wall to protect the empire.

**A Great Wall:** For centuries, invaders from the north harassed the Chinese. At various times, rulers built walls in an attempt to keep out these invaders. The Qin emperor decided to create one great wall by connecting the walls that already existed. This project was an enormous undertaking and required a massive amount of forced labor.

## HAN

**A Golden Age:** The Han Dynasty is known as the "Golden Age of China" because much of Chinese culture was established during this time. It was an era of peace and prosperity and allowed China to expand to a major world power.

**Revolution:** The Han Dynasty began with a peasant revolt against the Qin Emperor. It was led by Liu Bang, son of a peasant family. Once the Qin Emperor was killed there was a war for four years between Liu Bang and his rival Xiang Yu. Liu Bang won the war and became emperor. He changed his name to Han Gaozu and established the Han Dynasty.

**Civil Service:** One of the first things that Emperor Gaozu did was to establish the civil service. He gathered a number of educated men about him to help him run the empire. Later Han emperors would establish examinations and schools to make sure that only the most intelligent men would run the government. This method of government would run for over 2,000 years. Many people lived in the cities. The rich were educated and lived in big houses while the poor lived in crowded houses and often went without food.