

THE IN A HURRY SERIES

Ancient China

in a Hurry

Dynasties, inventions, and the Middle
Kingdom

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The Whole Thing in One Page

Ancient China is the deep foundation of a civilisation that never ended. Egypt, Babylon, Greece, and Rome rose and fell and became ruins for archaeologists. China rose, and is still here, ruling a fifth of humanity from roughly the same heartland, writing in a script descended from the one carved on bones three thousand years ago. This book is about the formative stretch when that civilisation was built: from the first cities on the Yellow River to the fall of the Han dynasty in 220 CE, the period the Chinese themselves still treat as classical, the age that set the mould everything later was poured into.

A few big ideas do most of the explaining. The first is the Mandate of Heaven: the belief that Heaven grants the right to rule to a just dynasty and withdraws it from a corrupt one, so that flood, famine, or defeat is a sign the mandate has passed and rebellion is justified. This produced the dynastic cycle, the recurring rhythm of rise, flourishing, decline, and collapse into a new founding, that organises the whole of Chinese history. The second is unity. In 221 BCE the state of Qin conquered its rivals and welded the warring kingdoms into a single empire, standardising the script, the coinage, and the roads, and building a professional bureaucracy to run it all. That machine outlived the Qin, outlived every dynasty after it, and made unity the natural condition of China and division the aberration, a conviction that holds to this day.

Around those two sit the rest. The Middle Kingdom, Zhongguo, the idea of China as the centre of the civilised world. The Hundred Schools of thought, Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism among them, hammered out during centuries of war and still shaping how well over a billion people think about duty, order, and nature. A society built on the family, on filial piety and the veneration of ancestors, with the household as the model for the state. And a genius for invention, silk, paper, cast iron, the crossbow, that kept China technologically ahead of the world for most of recorded history.

Two cautions before we start. Much of the earliest story is legend, and this book keeps the line between myth and evidence visible rather than blurring it. And the famous continuity is real but not seamless: China was conquered, divided, and remade more than once, and the tidy phrase five thousand years of unbroken civilisation is part history and part national myth.

That is the book.

Why You Should Care

The most obvious reason is also the most urgent: you cannot understand today's China, the country most likely to shape this century, without understanding the ancient one, because the modern state runs on patterns laid down two thousand years ago. When the Communist Party stakes its right to rule on delivering prosperity and order rather than on elections, it is drawing, whether it says so or not, on the Mandate of Heaven, the ancient bargain in which a ruler keeps power by keeping the realm fed and stable and forfeits it when he fails. When Beijing treats the unity of the country as sacred and non-negotiable, from Tibet to Xinjiang to Taiwan, it is expressing the conviction, forged by the Qin in 221 BCE, that China is by nature one and that division is a wound to be closed. When it behaves as a civilisation that expects deference from its neighbours rather than one state among equals, it is thinking, faintly, as the Middle Kingdom. None of this is destiny, and the parallels can be overdrawn, but a reader who knows the ancient patterns sees the present far more clearly than one who does not.

There is a deeper reason too, which is that ancient China is one of the very few times humanity built a great civilisation entirely from scratch, on its own. Most cultures borrowed their alphabet, their religion, their institutions from neighbours. China, walled off by ocean, desert, steppe, and the highest mountains on earth, invented its own writing, its own philosophy, its own model of the state, in near-total isolation from the other centres of the ancient world.

That makes it a natural experiment of extraordinary value: a completely independent answer to the basic questions of how to organise a society, run a government, and live a good life. Set beside the Greek and Roman answers most Western readers absorb by default, the Chinese answer is a revelation, sometimes an alternative, sometimes a mirror, always a reminder that the familiar Western way is one option among several rather than the only road humanity could have taken. To study ancient China is to double the size of your sample of how human beings can arrange their affairs, and a sample of one, however familiar, is a poor basis for understanding anything.

It also produced things that shaped the entire world. Paper, which carried nearly all human knowledge until the last generation, was a Chinese invention. So were silk, cast iron centuries before Europe managed it, the crossbow, the magnetic compass, and, a little later, printing and gunpowder. For most of recorded history China was the most technologically advanced society on earth, and the modern assumption that innovation flows naturally from West to East is a very recent inversion of a far longer and opposite story. Knowing that story corrects a lazy and widespread provincialism about where human ingenuity comes from. It also reframes the present. A China that is inventive, powerful, and central is not a strange new arrival to be feared as an aberration, but something closer to the historical norm reasserting itself after two unusual centuries of Western dominance, a perspective worth holding whatever else you conclude.

Be clear about the limits. This is a short introduction to a vast subject that scholars give their lives to, and it cannot make you an expert or replace real study. It compresses, and compression means hard choices about what to leave out. And it resists two opposite temptations that distort most popular accounts: the old Western habit of treating China as exotic, static, and slightly unreal, and the official Chinese habit of smoothing the messy, violent, discontinuous past into a seamless national epic. What it offers is a clear, honest, and reasonably balanced map of the foundations, enough to make the rest of Chinese history, and a good deal of the present, legible.

The rest of the book is that map.

The Core Ideas

1. The Mandate of Heaven and the Dynastic Cycle

The single most important political idea in Chinese history was invented as an excuse. Around 1046 BCE the Zhou, a frontier people, overthrew the Shang kings they had served, and needed to explain why toppling a dynasty ordained by the gods was not sacrilege. Their answer was the Mandate of Heaven, and it went on to govern how China thought about power for the next three thousand years.

The idea is elegant. Heaven, an impersonal cosmic order rather than a personal god, confers the right to rule on a just and capable dynasty. That right is conditional. A ruler who governs well, keeps the people fed, and performs the rituals correctly holds the Mandate. A ruler who becomes cruel, corrupt, or incompetent forfeits it, and Heaven signals the withdrawal through visible signs: floods, famines, earthquakes, eclipses, and above all popular rebellion. When the Mandate has passed, overthrowing the ruler is not treason but the execution of Heaven's will, and whoever succeeds in replacing him has, by the fact of his success, demonstrated that the Mandate is now his. In practice this made the reading of signs a serious business of state: a comet, a drought, a plague of locusts, or a failed harvest could all be construed as Heaven clearing its throat, and a nervous court watched the skies and the granaries for evidence of its own standing.

This was a radical departure from the divine right that justified kings elsewhere. Western monarchs claimed an unconditional, permanent grant: God had made them king, and rebellion was sin regardless of how badly they ruled. The Chinese version is conditional and revocable, tied to performance rather than bloodline, and it builds the right of rebellion directly into the theory of the state. A dynasty rules only so long as it rules well. This is a strikingly modern-sounding bargain, closer to a theory of legitimacy by results than to sacred kingship, and it echoes still in a government that rests its authority on results rather than on the ballot box.

From the Mandate flows the dynastic cycle, the rhythm that structures the whole of the imperial past. A vigorous founder seizes the Mandate and establishes a dynasty. It flourishes, expands, and grows rich. Over generations the rulers soften, the court grows corrupt, taxes rise, and the administration decays. Natural disasters and revolts multiply and are read as Heaven's verdict. The dynasty collapses, a period of chaos follows, and a new founder emerges to claim the Mandate and begin the cycle again. Rise, flourishing, decline, fall, renewal, over and over across two millennia.

One feature sets this apart from almost every other pre-modern politics: it made low birth no barrier to the throne. Because the Mandate rewarded success and virtue rather than bloodline, a peasant who led a victorious rebellion could found a legitimate dynasty, and more than once one did. The founder of the mighty Han began as a village official of humble origins, and the founder

of the later Ming was born a destitute peasant and spent years as a wandering monk. In theory, and now and then in fact, the right to rule was open to whomever Heaven chose, which gave Chinese history a streak of real mobility at the very summit that hereditary Europe rarely matched.

Two honest cautions. First, the logic is circular, and everyone knew it: winning proved you had the Mandate, and losing proved you had lost it, so the theory could justify any victor after the fact. Second, the neat cycle is partly a pattern imposed by Chinese historians, who wrote history precisely to illustrate the moral rise and fall of dynasties, as much as a natural law of politics. Real history was messier than the model. But the Mandate was never only propaganda. Rulers feared losing it, took omens and disasters seriously as report cards on their rule, and understood that a hungry, rebellious population was evidence against them. As a theory of power it was self-serving, circular, and remarkably durable, and understanding it is the first key to the whole civilisation.

2. The Middle Kingdom: China's Idea of Itself

The Chinese name for China is Zhongguo, which means the central state, or the Middle Kingdom, and the name is a worldview compressed into two characters. Its earliest known written appearance is on a bronze vessel cast around three thousand years ago, and the idea it carries has proved even more durable than the bureaucracy or the script: the conviction that China sits at the

middle of all that is civilised, with everything else arranged, in decreasing order of refinement, around it.

The crucial point is that this centrality was understood as cultural, not racial. To be civilised was to live as the Chinese did: to use the writing, observe the rituals, honour the family, and follow the Confucian norms of proper conduct. Peoples who did not were barbarians, the tribes of the four directions, but the category was porous in both directions. A barbarian who adopted Chinese civilisation could become civilised, and, crucially, this happened: when nomadic conquerors overran parts of China, they were repeatedly absorbed, adopting Chinese administration, language, and customs until they were, culturally, Chinese. The civilisation kept conquering its conquerors. This cultural confidence, the sense of being not one culture among many but the definition of civilisation itself, is one of the deepest features of the Chinese mind.

It expressed itself in the way China ordered its foreign relations, through what is usually called the tributary system. China did not deal with its neighbours as equal sovereign states, because the very idea of equal states was foreign to a worldview with one centre. Instead, surrounding peoples, Korea, Vietnam, the steppe kingdoms, and in time many others, sent tribute missions that acknowledged the supremacy of the Chinese emperor, the Son of Heaven, and in return received trade, lavish gifts, investiture, and a recognised place in the hierarchical order radiating out from the centre. It was a system of graded relationships with China at the apex, not a society of equals, and it structured East Asian diplomacy for centuries.

Underlying all of this was the concept of tianxia, all under Heaven: the notion that there was properly one civilised order beneath one Son of Heaven, rather than a patchwork of equal nations. It is worth grasping how total this was. The idea of many equal sovereign states, each supreme within its own borders, which Europe came to take for granted, did not fit a picture in which civilisation shaded outward by degrees from a single centre. Part of why China's eventual collision with the modern European order proved so disorienting is that the two sides did not even share a theory of what a state was, and traces of the older view still surface in how China approaches the world.

The same confidence carried a cost, which was complacency. A civilisation certain that it is the centre and the summit has little reason to learn from outsiders, and this served China poorly in later centuries when it dismissed foreign, and especially European, technology and ambition as the crude productions of barbarians, right up to the moment those barbarians arrived with gunboats. But for the ancient and classical period the confidence was largely earned. China was, for most of this story, the largest, richest, most populous, and most sophisticated society its neighbours had ever encountered, and the Middle Kingdom saw itself as the centre because, in its own world, it very nearly was. That self-image, of a returning central power that expects deference rather than mere equality, has not vanished, and it colours how China carries itself in the world today.

3. One Empire, One System: Unification and the Bureaucratic State

In 221 BCE the state of Qin defeated the last of its rivals and did something no one had done before: it welded the warring kingdoms of the Chinese world into a single unified empire under one ruler. Its king took a new title, Qin Shi Huang, First Emperor, and set about ensuring the unification would be more than a military accident. What he built in the next eleven years shaped China for the following two thousand.

The Qin's central move was to destroy the old order of hereditary aristocrats ruling their own fiefs, and replace it with something recognisably modern: a centralised bureaucratic state. The empire was divided into administrative districts, commanderies and counties, each run not by a local lord who owned it but by an official appointed by the centre, paid a salary, and liable to be transferred or dismissed. Government became a profession and a hierarchy answering upward to the emperor, rather than a patchwork of inherited privilege. This was administration by bureaucracy rather than by blood, and it is the ancestor of every centralised state that followed.

To make a vast and varied territory governable as one thing, the Qin standardised it with ferocious thoroughness. One script, imposed across the empire so that all official writing was uniform. One currency, the round bronze coin with a square hole. One set of weights and measures. Even the axle-widths of carts were standardised, so that wheels cut the same ruts in the same imper-

ial roads. Of all these unifiers the script was the most profound, because spoken Chinese was, and remains, a family of mutually unintelligible languages, but a single written script tied to meaning rather than sound meant that every literate person across the empire could read the same texts whatever dialect they spoke. Writing did what speech never could: it made the Chinese one people on paper.

The sheer reach of this new state is best measured by what it could command. The terracotta army, an entire underground host of thousands of individually modelled soldiers, horses, and chariots built for no purpose but to guard a dead king, was the work of a bureaucracy that could conscript, organise, feed, and direct labour on a scale no fragmented feudal order could have dreamed of. It survives as a monument less to one man's vanity, though it is certainly that, than to the frightening new power of the centralised machine he had assembled.

The Qin itself was a catastrophe to live under and did not last. Its Legalist harshness, its forced conscription of hundreds of thousands to build the first Great Wall and the emperor's tomb, its burning of books and burying of scholars, made it hated, and it collapsed within a few years of the First Emperor's death, having lasted a mere fifteen years in total. The same drive to standardise that unified the script was turned on thought itself, in an attempt to burn the books of rival traditions and bind all learning to the service of the state. But here is the decisive fact: the Qin failed and the Qin's system triumphed. The Han dynasty that replaced it kept the centralised bureaucratic empire almost intact, softened

its harshness, and passed it down the centuries, so that the machine a tyrant built in a decade ran China, in recognisable form, until the twentieth century. And it left a conviction deeper than any institution: that China is one by its very nature, that unity is its healthy and normal state, and that division is a temporary sickness always to be cured by reunification. That belief, forged by the Qin, is why there is one China rather than several today, and why Beijing treats the map as non-negotiable. Fittingly, it is from Qin that the West most likely took the name China.

4. The Hundred Schools: Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism

The richest period in Chinese thought grew directly out of the worst period of Chinese chaos. As the Zhou order disintegrated into the incessant warfare of the Spring and Autumn and then the Warring States eras, roughly the eighth to third centuries BCE, the collapse of the old certainties provoked an explosion of competing philosophies, the Hundred Schools of Thought, as thinkers wandered between the warring courts pressing rival answers to one urgent question: how do we restore order to a broken world. Three of their answers shaped China permanently.

Confucianism, the teaching of Confucius, who lived from 551 to 479 BCE, located order in morality, hierarchy, and ritual. Society holds together, he argued, when everyone cultivates personal virtue and faithfully performs the duties of their station. The core relationships, between ruler and subject, parent and child, husband

and wife, and the rest, each carry reciprocal obligations, and when all are honoured, harmony follows without the need for force. The good ruler governs by moral example rather than punishment, the way the pole star holds its place and the other stars turn around it. It is a conservative, humane, this-worldly ethic, obsessed with proper conduct and the family, and it became the moral backbone of Chinese civilisation. Much of it comes down to one demanding idea: that the patient, lifelong cultivation of the self is the foundation on which a well-ordered family, state, and world must be built, so that reforming society begins with reforming oneself.

Daoism, associated with the semi-legendary Laozi and the brilliant Zhuangzi, offered almost the reverse. Order comes not from effort and ritual but from ceasing to force things. There is a natural way, the Dao, that things follow when left alone, and the wise person acts through wu wei, a kind of effortless non-action that goes with the grain of the world rather than against it. Where Confucianism is anxious, social, and busy with rules, Daoism is relaxed, individual, and suspicious of rules, pointing away from the court and toward nature, spontaneity, and the acceptance of how things are. The two were felt as complements rather than pure rivals, captured in the old observation that a Chinese gentleman was a Confucian in office and a Daoist once he retired to his garden.

Legalism was the cold and effective third. Its thinkers, above all Han Fei, held that human nature is fundamentally selfish, that appeals to virtue are naive, and that order can be produced only by strict written law, harsh punishment, and generous reward, applied uniformly and impersonally by a powerful state. Morality was sen-

timent; power and law were reality. It was cynical, ruthless, and it worked: Legalism was the operating manual of the Qin, which used it to out-organise and conquer every rival, and then to collapse under the weight of its own severity.

A fourth school deserves a mention, if only for what its fate reveals. The Mohists, followers of Mozi, preached universal and impartial love, condemned wasteful ritual and aggressive war, and organised themselves into a disciplined brotherhood of engineers who would rush to help defend cities under attack. For a time they rivalled the Confucians directly. Yet Mohism all but vanished after the ancient period, its egalitarian message a poor fit for the steep hierarchy of the empire that emerged, a reminder that the schools which survived did so partly because they suited the state that adopted them, and not only because they were wise.

No single school won, and that is the point. The enduring Chinese state absorbed all three: Confucianism supplied the ethics, the legitimacy, and the ideal of the good society; Legalism supplied the law, the administration, and the hard machinery of control; Daoism supplied the counter-current, the escape valve, the art and mysticism that Confucian earnestness left no room for. Later, Buddhism arrived along the Silk Road to add a fourth strand and a developed answer to questions of death and suffering the native schools had neglected. But the ancient trio remains the deep structure, and its concerns, filial duty, social harmony, hierarchy, the reverence for education, the tension between rule by virtue and rule by law, are live forces in how well over a billion people still think.

5. The Confucian State and the Scholar-Official

The Hundred Schools were philosophy. The next step, turning philosophy into government, produced the most distinctive institution of imperial China. The Qin had run on pure Legalism and destroyed itself in fifteen years. The Han dynasty that followed drew the obvious lesson: it kept the Legalist administrative machine, which worked, but wrapped it in Confucian legitimacy, which lasted. Under Emperor Wu, in the second century BCE, and guided by the scholar Dong Zhongshu, Confucianism became the official ideology of the empire, and remained the ruling creed of the Chinese state for the next two thousand years.

The great practical consequence was government by educated men chosen for their learning rather than their birth. The Han founded an Imperial University to train officials in the Confucian classics and began recruiting them partly on merit and recommended virtue rather than pure aristocracy. The famous examination system, competitive written tests on the classics open in principle to almost any man, came later, under the Sui and Tang dynasties, but the ideal was already Han: a state run by a class of scholar-officials, the *literati*, selected and promoted for their mastery of a shared body of learning. This produced the mandarin, the scholar-bureaucrat steeped in the classics, expected to write elegant poetry and calligraphy as readily as to manage a province, who became the most prestigious figure in Chinese society and the very model of a successful life.

What bound this class together was a shared canon, the Confucian classics: a body of revered ancient texts on ritual, history, poetry, and moral philosophy that every educated man was expected to master and that formed the common inheritance of the elite for two thousand years. To govern, one first steeped oneself in these books, on the theory that literary and moral cultivation produced sound administration. It was a remarkable civil religion of learning, and it carried a cost the system seldom admitted: because advancement turned on mastering a fixed body of hallowed old texts, it rewarded orthodoxy over originality and inclined the whole culture to seek its wisdom by looking backward rather than forward.

The idea was radical. A bureaucratic meritocracy, at least in aspiration, in which the path to power ran through study and examination rather than birth or wealth, appeared in China more than a thousand years before anything comparable existed in Europe. It gave the empire an educated, mobile, relatively professional governing class, and it made learning itself the royal road to status.

Two honest qualifications keep this from becoming a fairy tale. The meritocracy was real but limited: the years of leisured study required to master the classics heavily favoured the already wealthy, and patronage, corruption, and birth never stopped mattering. And the state was never purely Confucian in operation. Beneath the humane Confucian surface, the hard Legalist machinery of law, punishment, and central control kept running, which is why the imperial system is often summed up as Confucian in appearance and Legalist in substance. Yet the aspiration was real and its

influence immense. The conviction that the state should be run by the learned and the moral, that authority ought to be earned through education, burned a reverence for scholarship and examination so deep into the culture that it is plainly visible across China and East Asia to this day.

6. Family, Ancestors, and the Agrarian Order

Ask what the basic unit of Chinese society was and the answer is neither the individual, as a modern Westerner might assume, nor the state, but the family, understood as a line stretching back through the ancestors and forward through the sons. Almost everything else in the society was built on that foundation.

At its heart lay filial piety, *xiao*, the supreme virtue: the profound respect, obedience, and care owed by children to their parents and elders. This was the first of the Confucian relationships and the training ground for all the others, on the logic that a person who learns to honour his father learns to honour his ruler. Filial duty was the school of social order, and loyalty to authority was understood as filial piety extended outward. The family was not merely one institution among many; it was the model on which the whole of society and the state were patterned. The emperor was the father of his people, a magistrate was called the father-and-mother official of his district, and obedience to the throne was cast as the natural extension of obedience to a parent. The sharp Western line between the private world of the family and the public world of politics did not exist; the one was the other, enlarged.

Binding the generations together was the veneration of ancestors, which is among the most ancient features of Chinese civilisation. The dead did not depart but became ancestors, still present, still watching, still owed ritual attention and offerings by their descendants, and capable of helping or harming the living. The Shang oracle bones, the oldest Chinese writing, are largely records of kings putting questions to their royal ancestors. To die without a son to continue the line and perform the rites was therefore a genuine catastrophe, spiritual as much as social, and this placed enormous weight on producing male heirs, a pressure that shaped marriage, inheritance, and the deep preference for sons that marks the culture to this day, not always for the better.

The whole order rested on a fixed scheme of five key relationships: between ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger brother, and friend and friend. Four of the five were bonds of hierarchy and obedience, and only the last, between friends, joined equals. Women occupied a subordinate place throughout, expected to obey first a father, then a husband, and in widowhood a son, and were largely shut out of the education, examinations, and offices that gave men their standing. The system prized order and continuity above the individual and delivered both, at a price paid most heavily by the young, the low-born, and above all by women, which is worth stating plainly rather than dissolving into admiration for the stability it produced.

Beneath the emperor, the officials, and the philosophy lay the vast and usually silent foundation of it all: the peasantry. China was, for nearly the whole of its history, an agrarian empire of villages, its

wealth and its armies and its taxes all drawn ultimately from a huge population of farmers working the soil. The peasant's lot was hard and largely voiceless, taxed, conscripted for war and for vast public works, and periodically ruined by flood or famine, yet in the official scheme of values he was honoured, at least on paper, as the very root of the state. The society ranked its members in four broad orders, and the ranking is revealing. At the top stood the scholars, then the farmers, honoured in theory as the productive root of the state, then the artisans, and at the bottom, strikingly, the merchants, despised in the official scheme as parasites who grew rich on the labour of others while producing nothing themselves. That official contempt for commerce, however much it was ignored in practice by a society that traded vigorously, is a distinctive and consequential feature of the Chinese order, and a sharp contrast with the merchant-driven values that would later power the rise of the West.

7. The Inventions: How China Led the World

For most of recorded history the most technologically advanced civilisation on earth was Chinese, and the modern reflex that treats invention as something that flows from West to East reverses a much older and opposite pattern. The ancient and classical period alone, before the fall of the Han, produced a run of inventions that the rest of the world would take a thousand years or more to match.

Silk came first and stayed secret longest. The Chinese learned to unwind the cocoon of the silkworm into thread in the Neolithic, thousands of years before this book's story properly begins, and then guarded the method so jealously that for millennia the civilisations to the west knew China only as the far-off, half-mythical land from which silk arrived, and named the trade route across Asia after it. Paper was the second world-changer, invented under the Han and traditionally credited to the court official Cai Lun around 105 CE. It is difficult to overstate the importance of a cheap, light medium for writing and copying; paper carried almost all of human knowledge until the present generation, and it took a thousand years to travel from China to Europe. When it finally arrived it helped make possible the printing press, the newspaper, and the paperwork of the modern state, none of which runs on anything else; few single inventions have done more to shape the world, and this one was Chinese.

The list runs on, and much of it is startling. Chinese metalworkers were casting iron in the Warring States period, around the fourth century BCE, using blast furnaces roughly fifteen centuries before Europe managed the same feat, which gave China cheap iron tools, weapons, and ploughs on a scale no other society could approach. The crossbow, with a precision-cast bronze trigger mechanism, was mass-produced and standardised to tolerances the ancient world could not otherwise achieve; the terracotta soldiers buried with the First Emperor carried them. And in 132 CE the Han polymath Zhang Heng built an instrument to detect earthquakes, a bronze vessel that released a ball from the mouth of a dragon in

the direction of a distant tremor, some seventeen centuries before the West produced anything comparable. Behind these headline inventions sat a host of quieter ones, the efficient horse harness, the wheelbarrow, the seed drill, deep-borehole drilling for brine and natural gas, that together made China the most productive economy of the ancient world.

It is worth dwelling for a moment on why this mattered beyond the objects themselves. A society with cheap cast-iron tools could clear and plough far more land and feed a far larger population; one with paper could run a sprawling bureaucracy on written records and spread its books widely; one that alone knew how to make silk held a luxury the whole of Eurasia would pay for in gold. Technology was not a decorative sideshow to ancient China's wealth and power but a foundation of it, and the lead it opened up was measured not in years but in centuries.

One honest correction belongs here, because it is almost always got wrong. China is most famous for the so-called four great inventions, papermaking, printing, gunpowder, and the compass, which are usually reeled off as a set. But only paper belongs to the ancient period. Printing, gunpowder as a weapon, and the navigational compass were largely developed far later, under the Tang and above all the Song dynasty, roughly the seventh to eleventh centuries CE, a full millennium after the era this book covers. Ancient China supplied the foundations, the paper to print on, the early knowledge that a lodestone points south, the chemical curiosity that would one day yield gunpowder, but the celebrated flowering came in the medieval period, not this one. That distinc-

tion matters for honesty, and it points to a genuine puzzle that hangs over the whole subject: given a lead this enormous and this sustained, why did the great industrial breakthrough eventually come in Europe and not in China. That question belongs to a later period and a longer book, but it is worth carrying, because it warns against reading China's ancient dominance as either a natural destiny or an unfathomable mystery. It was neither. It was the achievement of a particular civilisation, working, for a very long time, extremely well.

How It Actually Works

Section 3 laid out the ideas and structures that define ancient China. This section is the chronological story they emerged from: the sequence of dynasties from the first villages to the fall of the Han, and, at the end, how we know any of it, which turns out to be a story in its own right.

Before the dynasties: the Neolithic

Chinese civilisation grew from two rivers. Along the Yellow River in the north, where the soil is a fine wind-blown loess easy to work with primitive tools, farming villages were growing millet by around 5000 BCE, producing the painted pottery that marks the Yangshao culture and, later, the walled towns and fine black pottery of the Longshan. Along the Yangtze in the warmer, wetter south, a separate tradition was cultivating rice and, in the Liangzhu culture, carving the dense jade objects that show a stratified society with rulers, craftsmen, and belief already in place. The old picture of a single cradle on the Yellow River has given way to a messier and truer one of several regional cultures interacting across a huge area. Out of this Neolithic world, over millennia, came larger settlements, social hierarchy, bronze-working, and eventually the concentration of power that we call a dynasty.

What these scattered cultures already reveal is telling. Fortified towns imply organised violence, graves furnished with fine jade

imply sharp differences of rank, and shared styles of ritual imply shared belief. The ingredients of civilisation, hierarchy, warfare, craft, and religion, were in place long before the first king whose name we can read.

Legend and the first real dynasty

Traditional history opens with the Xia, founded by a sage-king named Yu the Great, who is said to have earned the throne by taming the great floods through years of selfless labour. It is a magnificent story, and there is no solid proof any of it happened. No contemporary records of the Xia exist, the dynasty is not mentioned in the oldest Chinese writing that survives, and its earliest appearance in the texts comes centuries later, conveniently deployed to justify a conquest. Some scholars link the Xia to a real Bronze Age site at Erlitou, but since no writing has been found there, the identification is a guess. The honest position is that the Xia sits on the border between legend and history, and probably always will.

With the Shang, roughly 1600 to 1046 BCE, we cross firmly into history, and we cross it because of writing. The Shang kings ruled the Yellow River heartland from a series of capitals, cast astonishing ritual vessels in bronze, went to war in chariots, and practised human sacrifice on a large scale, burying servants and war captives with their dead. Above all they were obsessed with divination, scratching questions to their ancestors onto ox bones and turtle shells, applying heat, and reading the cracks. Those oracle

bones are the oldest Chinese writing, direct ancestors of the characters in use today, and they make the Shang the first Chinese dynasty we can document from its own records rather than from later legend. The dividing line between the mythical Xia and the historical Shang is, quite literally, the moment a civilisation begins to write things down. And the Shang were no primitive chiefdom. Their bronze ritual vessels, cast by an intricate piece-mould method of remarkable sophistication, are among the technical and artistic masterpieces of the ancient world, and the wealth, labour, and organisation behind them mark a powerful and frightening state.

The long Zhou and the birth of the Mandate

Around 1046 BCE a subject people on the western frontier, the Zhou, rose against their Shang overlords and destroyed them at the battle of Muye. To justify overthrowing a divinely sanctioned dynasty, the Zhou, and in particular the revered statesman known as the Duke of Zhou, articulated the Mandate of Heaven, the doctrine that would outlast them by three thousand years. The Zhou then ruled, at least in name, for some eight centuries, the longest of all Chinese dynasties, though for most of that time they did not rule in any real sense at all.

The early, strong phase, the Western Zhou, held the realm together through a system in which the king granted territories to relatives and allies who governed them in his name, an arrangement loosely comparable to European feudalism. It worked while the king was

strong. In 771 BCE it failed: nomads sacked the Zhou capital and killed the king, and though the dynasty survived by fleeing east to a new capital, its authority never recovered. From then on the Zhou king was a figurehead presiding over a growing collection of effectively independent states who fought one another with escalating ferocity while paying him ceremonial respect. This later, hollow phase is the Eastern Zhou, and its centuries of disunity, paradoxically, produced the richest culture in Chinese history.

The early Zhou order is often likened to European feudalism, and the comparison helps so long as it is not pressed too hard. Land and authority were parcelled out to a hierarchy of lords tied to the king by kinship and ritual rather than by the formal contracts of medieval Europe, and the glue holding it together was ceremony and shared ancestor worship as much as force. When that glue failed and the king's power collapsed, the lords did not so much rebel as quietly stop pretending to obey, and the long unravelling that followed is the backdrop to everything else in this section.

The age of warring states and philosophers

The long Eastern Zhou decline is divided into two parts, the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period, and the names tell the story: escalating, and finally total, war. As the centuries passed the number of surviving states shrank through conquest from over a hundred to seven great powers locked in a struggle for supremacy, fielding mass infantry armies equipped with iron weapons and the deadly crossbow, and prosecuting war with a

new professionalism and ruthlessness. It was, by any measure, a catastrophe to live through. Battles that had once been limited affairs between chariot-riding aristocrats swelled into mass slaughters between conscript armies hundreds of thousands strong; one notorious defeat, at Changping, is said to have ended with the execution of hundreds of thousands of soldiers who had already surrendered. It was in this pitiless world that the strategist Sunzi composed *The Art of War*, still studied today, and that Qin, cold and organised for nothing but victory, ground its rivals down one by one.

Yet this same period of disunity and violence was the golden age of Chinese thought. The collapse of the old order set thinkers loose to ask how a shattered world might be put back together, and the result was the Hundred Schools, Confucius and his followers, the Daoists, the Legalists, the strategist Sunzi, and many more, wandering between the warring courts selling their competing prescriptions for order. Almost every enduring current of Chinese philosophy was formed in these centuries. The disunity was itself the engine: a hundred rival courts competing for advantage meant a hundred markets for clever advisers, and a ruler who ignored a useful idea would soon be conquered by a rival who had not. The lesson is worth pausing on: the intellectual foundations of the civilisation were laid not in a golden age of peace but in its bloodiest era of division, by people desperate to end the chaos around them. In the end it was ended, though not by any philosopher. It was ended by the most ruthless of the seven states, which had adopted Legalism as its operating system: Qin.

The First Emperor

In 221 BCE the king of Qin completed the conquest of the last of his rivals and made himself master of the entire Chinese world. He proclaimed himself Qin Shi Huang, First Emperor, and in a reign of raw, relentless energy he built the machinery of unified empire described earlier: the centralised bureaucracy of commanderies and counties, the standardised script, coinage, and measures, the network of roads, and the first version of the Great Wall, thrown up across the northern frontier by conscript armies at enormous cost in lives. His Legalist state tolerated no dissent; in a notorious episode it burned books it considered subversive and, according to tradition, buried scholars alive. And in secret it built him a tomb guarded by an army of thousands of life-sized terracotta soldiers, each individually modelled, which lay undisturbed and unknown until farmers stumbled on it in 1974. The First Emperor was a figure of colossal ambition and deepening paranoia, obsessed in his final years with the search for an elixir of immortality, dispatching expeditions to find it and, in bitter irony, quite possibly hastening his own death by swallowing the mercury pills his alchemists promised would make him deathless.

The Qin achieved in a decade what would shape China for two thousand years, and it destroyed itself almost as fast. The regime's harshness and the crushing burden of its forced labour bred hatred, and within four years of the First Emperor's death in 210 BCE the empire dissolved into rebellion. By 206 BCE the Qin was gone, the shortest of the major dynasties, having lasted a mere fifteen years. But the unified empire it had forged did not die with it.

Out of the rebellions rose a peasant leader who founded a new dynasty on the Qin's foundations, and made them last. The very first of those revolts had been led by a common conscript who, delayed by floods and facing death under the Qin's own merciless law for arriving late at his post, reasoned that he might as well rebel; that a peasant mutiny could bring down the First Emperor's empire within a few years of his death was the Mandate's logic made flesh.

The Han, and the end of the ancient age

The Han dynasty, which ruled from 206 BCE to 220 CE, is the classical age of China, so central to the civilisation's sense of itself that the majority ethnic group still calls itself the Han. Its founders kept the Qin's centralised machine but softened the Legalist cruelty and, over time, clothed the state in Confucian legitimacy, producing the durable synthesis, Legalist in structure and Confucian in spirit, that would define imperial China. Under its most vigorous ruler, the Emperor Wu, the Han expanded dramatically into Central Asia, Korea, and the south, and opened the trading routes across the deserts that became the Silk Road, carrying Chinese silk west and, in time, Buddhism east.

The opening of that road was itself an accident of war. Seeking allies against the fearsome Xiongnu nomads who raided the northern frontier, Emperor Wu sent an envoy named Zhang Qian deep into Central Asia. Zhang Qian was captured by the Xiongnu, held for years, escaped, and eventually came home having wholly failed

in his mission, but carrying the first detailed Chinese knowledge of the lands and peoples to the west. The routes his journey opened would move silk, and later paper and much else, across Asia for fifteen centuries, and carry back horses, crops, and faiths in return, Buddhism above all. War on the frontier had accidentally wired China into the wider world.

At its height the Han rivalled the contemporary Roman empire in size, population, and sophistication, two vast agrarian empires at either end of Eurasia, each barely aware the other existed. Governing perhaps sixty million people, it ran a salaried civil service, a state university, public granaries, and a standardised law across a territory approaching the shape of China proper today. So successful was the model that when the Chinese majority names itself, it still reaches back past every later dynasty to this one, and calls itself the people of Han.

This was an age of confidence and invention. Paper was produced under the Han, the polymath Zhang Heng built his earthquake detector, and the civil service of scholar-officials took shape. The dynasty was interrupted briefly by a usurper, Wang Mang, who seized the throne for a chaotic decade and a half before the Han were restored, and the two halves are known as the Western and Eastern Han for the location of their capitals. But the second half slowly decayed along the classic lines of the dynastic cycle: powerful families, court intrigue, and a weakening centre. In 184 CE a huge peasant uprising, the Yellow Turban Rebellion, broke the dynasty's back, and real power fell to regional warlords. In 220 CE the last Han emperor formally abdicated, and China fractured into

the three rival kingdoms whose wars are the most romanticised in all Chinese history, immortalised centuries later in the sprawling novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and familiar today to hundreds of millions through opera, film, and video games.

That date, 220 CE, is where this book closes, because the Han's fall ends the formative, classical age, the period that built the enduring foundations. What followed was not the end of Chinese civilisation but its continuation through very different chapters: nearly four centuries of division, then reunification under the brief Sui and the glittering Tang, then the commercial and technological explosion of the Song, and on through Mongol and Manchu conquest to the last emperor's abdication in 1912. The civilisation ran on, but the mould had been cast, and it was cast in the age this book has described. Through every one of those later upheavals, including two long spells of rule by foreign conquerors, the essential apparatus first assembled by the Qin and Han, a unified bureaucratic empire legitimated by the Mandate and staffed by Confucian scholars, was inherited, restored, and carried on.

How we know

A fair question hangs over all of this: how can anyone claim to know what happened three thousand years ago. The answer rests on three kinds of evidence, and the way they came together is one of the great detective stories of history.

The first is transmitted texts, above all the *Records of the Grand Historian*, written around 91 BCE by Sima Qian, the founding mas-

terpiece of Chinese history-writing, which narrates the whole story from the legendary sage-kings down to his own Han dynasty. The second is contemporary inscriptions, the words the ancients themselves wrote: the oracle bones of the Shang and the long dedications cast into Zhou bronze vessels. The third is archaeology, the excavated cities, tombs, and objects, from the Shang capital at Anyang to the First Emperor's terracotta army.

The moment these three came together is worth telling, because it transformed the subject. For most of modern history, Western and even many Chinese scholars suspected that the earliest dynasties were myth, the Shang no more real than the Xia. Then, in 1899, a Chinese official being treated for malaria noticed that the "dragon bones" ground up for his medicine were covered in archaic writing. Traced to a site near Anyang and painstakingly deciphered, the inscriptions turned out to name the kings of the Shang, and the list they gave matched the sequence Sima Qian had recorded two thousand years earlier almost exactly. At a stroke, a dynasty long dismissed as legend was confirmed as fact, and a historian long suspected of embroidery was vindicated. That is the pattern of the whole field: legend where the evidence runs out, hard knowledge where texts, inscriptions, and the spade confirm one another, and a scholar's duty to keep the line between the two always in view. And the evidence is still growing. Tombs sealed for two thousand years, like the astonishingly preserved Han burials at Mawangdui, continue to emerge from the ground with their silk, their texts, and on occasion their occupants

almost intact, and every such find sharpens the picture a little further.

What People Get Wrong

“Five thousand years of unbroken civilisation”

The famous boast contains real truth and real inflation. The truth: China is the most continuous of the great ancient civilisations. Its script descends without a break from the oracle bones, its Confucian tradition and imperial idea persisted for two thousand years, and a genuine thread of identity runs through the whole story. The inflation is in both key words. Five thousand years reaches back past the roughly thirty-six centuries of attested history into the legendary Xia and the wholly mythical Yellow Emperor. And unbroken glosses over repeated rupture: centuries of division after the Han, long periods of rule by outside conquerors in the Mongol and Manchu dynasties, total dynastic collapses, and the twentieth-century revolutions that swept the entire imperial system away. What China has is a remarkable continuity of culture and identity that reasserts itself across breaks, which is impressive, and quite different from the seamless unbroken line of the slogan. The rounded version is national myth, promoted because a five-thousand-year-old unbroken civilisation is a powerful thing to claim as your inheritance.

“Ancient China was cut off from the world”

China was ringed on every side by formidable natural barriers, by ocean and desert and steppe and the world's tallest mountains,

and it did think of itself as a self-sufficient centre. But isolated it was not. The Han opened the Silk Road, and along it flowed far more than silk heading west: ideas, goods, and people came east, most consequentially Buddhism, an Indian religion that became one of the three great pillars of Chinese thought. Throughout the ancient period China traded with, fought, absorbed, and was shaped by the peoples of Central Asia and beyond. The image of a sealed, inward civilisation is false. It was connected, and its very self-image as the centre was a claim about its place in a wider world it knew perfectly well was there. The very silk that gave the western route its name reached, at its furthest, the markets of imperial Rome, whose wealthy prized it and whose moralists grumbled about the fortune in gold draining east to pay for it.

“The Great Wall is one ancient wall you can see from space”

Two myths bundled together, both wrong. It is not one wall but a discontinuous network of many walls, built, rebuilt, and abandoned over more than two thousand years by numerous states and dynasties along different routes. The First Emperor did connect earlier walls around 220 BCE, but those were rammed earth and have almost entirely eroded to low mounds; the magnificent stone-and-brick wall that tourists photograph is largely the work of the Ming dynasty, built between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries CE, well over a thousand years after this book's period. And you cannot see it from space with the naked eye, a

claim that predates spaceflight and was contradicted the moment humans went up to look, China's own first astronaut among them; the wall is too narrow and too close in colour to the ground it crosses. A telling footnote: for most of Chinese history the wall was a symbol not of pride but of tyranny and failure, linked to the cruelty of the Qin and to the repeated inability to keep invaders out.

“China was timeless and unchanging”

This is an old Western notion, that China was the land of eternal stagnation, frozen in changeless tradition while the dynamic West made history. It is nonsense, and revealing nonsense, because it exposes European condescension rather than any Chinese reality. Within the span of this book alone, China moved from Neolithic villages to oracle-bone kingship to a feudal-style monarchy to warring states to a unified bureaucratic empire, inventing a philosophy, a script, and a model of the state as it went, and it kept changing dramatically for two thousand years after, through commercial revolutions, technological leaps, and repeated reinventions. The unchanging China was a fiction that let outsiders feel superior and, in the imperial age, helped justify carving the country up. China changed as much as anywhere. It kept a stronger thread of cultural continuity while doing so, which is a wholly different thing from standing still.

“Confucianism is a religion”

Confucianism has religious-looking features, reverence for Heaven, elaborate ritual, ancestor veneration, and in time temples and a cult around Confucius himself, so the confusion is understandable. But it is not a religion in the way Christianity or Islam is. It has no creator god, no promise of salvation or account of the afterlife, no church and no priesthood, and it concerns itself overwhelmingly with this world: with how to behave, how to govern, and how to hold a society together. Confucius was a teacher and social reformer, not a prophet, and he deliberately declined to speculate about gods and the dead, remarking that there was more than enough to understand about life without worrying about death. It is best read as an ethical, social, and political philosophy, a comprehensive guide to conduct and good order, and it coexisted quite comfortably with the actual religions of China, Daoism, Buddhism, and folk belief, which supplied the gods and the afterlife it left well alone.

“The emperor was an all-powerful god-king”

The emperor was styled the Son of Heaven and stood at the sacred centre of the cosmos, and a strong emperor could wield terrifying power. But the office was hedged with constraints that made it quite unlike the god-kingship of a pharaoh. The Mandate of Heaven made his authority conditional: rule badly and you could forfeit it, and rebellion against you then became legitimate. The vast bureaucracy that carried out his will also quietly constrained

it, since he depended entirely on the scholar-officials to run the empire at all. A revered tradition of remonstrance held that a loyal official was duty-bound to criticise the emperor to his face when he erred, and the court historians, whose verdict on his reign he could not dictate, were always watching. Ritual, precedent, and the weight of the Confucian order bound him at every turn. He was the most powerful man in his world, but he was not a free god. He was the linchpin of a system that disciplined him too.

“Ancient China invented everything, or nothing”

Two opposite errors, both worth resisting. The nationalist version claims almost every important technology for ancient China, which overreaches: many things were invented independently in several places, some celebrated Chinese inventions came long after the ancient period, as we saw with three of the famous four, and priority is often uncertain. The dismissive version, once common in the West, treats China as a place of derivative craft that never innovated, which is false and always was. The calibrated truth is more impressive than either myth. For a very long stretch ancient China was the most inventive society on earth, handing the world silk, paper, cast iron, and much else centuries ahead of anyone, without needing to have invented everything. The real achievement is large enough that it requires no inflation, and solid enough that it deserves no dismissal.

Use It

Unlike the ruins of Egypt or Babylon, the civilisation in this book is still here, still run on patterns two thousand years old, and now one of the two states that will shape the century. So the main use of this knowledge is not antiquarian. It is to read the present. When you understand the ancient grammar, a great deal of what China does, and much that puzzles outside observers, becomes legible. This section is how to use it, and where to stop.

Run the news past the deep patterns

The single biggest payoff is a habit: when a story about China crosses your screen, test it against the old grammar. Is this the Mandate of Heaven at work, the imperative of unity, or the Middle Kingdom worldview? Most of the large, recurring themes of Chinese politics map onto structures laid down before Rome fell, and once you can see the map, the headlines organise themselves into patterns instead of arriving as a stream of unconnected events. The rest of this section is the main patterns to watch for. The point is not that history dictates what China does, but that it supplies the vocabulary in which China understands itself, and knowing that vocabulary lets you hear what is being said.

Watch the Mandate logic

This is the oldest and most useful lens. The Communist Party holds no elections and claims no divine right; in practice its legitimacy rests on delivering order, stability, and rising prosperity, which is the Mandate of Heaven in modern dress, authority earned by performance and forfeit through failure. It explains a great deal at once. It explains why economic growth is treated as almost existential, why the state responds to natural disasters, epidemics, and mass unrest with such urgency, since each is, in the ancient grammar, a sign the Mandate might be slipping, and why a slowing economy registers as a political danger and not merely an economic one. The bargain is three thousand years old: keep the realm fed and stable, and be obeyed. Watch for it, and much of the behaviour that baffles outsiders falls into place. It also explains the ferocity with which the state moves against anything it reads as a portent of lost control, from mass protests to uncensored bad news, because in the ancient grammar the mere appearance of disorder is itself the danger, the visible sign that the Mandate may be slipping.

Understand the obsession with unity

When Beijing treats the unity and territorial integrity of the country as sacred and beyond compromise, over Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong, it is expressing the deepest political conviction the ancient world left it: that China is by nature one, that division is a wound, and that reunification is close to a sacred

duty. This is the Qin's legacy, alive and undiminished after two thousand years, and it is felt with an intensity that surprises outsiders who read these as ordinary territorial disputes. To the Chinese state they are something nearer to questions of civilisational wholeness. You need not share the conclusion to grasp that the historical charge behind it is real and very old.

See the Confucian and Legalist blend still running

The imperial state was Confucian on the surface and Legalist underneath, and the combination is strikingly visible now. On the Confucian side: the reverence for education and examination, so that the ferociously competitive national university exam is the old exam-meritocracy in modern form; the ideal of rule by an examined elite, now a technocratic party rather than a class of classicists; the constant language of harmony and order. On the Legalist side: a powerful centralised state, law understood substantially as an instrument of control rather than a limit on the rulers, and a machinery of surveillance and discipline that Han Fei would have recognised and approved. The ancient synthesis, a humane ideal draped over hard machinery, is not a museum piece. Watch, too, for the reflex that treats criticism of the state as a kind of disloyalty to the family of the nation, and for the official habit of speaking of the leadership as stern but caring elders: these are filial patterns of thought, two thousand years deep, doing quiet work inside a thoroughly modern state.

Use it as a lens that cuts both ways

The knowledge is most valuable as a corrective against two opposite distortions, and it is worth turning it deliberately on both. Against the Chinese state's own account, it lets you see where the seamless five-thousand-year national epic smooths over conquest, rupture, and the mess of the real past. Against the lazy Western account, it inoculates you against the worn tropes of a timeless, despotic, inscrutable China, by revealing a civilisation that changed constantly and whose politics follow a logic anyone can learn. A reader who resists both the propaganda and the condescension sees more clearly than a good many professional commentators.

The limits, and one serious warning

Be careful, because the neat parallel is a trap as much as a tool. History rhymes; it does not repeat. Modern China is not simply the latest dynasty in an eternal cycle. It is a one-party Leninist state with a globalised industrial economy, nuclear weapons, and a hundred features no emperor ever faced, and treating it as the Han with better technology will mislead you as badly as ignoring the past altogether. The Mandate lens is illuminating precisely because it is not a prophecy: it shows a pattern, not a script, and the moment you use it to predict with confidence what China must do next, you have overreached. The deepest error of all is the one this book has fought throughout, the notion that a civilisation has a fixed, timeless essence that dictates its conduct. Culture shapes;

it does not command. Use the ancient patterns to understand the present more richly, never to collapse it into destiny.

And be clear that this short book is a beginning, a map and not the territory: enough to make the news legible and further study rewarding, and no substitute for either.

The one thing to keep

If you keep one thing, keep this: China is not a riddle. It is a civilisation with a long, legible history and a deep internal logic, and that logic can be learned, which means the country most likely to shape your century is understandable rather than mysterious. The people who find China baffling are usually the ones who never learned its grammar and mistake their own ignorance for its inscrutability. You now have the start of that grammar: the Mandate, the drive to unity, the Middle Kingdom, the Confucian and Legalist blend, the long rhythm of the dynasties. Carry it, hold it lightly, keep adding to it, and one of the largest and most consequential stories on earth becomes something you can follow with your eyes open.

Terms

A glossary of the key terms and names used in this book, and a few you will meet the moment you read further.

Mandate of Heaven (Tianming). The doctrine that Heaven bestows the right to rule on a worthy dynasty and revokes it from a cruel or failing one, making authority conditional on good government and rebellion legitimate once it is lost. The foundation of Chinese political thought.

Dynastic cycle. The recurring pattern of a dynasty rising under a vigorous founder, flourishing, decaying through corruption and misrule, collapsing amid disaster and revolt, and being replaced by a new dynasty that claims the Mandate afresh.

Zhongguo. The Chinese name for China, meaning the central state or Middle Kingdom, and with it the worldview that places China at the hub of the world and all others at its margins.

Son of Heaven. The emperor, in his role as the ritual link between Heaven and the human world, holder of the Mandate and pivot of the cosmic order.

Dynasty. A line of hereditary rulers from one family, and the period during which it holds the Mandate. The dynasties named in this book, in order, are Xia (legendary), Shang, Zhou, Qin, and Han.

Xia. The first dynasty of traditional history, founded by the legendary Yu the Great. Unconfirmed by contemporary evidence

and possibly mythical; it stands on the frontier between legend and history.

Shang (c. 1600 to 1046 BCE). The first dynasty documented by its own records, known for bronze casting, chariot warfare, ancestor worship, and the oracle bones that carry the oldest Chinese writing.

Zhou (1046 to 256 BCE). The longest Chinese dynasty, which overthrew the Shang and introduced the Mandate of Heaven. Strong in its early Western Zhou phase, it became a powerless figurehead through the long Eastern Zhou decline.

Oracle bones. Ox shoulder blades and turtle shells inscribed with questions to the ancestors, heated until they cracked, and read for answers. The Shang divination records, and the earliest surviving Chinese writing.

Spring and Autumn, and Warring States. The two phases of the Eastern Zhou decline, running from the eighth to the third centuries BCE: an age of escalating warfare between fragmenting states that was also the golden age of Chinese philosophy.

Hundred Schools of Thought. The flowering of rival philosophies during the Warring States, as thinkers competed to answer how order might be restored to a broken world. It produced Confucianism, Daoism, Legalism, and much else.

Confucianism. The teaching of Confucius (551 to 479 BCE): order through morality, hierarchy, and ritual, built on personal virtue, the

reciprocal duties of the five key relationships, and above all filial piety. The moral backbone of imperial China.

Daoism. The teaching associated with Laozi and Zhuangzi: harmony through following the Dao, the natural way of things, and acting by wu wei, effortless non-action that works with nature rather than against it. The counter-current to Confucian earnestness.

Legalism. The hard-headed doctrine that order comes only from clear laws, severe penalties, and generous rewards, applied without favour by a powerful state. The operating ideology of the Qin.

Filial piety (xiao). The supreme Confucian virtue: the deep respect and obedient care that children owe their parents and elders, extended outward as the model for loyalty to all authority.

Qin (221 to 206 BCE). The short-lived dynasty that first unified China under its First Emperor, imposing central bureaucracy and standardising the script, coinage, and measures. Brutal and brief, but the maker of the enduring imperial system. The likely source of the name China.

Han (206 BCE to 220 CE). The classical golden age, which fused the Qin's administrative machine with Confucian legitimacy, opened the Silk Road, and set the mould of imperial China. The majority Chinese ethnic group still takes its name from it.

Scholar-official (mandarin). A member of the educated class that staffed the imperial bureaucracy, selected for mastery of the Con-

fucian classics. The most admired figure in imperial society, and the very image of a successful life.

Silk Road. The network of trade routes across Central Asia linking China to the wider world, opened under the Han. It carried silk west and, in return, goods, people, and ideas east, Buddhism above all.

Go Deeper

This was a short map of a vast subject. If you want to go further, here is where to start, and what each book is for.

The best readable account of the core period.

Mark Edward Lewis, *The Early Chinese Empires: Qin and Han* (2007). A clear, authoritative, and readable history of the classical age this book centres on, by a leading scholar, opening the excellent Harvard series on imperial China. It begins at the unification of 221 BCE, so for the earlier Shang and Zhou centuries pair it with *The Cambridge History of Ancient China* (Loewe and Shaughnessy, 1999), the standard scholarly reference for everything before the empire.

The great primary source.

Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian* (around 91 BCE), in Burton Watson's translation. The foundational masterpiece of Chinese history-writing, and the detective-story hero of this book: the account whose king lists the oracle bones later confirmed. To read it is to hear the ancient world describe itself, with all its judgements and drama intact.

The philosophy in his own words.

Confucius, *The Analects*, in D. C. Lau's translation. Short, fragmentary, and often surprising, it is the record of the teacher who shaped Chinese civilisation more than any other, and nothing conveys the texture of that mind like reading the actual sayings rather than a summary of them.

The whole sweep.

John Keay, *China: A History*. A brisk, accessible one-volume narrative of the entire Chinese story from the beginning to the present. Read it to see where the ancient foundations in this book lead across the following two thousand years, through the Tang, the Song, the Mongol and Manchu conquests, and on to the modern state.

Notes and Sources

The history of ancient China rests on a vast scholarship. The references below cover the foundational sources, the standard datings, and the specific attributions used in this book. Dates for the early period are approximate and in places debated, and Chinese words are given in pinyin.

The Core Ideas

The Mandate of Heaven. The doctrine (Tianming) was articulated by the Zhou after their conquest of the Shang around 1046 BCE, and is traditionally associated with the statesman known as the Duke of Zhou. It became the cornerstone of Chinese political theory.

The Middle Kingdom. The name Zhongguo, central state or Middle Kingdom, has its earliest known written appearance on the He zun, a Western Zhou bronze vessel of around the eleventh century BCE.

Unification. The state of Qin unified China in 221 BCE under its king, who took the title Qin Shi Huang, First Emperor. The standardisation of script, currency, and measures is associated with his chancellor Li Si.

The Hundred Schools. The Hundred Schools of Thought flourished during the Spring and Autumn (770 to 476 BCE) and Warring

States (475 to 221 BCE) periods. Confucius lived from 551 to 479 BCE; the leading Legalist thinker Han Fei died in 233 BCE.

The Confucian state. Confucianism became state orthodoxy under Emperor Wu of Han (reigned 141 to 87 BCE), promoted by the scholar Dong Zhongshu; the Imperial University was founded in 124 BCE. The competitive written examination system developed later, under the Sui and Tang dynasties.

Family and society. The four occupations (scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants) ranked the social orders, with merchants placed lowest. Ancestor veneration is attested in the Shang oracle bones, the oldest Chinese writing.

The inventions. Paper is traditionally credited to Cai Lun around 105 CE; Zhang Heng built his earthquake-detecting instrument in 132 CE; cast iron was produced in China from the Warring States period. Of the famous four great inventions, printing, gunpowder as a weapon, and the navigational compass were largely developed later, under the Tang and Song dynasties.

How It Actually Works

The early dynasties. The Shang (c. 1600 to 1046 BCE) is the earliest dynasty documented by contemporary records. The Xia remains archaeologically unconfirmed and is regarded by many scholars as legendary. The Zhou overthrew the Shang at the Battle of Muye, around 1046 BCE; the Western Zhou fell in 771 BCE.

Qin and Han. The Qin dynasty lasted from 221 to 206 BCE; the First Emperor died in 210 BCE, and the Terracotta Army was discovered by farmers in 1974. The Han dynasty ruled from 206 BCE to 220 CE, interrupted by the usurper Wang Mang (the Xin dynasty, 9 to 23 CE). The Yellow Turban Rebellion broke out in 184 CE; the last Han emperor abdicated in 220 CE.

How we know. The oracle bones were rediscovered in 1899, when the archaic script on so-called dragon bones sold as medicine was recognised. The king list they yielded matched the account in Sima Qian's Records of the Grand Historian (about 91 BCE), confirming the historicity of the Shang.

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