

History

China is one of the world's oldest civilizations with a recorded history of more than 5,000 years. The compass, gunpowder, the art of paper-making and block printing invented by the ancient Chinese have contributed immensely to the progress of mankind. The Great Wall, Grand Canal and other projects built by the Chinese people are regarded as engineering feats in the world.

Ancient History

Primitive Society

China's earliest primitive human discovered so far is known as Yuanmou Man, an early human fossil unearthed in Yuanmou in Yunnan Province who lived approximately 1.7 million years ago. The better-known Peking Man, discovered in the Zhoukoudian area in the suburbs of Beijing, lived about 600,000 years ago. Peking Man was able to walk upright, make and use simple tools, and make fire.

People in China take pride in calling themselves the descendants of Huang Di or Yellow Emperor, a tribal chief who dwelled in the Yellow River Valley more than four millennia ago. Prehistorical legends about the Yellow Emperor and other outstanding personages of his time abound in ancient Chinese books. Legend goes that the Yellow Emperor made weapons out of jade to conquer other tribes, while his wife, Lei Zu, introduced the rearing of silkworms. The Yellow Emperor taught tribemen to domesticate wild animals and to grow cereals, and as a result his tribes grew in strength and defeated the tribes under Yan Di (Emperor Yan). Later, the Yellow Emperor and Emperor Yan formed an alliance that conquered all the other tribes in the Yellow River Valley. Today the Yellow Emperor is regarded as the ancestor of the Chinese people, who call themselves the descendants of Yan Di and Huang Di.

Society in those bygone times, as reflected in the legends, was based on the primitive communion in which private property and the exploitation of man by man were unknown.

After the death of the Yellow Emperor, the primitive tribes in the Yellow River Valley were ruled in succession by such sage kings as Yao, Shun and Yu who subdued floods and harnessed rivers.

Slavery Society

The Xia Dynasty (2070–1600 BCE), the first dynasty that emerged in China 4,100 years ago, was founded by Qi, son of Yu who conquered floods and tamed rivers. The Xia Dynasty, which was a slave-owning society, was overthrown by warriors commanded by Shang Tang, the founder of the Shang Dynasty (1600–1046 BCE) during which the slave-owning system developed with the growth of farm and handicraft production. The art of smelting and casting bronze reached a higher level of development in this period during which recorded history commenced in China. As paper was then unknown, some of the writings in Shang times were cast in bronze, and some inscribed on tortoise shells or animal bones.

The Shang Dynasty was superseded by the Western Zhou Dynasty (1046–771 BCE) during which the slave-owning system grew more prosperous. The Western Zhou rulers instituted an enfeoffment system under which nobles were invested with hereditary titles as well as land along with the slaves working on it. Introduced then was the "nine-square pattern" of farming in which a tract of land was partitioned into nine squares. The eight outer squares were allocated to slaves who had to work the central square gratis for their masters.

The Spring and Autumn Period (770–476 BCE) witnessed the advent of the ox as a draught animal and the use of iron implements on the farm. This boosted farm output and made it possible for the opening up of more land for crop cultivation. As a result, more farmland came under private ownership and the disintegration of the slave system commenced to give way to a feudal society.

Feudal Society Came into Being

The up-and-coming land-owning or landlord class introduced reforms to change the land ownership system to its own advantage at the beginning of the Warring States Period (475–221 BCE). There were then seven vassal states contending with one another for hegemony. In the struggle for supremacy, the state of Qin based in Shaanxi Province, which had become powerful because of the fact that it had adopted drastic measures to reform the land ownership system, conquered all the other states to establish the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BCE), the first centralized, autocratic feudal empire in China. This was a signal victory for the new landlord class.

Emperor Qin Shi Huang of the Qin Dynasty carried out a lot of reform measures, including standardization of weights and measures and the initiation of a single currency and a unitary script, etc.

The sovereigns of the next 2,000-odd years followed the feudal governmental structure established

by him. He mobilized more than 300,000 people over a period of a dozen years to build the Great Wall, which stretches for 5,000 km in northern China.

He dispatched 500,000 warriors to garrison Lingnan (present-day Guangdong Province) and 700,000 men to erect his mausoleum. The Mausoleum of Qin Shi Huang along with a big army of life-sized terracotta warriors and battle steeds, which have been unearthed in the city of Xi'an, is a big attraction for tourists from all over the world.

Pauperized by such extravagances, the peasant masses rose up in arms and overthrew the Qin rulers to set up the Western Han Dynasty (206 BCE–25 CE).

During this dynastic period agriculture and handicraft made marked progress along with the flourishing of science, culture and the arts. Links between the different ethnic groups in the country were strengthened and exchanges with the outside world broadened. Zhang Qian, a diplomat of that time, who was dispatched as envoy to the Western Regions, opened the world-famous Silk Road.

As the Western Han Dynasty was later weakened by corruption, Liu Xiu, taking advantage of the strength of peasant uprisers, replaced the Western Han Dynasty with the Eastern Han Dynasty founded in 25. From this time onward, economy, science and culture continued to progress. However, contradictions within the ruling class flared up later and the uprisings of the Yellow Turbans led by Zhang Jiao hastened the disintegration of the Eastern Han Dynasty.

Split of Feudal States

There followed tangled warfare among various separatist regimes until three rival kingdoms Wei, Shu and Wu, came to the fore.

In 266 Sima Yan, an influential official of the Kingdom of Wei, dethroned its ruler and established the Western Jin Dynasty. He annexed the Kingdom of Wu in 280. So, with the Kingdom of Shu toppled by the Kingdom of Wei earlier in 263, the Three Kingdoms came to an end. Soon afterwards, nevertheless, tangled warfare broke out among various ethnic groups, resulting in the emergence of 16 small kingdoms in northern China and the downfall of the Western Jin Dynasty. In 317, the year that the Western Jin Dynasty was brought down, Sima Rui, a member of the royal house, set up the Eastern Jin Dynasty in the south.

In 386 there came into existence two antagonistic regimes—the Southern Dynasty in the south and the Northern Dynasty in the north.

Culmination of Feudal Society

At last, in 581, the country was unified under the Sui Dynasty. The nation's economy, however, was later ruined by Emperor Yang Di's extravagance and corruption as well as by his gigantic construction projects and excessive military spending. This brought about peasant uprisings which swept the whole country. Taking advantage of this situation, Li Yuan, a military commander of the dynasty, led his forces to take the capital Chang'an. He became the founder of the Tang Dynasty (618–907).

The Tang Dynasty witnessed a period of economic and cultural boom in China. At that time China was powerful and ranked among the most advanced countries in the world. Its foreign relations were broader than ever before. It forged friendly ties with Japan, Korea and many countries in West Asia, Europe and Africa, with its capital Chang'an serving as a center of cultural exchange among various countries.

Economically, agriculture and handicraft in Tang times reached a very high level of technology. Literary and artistic creations flourished. It was in the Tang period that most of the frescos in the Dunhuang Grottoes, a world-renowned treasure house of art, were done. A host of noted scientists and men of letters came to the fore, such as the high monk Yi Xing (alias Zhang Sui), an astronomer, and Li Bai and Du Fu, poets. Also accredited to the Tang Dynasty are the inventions of gunpowder, block printing and the astronomical clock, which have substantially contributed to the development of world culture.

The rebellion of An Lushan and Shi Siming, generals of the Tang court, marked the beginning of the decline of the Tang Dynasty, which came to an end in 907.

Development of Feudal Society

In the years that followed, constant strife plagued the country. In a space of 50 years, five dynasties (Later Liang, Later Tang, Later Jin, Later Han and Later Zhou) rose and fell in the Yellow River Basin. At the same time, 10 kingdoms including Former Shu, Wu, Min, Wuyue and Chu ruled different areas in the south. This period has come to be known as the period of Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms.

National unification was achieved again in 960 when Zhao Kuangyin, a general of the State of Later Zhou, founded the Song Dynasty with the capital in Kaifeng, modern Henan Province. This dynasty is known in history as the Northern Song Dynasty.

In Northern Song times some border tribes grew very strong. They were the Khitan of the Kingdom of Liao and the Nuzhen of the Kingdom of Jin in Northeast China, and the Dang Xiang of the Kingdom of Western Xia. They fought among themselves and against the Song government. After conquering the Khitan, the Nuzhen swept south and overthrew the Northern Song Dynasty. In 1127, Zhao Gou, brother of the last emperor of the Northern Song Dynasty, established a new government in Nanjing (now Shangqiu, Henan Province), which is historically known as the Southern Song Dynasty.

During the Song period agriculture and commerce flourished and science and technology made impressive strides. New cities sprang up. Overseas trade began to develop. A host of thinkers, scholars

and men of letters came to the fore. There was a boom in calligraphy, painting, sculpture and weaving art. Achievements in porcelain manufacture outshone all previous records. Gunpowder was widely used for military purposes. Especially noteworthy are the inventions of the compass and movable type printing which have greatly contributed to human progress.

While the Song and Nuzhen armies were locked in continuous warfare, the Mongols in the north rose to power under Genghis Khan, who unified all the Mongol tribes. He subjugated the Western Xia, Liao and Jin kingdoms one after another. His grandson, Kublai Khan, set up the Yuan Dynasty in 1271 and in 1276 overthrew the Southern Song Dynasty, thus unifying China once more.

The renewed national unification served to boost the economy, promote science and culture, improve the ties between various nationalities and increase contacts with foreign lands.

Decline of Feudal Society

During the nine decades of Yuan rule, however, there was no end to peasant insurrections.

In 1368, Zhu Yuanzhang, a peasant leader, established the Ming Dynasty and in the same year drove the Mongol emperor away from his capital (now Beijing), thereby restoring Han nationality rule in China.

During the Ming Dynasty, the growth of agriculture and handicraft production brought an expansion to the commodity economy. From the middle of the Ming times onward, capitalism began to burgeon in some handicraft industries in certain coastal regions. Meanwhile, overseas contacts increased. A notable example is provided by Zheng He, a noted navigator, who was sent overseas as an envoy at the head of a large fleet on seven voyages, the longest of which took him to the equator on the eastern African coast.

The Ming Dynasty was overthrown in 1644 by the peasant armies under the command of Li Zicheng and Zhang Xianzhong. In the same year Manchu armed forces pushed south of the Great Wall through Shanhaiguan Pass. They defeated the peasant armies, followed by the establishment of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911).

The Qing Dynasty reached the zenith of its power during the reigns of emperors Kang Xi, Yong Zheng and Qian Long. Its territory was extensive and production boomed. However, the isolationist policy carried out in the later years of the Qing government retarded the burgeoning of capitalism in China and kept the country ignorant of the political, economic, military and cultural developments in the West.

Modern History

In 1840, the British imperialists launched the Opium War against China. In its wake came invaders from various countries. The foreign powers forced the corrupt and incompetent Qing government to sign a series of unequal treaties. Consequently, China was gradually turned into a semi-feudal and semi-colonial country.

The revolution led by Dr. Sun Yat-sen overthrew the Qing Dynasty in 1911 and led to the founding of the Republic of China, thus putting an end to the more than 2,000 years of feudal, monarchic rule in China. Regrettably, the fruits of the 1911 Revolution were usurped by the warlord Yuan Shikai with the backing of imperialism.

Contemporary History

In 1919, the May 4th Movement broke out to spearhead against imperialism and feudalism. It is regarded as the ideological origin of many important events in modern Chinese history. Its direct cause was the unequal treaties imposed on China after the First World War. Motivated by strong patriotism, students initiated the movement, and it further developed into a national protest movement involving people from all walks of life. It also marked the introduction into China of various new ideologies, among which the spread of Marxism-Leninism is worthy of special mention. Under the influence of Russia's October Revolution of 1917, twelve delegates, including Mao Zedong, representing communist groups in different places throughout the nation, held the First National Congress in Shanghai in 1921 to found the Communist Party of China (CPC).

In 1924, the Kuomintang founded by Dr. Sun Yat-sen entered into cooperation with the Communist Party of China to launch from Guangdong Province in 1926 the Northern Expedition to overthrow imperialist-backed warlordism. In the following year, Chiang Kai-shek, Wang Jingwei and other Kuomintang right-wingers betrayed the revolution one after another. They set up in Nanjing a new regime that still went under the name of the "Republic of China."

Under Chiang Kai-shek's rule, there emerged in China national monopoly capitalism of a comprador and feudal nature. The fascist rule he instituted plunged the Chinese people into misery.

After 1931, Japan stepped up its aggression against China. This triggered off the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression six years later. For the second time the Communist Party and the Kuomintang Party entered into cooperation—this time to fight the Japanese invaders. The war dragged on for fourteen years until Japan surrendered in August 1945.

In 1946, Chiang Kai-shek launched an all-out attack against the resistance forces led by the Communist Party of China. Chiang was defeated, and the Kuomintang regime was toppled in 1949. Chiang fled to Taiwan Island with his remnant troops.

The People's Republic of China

The Founding of the PRC and the Socialist Transformation

On October 1, 1949, in a grand ceremony witnessed by crowds of people in Tian'anmen Square, Mao Zedong, chairman of the Central People's Government, solemnly proclaimed the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

From the inception of the People's Republic of China in October 1949 to 1956, the CPC led people of all ethnic groups to take the path from the new democracy to socialism, rapidly rehabilitating the country's economy, undertaking planned economic construction and accomplishing the socialist transformation of the private ownership of the means of production in most of the country. The guidelines and basic policies defined by the Party in this historical period were correct and led to brilliant successes.

In the first three years of the PRC, the Party cleared the mainland of bandits and the remnant armed forces of the Kuomintang reactionaries, peacefully liberated Xizang, established people's governments at all levels throughout the country, confiscated bureaucrat-capitalist enterprises and transformed them into state-owned socialist enterprises, unified the country's financial and economic work, stabilized commodity prices, carried out agrarian reform in the new liberated areas, suppressed counter-revolutionaries and unfolded the movements against the "three evils" of corruption, waste and bureaucracy and against the "five evils" of bribery, tax evasion, theft of state property, cheating on government contracts and stealing of economic information, the latter being a movement to beat back the attack mounted by the bourgeoisie. The Party effectively transformed the educational, scientific and cultural institutions of old China. While successfully carrying out the complex and difficult task of social reform and simultaneously undertaking the great war to resist US aggression and aid Korea, protect and defend the country, the Party rapidly rehabilitated the country's economy which had been devastated in old China. By the end of 1952, the country's industrial and agricultural production had attained record levels.

On the proposal of Comrade Mao Zedong in 1952, the Central Committee of the Party advanced the general line for the transition period, which was to realize the country's socialist industrialization and socialist transformation of agriculture, handicrafts and capitalist industry and commerce step by step over a fairly long period of time. This general line was a reflection of historical necessity.

Socialist industrialization is an indispensable prerequisite to the country's independence and prosperity.

With nationwide victory in the new-democratic revolution and completion of the agrarian reform, the contradiction between the working class and the bourgeoisie and between the socialist road and the capitalist road became the principal internal contradiction. The country needed a certain expansion of capitalist industry and commerce which were beneficial to its economy and to the people's livelihood. But in the course of their expansion, things detrimental to the national economy and the people's livelihood were bound to emerge. Consequently, a struggle between restriction and opposition to restriction was inevitable. The conflict of interests became increasingly apparent between capitalist enterprises on the one hand and the economic policies of the state, the socialist state-owned economy, the workers and staff in these capitalist enterprises and the people as a whole on the other. An integrated series of necessary measures and steps, such as the fight against speculation and profiteering, the readjustment and restructuring of industry and commerce, the movement against the "five evils," workers' supervision of production and state monopoly of the purchase and marketing of grain and cotton, were bound to gradually bring backward, anarchic, lop-sided and profit-oriented capitalist industry and commerce into the orbit of socialist transformation.

Among the individual peasants, and particularly the poor and lower-middle peasants who had just acquired land in the agrarian reform but lacked other means of production, there was a genuine desire for mutual aid and cooperation in order to avoid borrowing at usurious rates and even mortgaging or selling their land again with consequent polarization, and in order to expand production, undertake water conservancy projects, ward off natural calamities and make use of farm machinery and new techniques. The progress of industrialization, while demanding agricultural products in ever increasing quantities, would provide stronger support for the technical transformation of agriculture, and this also constituted a motive force behind the transformation of individual into co-operative farming.

As is borne out by history, the general line for the transition period set forth by the Party was entirely correct.

During the period of transition, the Party creatively charted a course for socialist transformation that suited China's specific conditions. In dealing with capitalist industry and commerce, it devised a whole series of transitional forms of state capitalism from lower to higher levels, such as the placing of state orders with private enterprises for the processing of materials or the manufacture of goods, state monopoly of the purchase and marketing of the products of private enterprise, the marketing of products of state-owned enterprises by private shops, and joint state-private ownership of individual enterprises or enterprises of a whole trade, and it eventually realized the peaceful redemption of the bourgeoisie, a possibility envisaged by Marx and Lenin. In dealing with individual farming, it devised transitional forms of cooperation, proceeding from temporary or all-the-year-round mutual-aid teams, to elementary agricultural producers' co-operatives of a semi-socialist nature and then to advanced agricultural producers' co-operatives of a fully socialist nature, always adhering to the principles of voluntariness and

mutual benefit, demonstration through advanced examples, and extension of state help. Similar methods were used in transforming individual handicraft industries. In the course of such transformation, the state-capitalist and cooperative economies displayed their unmistakable superiority. By 1956, the socialist transformation of the private ownership of the means of production had been largely completed in most regions. But there had been shortcomings and errors. From the summer of 1955 onwards, the Party was overhasty in pressing on with agricultural co-operation and the transformation of private handicraft and commercial establishments; it was far from meticulous, the changes were too fast, and it did its work in a somewhat summary, stereotyped manner, leaving open a number of questions for a long time. Following the basic completion of the transformation of capitalist industry and commerce in 1956, the Party failed to do a proper job in employing and handling some of the former industrialists and businessmen. But on the whole, it was definitely a historic victory for the Party to have effected, and to have effected fairly smoothly, so difficult, complex and profound a social change in so vast a country with its several hundred million people, a change, moreover, which promoted the growth of industry, agriculture and the economy as a whole.

A Brief Chinese Chronology

Xia Dynasty	about 2070–1600 BCE
Shang Dynasty	about 1600–1046 BCE
Western Zhou Dynasty	1046–771 BCE
Spring and Autumn Period	770–476 BCE
Warring States	475–221 BCE
Qin Dynasty	221–206 BCE
Han Dynasty	206 BCE–220 CE
Western Han	206 BCE–25 CE
Including Wang Mang	(9–23 CE)
and Gengshi Emperor	(23–25 CE)
Eastern Han	25–220 CE
Three Kingdoms	220–280 CE
Wei	220–265 CE
Shu	221–263 CE
Wu	222–280 CE
Jin Dynasty	265–420 CE
Western Jin Dynasty	265–317 CE
Eastern Jin Dynasty	317–420 CE
Northern and Southern Dynasties	420–589 CE
Sui Dynasty	581–618 CE
Tang Dynasty	618–907 CE
Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms	907–960 CE
Song Dynasty	960–1279 CE
Northern Song Dynasty	960–1127 CE
Southern Song Dynasty	1127–1279 CE
Liao Dynasty	916–1125 CE
Western Xia Dynasty	1038–1227 CE
Jin Dynasty	1115–1234 CE
Yuan Dynasty	1271–1368 CE
Ming Dynasty	1368–1644 CE
Qing Dynasty	1644–1911 CE
Republic of China	1912–1949 CE
People's Republic of China	founded on October 1, 1949