

# China: The Middle Kingdom

The ancient name for the land we call China is *Chung Kuo* --- a name that means the “Middle Kingdom.” The Chinese thought that their land was the center of the world. For thousands of years they met no civilized neighbors. Everything around ancient China was barbarian territory, at least as far as the Chinese were concerned.

Over the centuries, China expanded from a small kingdom along the Yellow River to cover much of southeastern and central Asia. China today stretches from the cold northern plains of Asia to the tropical jungles of Southeast Asia. China has some of the world’s tallest mountains (the Himalayas), most **barren** deserts (the Gobi), and wildest rivers (the Yellow River and the Yangtze River). China has fertile lowlands and **arid** plateaus, snow-swept steppes and tropical jungles.

Two great rivers cross China from west to east—the Yellow River in the north, and the Yangtze River in the south. Civilization in China grew up along these two

**tropical:** a word referring to the area around the tropics

**barren:** not able to produce anything

**arid:** having very little rainfall; dry

**topsoil:** the upper part of the soil; the soil on the surface

**semitropical:** having hot summers and warm winters, with nearly no frost or snow

rivers. The valley of the Yellow River, where Chinese civilization began, has rich farmland, with deep, but dry, **topsoil**. In the beginnings of China’s history, grain crops such as millet and wheat grew abundantly in the Yellow River Valley. However, the Yellow River’s annual floods have caused much hardship for the farmers and cities along the river. The valley of the Yangtze River, which is much farther south, is **semitropical** and surrounded by beautiful mountains. Rice growing made it a wealthy region. Farther south in China, tropical plants

and flowers grow among the many farms and neatly ordered towns.

North of China lies Mongolia --- a region of frozen plains and desert-like hills. Primitive tribes and nomads once lived in Mongolia, and the emperors of China built the marvelous “Great Wall” to keep them from invading China. In western China, the Gobi Desert and the Tibetan Mountains stretch for thousands of miles, from east to west. For centuries, these wild and desert lands made travel difficult between Europe and China and cut off almost all contact between them. The Silk Road, a great caravan route, stretched from China’s capital, Changan, across the desert wastes. It ran from oasis to oasis all the way to Persia. Merchants traveling along this road brought treasured silk to the Mediterranean world in return for Western gold. Except for this trade, however, China had little contact with other civilizations. The Chinese mistrusted strangers so much that at times all foreigners were forbidden to set foot on Chinese soil.

## Early Chinese Dynasties

The Chinese divide their history into eras that are named for the principal royal families or dynasties that ruled them. Chinese history is said to have begun with mythical god-like rulers, called the *Three Rulers*. The Three Rulers are said to have invented civilization; and, if they existed at all, they lived sometime between 3000 and 2000 B.C. They were followed by human rulers, called the Five Emperors. The first dynasty for which we have certain historical evidence is the Shang Dynasty, which ruled northeastern China from about 1766 to 1022 B.C.

The dynasty that followed the Shang, the Zhou Dynasty, ruled China for an amazingly long time --- 900 years. Under the Zhou kings, who had their capital in north-central China, Chinese lords conquered lands to the south, west, and east. The Zhou Empire extended from the Pacific Ocean to the mountains of the west, and included both the Yangtze and Yellow River Valleys. Farming practices improved during this period, and industry and commerce sprang up.

The culture of China under the Zhou Dynasty was rich. In religion, people worshiped, besides ancestors and spirits, a supreme God. This God, it was believed, loved good and just actions and hated evil deeds. The Zhou Chinese greatly honored the family, for they thought it the most important building block of society. China had schools, too, during this period, and artists who created works of literature, including poetry.

After a time, however, the Zhou kings grew weaker while the nobles grew stronger. The king could no longer rule the whole country and control the lords. Because a kind of feudal government developed during this period and different regions were constantly battling each other, this period of the Zhou Dynasty was called *Warring States*. Yet, it was during this period that the great thinkers of Chinese philosophy arose. The most important of these was a man called K'ung-tzu, whom we remember as Confucius.

### A Teacher of Tradition and Harmony

Confucius (551-479 B.C.) was an aristocrat from the small state of Lu in northeastern China. He wrote about morality, praising education and proper behavior toward one's parents, peers, superiors, and others. Confucius taught that one had to respect his elders and show obedience to his superiors. According to Confucius, a person became worthy of a great position, not because he had a noble parent, but by his own talents and moral character.

Confucius took on a small band of students, who followed him from Lu to other states and secured for him his first government post when he was old. He devoted his old age to collecting and writing down the great poetry and ideas of China under the Zhou Dynasty. Confucius is known for a compilation of poems called *The Book of Songs*,

and a history called the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. The work *Lunyu* (known in English as the *Analects*) contains sayings of Confucius that were probably brought together in a book by generations of his disciples.

Confucius gave China the social and moral ideas that have guided its civilization over the centuries since he lived. Confucius did not establish a religion, though he called on men to honor traditional religious rituals, especially reverence for ancestors. Rituals were important for Confucius, because he thought they joined people together in friendship and mutual respect.

Confucius did not come up with new ideas; rather, he saw himself as a preserver of the institutions and traditions of China. He rejected the idea that human beings are individuals that have no natural connection with one another. He wanted to give new life to the institutions that united people --- the family especially, but also the local community, the school, and the kingdom. He opposed the kind of society where the rich and powerful for their own benefit rule and abuse the weak and poor.

Rulers, said Confucius, should seek first to become good men themselves and then govern more by their moral example than by force. Rulers are not to provide only for the physical needs of their people but to educate them as well. Formal education was very important to Confucius and his followers after him. Subjects, said Confucius, should show respect to their rulers, obey the laws, and participate in the rituals that tie society together. In turn, every person has the duty to show **piety** (or profound respect) to his parents, his superiors, and to the king.

**piety:** the showing of reverence to God and those in authority, especially parents

Every person must strive to discipline him or herself, said Confucius, and conform to the rituals of society. By striving to be virtuous, one was being true to himself. At the same time, a person had to be considerate of others, for only in this way could everyone in society be

joined together in harmony. The maxim, "Do not do to others what you would not want others to do to you," was the golden rule of Confucius's thought.

## The Empire of the "Sons of Han"

In 249 B.C., the last Chou king was removed from the throne. Three years later, a lord named Zheng made himself king of all China, calling himself the "First Emperor." He was the founder of the Qin Dynasty.

Zheng's reign began with terror. He killed local rulers to force the warring states to obey him alone. To keep his subjects from questioning him and his deeds, he forbade all his subjects to discuss philosophy. They were also not to praise what had happened in the past or criticize what was happening in their own time. Zheng, in particular, did not like Confucianism, because it encouraged people to do good for its own sake. Zheng

wanted his people simply to obey his laws and commands. He did not want them to think about whether doing so was right or wrong.

Zheng accomplished one of the wonders of the world: he built the first Great Wall to keep the fierce horsemen from Mongolia from invading China. The Great Wall today begins on the Pacific coast, at the Yalu River, and continues for 3,000 miles over the mountains and deserts to the sands of the western Gobi Desert. The first Great Wall was not so long, but it stretched for over 1,000 miles. Zheng forced thousands of peasants and political troublemakers to work on the wall. They had to ram dirt into frames to create bricks and haul great stones from quarries. Thousands died because of the extremely hard labor they were forced to do.

Zheng also forced peasants to dig a canal, linking rivers and lakes, so that shipping could move between the Yangtze and Yellow Rivers. The construction of the "Grand Canal," as it is called, took almost as many lives as the building of the Great Wall.

The Qin Dynasty did not last long after Zheng's death in 210 B.C. His reign had been too cruel and terrifying and so harmful to China that it brought about a rebirth of the Chinese love of tradition and sense of purpose. This led, finally, to one of the greatest periods of Chinese history --- the empire of the Han Dynasty.

## **The Han Dynasty (206 B.C.–A.D. 220)**

Zheng's son tried to rule China after his father's death but was murdered in 207 B.C. Civil war then broke out until a peasant, called Liu Bang, won the command of the army and united central China. He proclaimed himself emperor of China (the first time a commoner had done so), and the Chinese people generally accepted him as their ruler. They had had enough of tyranny and civil war. Liu Bang was the founder of the Han Dynasty. So great was this dynasty that, not only did it rule China for 426 years, but it gave a name to the Chinese people. Ever since, the Chinese have called themselves the "Sons of Han."

The Han emperors did not try to control every aspect of life in China, like Zheng had done. For instance, the Han allowed some local aristocrats to go back to their lands and rule them in the name of the emperor. Han laws, too, followed the philosophy of Confucius. The Han emperors wanted people to obey the laws because it was the right thing to do, not just because they were afraid of punishment.

The Han dynasty united all of central China by learning rather than regulations. The Han emperors wanted the most capable men to serve as civil servants, and so the Han encouraged education. They were the first to use examinations to find the best minds in China for the civil service. Eventually, all of urban and rural China was included in this educational system. Though the civil service examination was open to all classes, it was expensive to prepare for it --- which meant that few besides the wealthy could hope to take the test. Still, some poor men did pass the examination; in

this way, even a poor peasant could become a leader in China. Also, over a period of several hundred years, the Chinese language spoken by the Han monarchs replaced local languages and customs.

The Han emperors carried on wars against the “barbarian” peoples in the lands northwest of central China and Central Asia. Under the Han, the Chinese conquered new lands in Central China and far into the south. They established trade routes that crossed thousands of miles of desert mountains and connected China with the countries of the Mediterranean. The Han Chinese traded with the Roman Empire, where Chinese porcelain and tea were greatly admired. The greatest Chinese trade item was silk, a fine cloth made from the cocoon web of a silkworm.

The Han Dynasty removed Zheng’s ban on ancient books, and scholars began to copy them and write new works of their own. Poetry flourished under Han Dynasty, as did the writing of history. Under the Han monarchs, the Chinese invented paper, water clocks, sundials, and instruments for use in studying the heavens. Painters, weavers, sculptors, and architects created beautiful works of art.

The Han Dynasty was one of the greatest periods in Chinese history. It created one of the most advanced civilizations the world has ever seen.

## **A New Way for China**

When the Han Dynasty came to an end around A.D. 220, it was followed by three-and-a-half centuries where China was divided into more than one kingdom. During this period, China suffered from civil wars and from invasions by Mongols, Turks, and people called the Hsiung Nu. China at last was reunited under the Sui Dynasty, which ruled from 589-618, and then the Tang Dynasty, which reigned from 618-907. The Tang united all the kingdoms of China and, under their rule, China became for a time the largest and strongest empire in the world. The Tang emperors conquered areas around China, including important trade routes that ran north of central China to Europe.

A new religion or philosophy came to China during the Han Dynasty and grew in popularity in the years China was divided. This religion was Buddhism.

Buddhism was not a native Chinese religion. It came originally from India and so its writings were originally written in Sanskrit, a language of India. The translation of the Sanskrit writings into Chinese was very difficult, and Buddhism at first grew slowly in China. It attained its greatest hold on China during the Tang dynasty and eventually became one of the most important religions of China.

## **The Development of Buddhism**

Buddhism has its roots in the religion of the Aryan people who invaded and settled India around 1500 B.C. Since the Aryans belonged to the larger family of Indo-European

peoples (which include Europeans as well as Persians and other peoples), the heroic stories they told about their gods were similar to the stories the Greeks and Romans told about their gods and heroes. The chief Aryan gods were the three brothers, Brahman, Indra, and Varuna, who were similar in many ways to the Greek gods Hades, Poseidon, and Zeus.

Though the chief god of the Aryan people was Indra, the war god, the Aryan priests (called brahmins) worshiped Brahman, the god of enlightenment. The sacred books of the Aryans, called the *Vedas*, speak of some 33 gods, but the Aryans added the gods of conquered peoples to their **pantheon** until Indian civilization was worshipping hundreds of gods.

A major religious change occurred in Aryan society around the 600s B.C. While the Aryan lords called rajas and their warriors stole cattle and waged **petty** wars to strengthen their growing kingdoms, the brahmins became more influential among the people. The people honored the priests because they knew the complex rituals for controlling the gods. Kings had to listen to the brahmins' demands and buy their favor. In this way, the brahmins became the highest **caste** in Indian society. The religion of the brahmins is called Hinduism.

**pantheon:** a group of gods arranged in a family

**petty:** small and with little importance or value

**caste:** a social group that excludes everyone outside of itself; a distinct class

To escape the power of the brahmins, some men wandered off into the wilderness to live as hermits in search of spiritual knowledge.

They undertook heroic fasts and acts of self-denial. They sang and performed sacred dances, unaware of anyone near them. They went into long trances. These hermits lived on what people gave them as they wandered from village to village, teaching their wisdom. Without using the ritual spells of the brahmins, the hermits blessed those who were kind to them.

The hermits' pursuit of religious wisdom transformed Indian life. Their teachings were set forth in a series of poems called the *Upanishads*, a word meaning the "meditations." The *Upanishads* say people should trust religious insight over what one can learn through study. They counsel people who want to escape from earthly desires and pains that they should practice self-denial instead of indulging in earthly pleasures.

According to the *Upanishads*, Brahman is the creator of the universe, and with him are two other gods --- Shiva, the destroyer of creation, and Vishnu, who preserves the universe that Brahman creates. Shiva's wife (called Parvati, Kali, or Durga) was the most important god of the Hindu religion.

The *Upanishads* also speak of reincarnation. Reincarnation is the belief that after death the immortal soul does not go to live forever in a heaven or hell but is reborn in another creature. The Hindus believe the soul is "reincarnated" many times. How one will live in a future life depends on how well he or she lives in this life.

The *Upanishads* developed the idea of “the universal spirit.” According to the *Upanishads*, the gods are just different “faces” of the universal spirit. Sometimes this universal spirit is called Brahman; sometimes it is presented as something greater even than Brahman.

## Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha

In the 6th century B.C., an Indian prince named Siddhartha Gautama accomplished his own spiritual journey and taught a new way of spiritual enlightenment. This method of spiritual growth came to be called Buddhism from its founder, Siddhartha, who was later called Buddha, or “enlightened one.”

According to Buddhist legend, at Siddhartha’s birth, a **soothsayer** prophesied that the child would one day see four signs that would convince him of the misery of the world. Seeing these signs, Siddhartha would choose to be either a teacher or a tyrant. To prevent this prophecy from coming true, Siddhartha’s father tried to shelter him from all sickness and decay and surround him only with youth, beauty, and pleasure.

**soothsayer:** one who foretells future events

One day, however, Siddhartha was riding in his hunting preserve when he came upon a gnarled and feeble old man who had somehow wandered into the park. Having never seen an old person, Siddhartha asked his charioteer what this creature could be. It is “Old Age,” the charioteer said. On the ride home, Siddhartha passed a beggar covered with sores and shivering with fever. “What is the matter with this man?” he asked. “Sickness,” replied the charioteer. Just then a funeral procession rounded the corner, and seeing the corpse, Siddhartha asked, “What is this?” “Death,” was the reply.

Troubled by these sights, Siddhartha left home at the age of 29 to learn the mystery of Old Age, Sickness, and Death. Finally, in his 36th year, he sat down under a great fig tree --- which Buddhists call the *bodhi*, the tree of wisdom. He vowed to sit there until he had solved the three riddles of suffering. For seven weeks he sat, fasting and thinking. At last he entered a state of mind that seemed to be neither being or nonbeing. It was a timeless realm of meditation. Buddhism would later call that state of mind, *nirvana* --- a word meaning “detachment.” In that moment Siddhartha became *the Buddha*, the “Enlightened One.”

Siddhartha wanted to know why there is sorrow and suffering in the world. His answer was that sorrow and suffering come from desire for pleasure and fear of pain. If people want to rid themselves of sorrow and suffering, said Siddhartha, they have to purify the spirit through right thinking and right conduct. Siddhartha did not abandon all the gods of Hinduism, but he taught that religious rituals were of no use. Men of all classes flocked to his message, and the new religion spread quickly throughout northern India.

People were attracted to the simple ideas of Buddhism and to the fact that, unlike Hinduism, it did not divide people into castes. Even though it did not entirely break off from Hinduism until later years, Buddhism was for several centuries the major rival to Hinduism in India.

## Buddhism in China

Missionaries carried Buddhism from its birthplace in India to Burma, Thailand, and Southeast Asia. They followed the trade routes from northwestern India into Central Asia, where Buddhism flourished for centuries until Islam destroyed it there. Buddhism became the majority religion on the island of Sri Lanka, south of the Indian mainland. Today in Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam, most people are Buddhist.

Buddhism may have come to China as early as the third century B.C. Buddhist tradition, however, says that Mingdi, an emperor of the Han dynasty who reigned in the first century A.D., brought Buddhism to China after he dreamed of a flying god of gold that he thought was a vision of Buddha. Whether or not this story is true, Buddhism spread among many even of the common people of China, who added ideas from their own religion, Taoism, to it.

After the end of the Han Dynasty, when China was divided into more than one kingdom, non-Chinese rulers in northern China used Buddhist monks as counselors and magicians. Elsewhere in China, members of the upper classes and the learned studied and adopted Buddhist ideas and practices. In the fifth and sixth centuries, Buddhist schools and monasteries grew up in China, and even peasants adopted Buddhism. Under the Sui Dynasty (581-618), Buddhism became for the first time one of the official religions of the realm.

Chinese missionaries brought Buddhism into Korea in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The people of Korea, who inhabit a peninsula that lies between the Yellow Sea and the Sea of Japan, had long been influenced by Chinese culture. This was especially true of northern Korea, which by the end of the first century B.C. was under direct Chinese rule. Though southern Korea remained outside of Chinese control, its culture was strongly influenced by Chinese culture.

By 300, Korea was divided into three independent kingdoms --- Koguryō (in northern Korea), Paekche (in southwest Korea), and Silla (in southeast Korea.) For about 700 years, these three kingdoms waged constant war on each other, while Silla itself suffered numerous attacks from Japan.

It was in this world of warring kingdoms that Buddhism made its first inroads into Korea. As was often the case in the ancient world, the new religion first found favor among the ruling classes. It was the aristocracy of the three kingdoms who first adopted Buddhist ideas and practices, which then gradually spread among the common people.

Korean Buddhism benefited from a number of remarkable teachers, among whom was Wonhyō Daisa (617-686). Wonhyō was a monk who studied not only

Buddhism but the Chinese Taoist religion and Confucianism. In his earlier life he was a teacher for the royal family of Silla as well as the nobility; but later he abandoned his monk's robes, dressed as a common man, and lived the life of a wanderer. Using music, literature, and dance, he sought to spread Buddhist ideas among the common people. He tried as well to unite the various **sects** into which Buddhism had become divided.

It was during Wonhyō's lifetime, in 660, that Silla united all the Korean kingdoms under its power. The unification of the peninsula helped Buddhism spread and flourish among the Korean people. Like Wonhyō, the great thinkers of Korean Buddhism tended to seek for unity among the various schools of Buddhist thought and practice.

**sect:** a group of people who have the same beliefs

In the Middle Ages, however, Korean Buddhism fell away from its earlier, nobler ideals. The government, too, began to persecute Buddhists and remove privileges from the monks. Finally, by the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Confucianism replaced Buddhism as the official religious philosophy of Korea.

## The Golden Age of China

It was under the Tang Dynasty that China had its only official empress --- Empress Wu Zhao, who took power in 690. With her beauty and wiles, Wu had married an emperor; then, after his death, she married his grown son from another marriage. She then poisoned her young husband and killed three of her own sons. After removing her fourth and last son from the throne, Wu declared herself a man and crowned herself emperor. She put to death anyone who opposed her.

Empress Wu ruled ably and extended the territory of her empire south and north. She made Buddhism the official religion of the realm and gave much wealth to Buddhist monasteries. In 705, however, she was overthrown, and her youngest son was made emperor in her place.

Seven years after Wu was overthrown, one of China's greatest emperors, Hsuan-Tsung, came to power. Emperor Hsuan-Tsung's capital city, Chang-an, in central China, became a brilliant center of culture and a fabulously rich city. The greatest Chinese poets and painters lived and worked in Chang-an --- including the two poets Tu Fu and Li Po. Hsuan-Tsung supported thousands of musicians, dancers, and actors. He established China's first musical academy, called the "Pear Garden."

Trade between China and Central Asia, India, and Persia developed during the Tang Golden Age. The emperor's court sent ambassadors to the courts of Persia and, even, Constantinople. Because of this, many foreigners came to live in Chang-an --- Syrians, Arabs, Japanese, Persians, Koreans, and Jews. These peoples enriched Chinese culture and practiced various religions, including Islam, Judaism, and the Christian faith. The first Christians had come to China in the 600s. These were heretical Christians,

called Nestorians, who refused to call Mary the Mother of God. The Nestorians built the first Christian church in China in 636.

Hsuan-Tsung's reign, however, ended sadly. In 751, his armies were defeated by the Turks in western Asia, and in 755 a rebellion broke out against the emperor. The great capital, Chang-an, was **sacked**. After Hsuan-Tsung's death in 756, China suffered from invasions and civil wars. Millions of Chinese died. The empire lost a good amount of the territory it had gained under Empress Wu.

**sack:** to plunder (a captured town)

But even after 755, China under the Tang continued to experience growth and prosperity. People in the north of China entered the more fertile lands of the south where they grew, not only grain as they had in the north, but new crops such as tea and sugarcane. In the fertile Yangtze River Valley, farmers grew rice and cultivated new varieties of grain. Markets for both agricultural and other goods sprang up all over China, both in big cities and provincial towns. The growth of banking led to more widespread use of silver coins in place of silk, the traditional item used in payment for goods. Trade between foreign countries and China continued, though Arabs, Koreans, Persians, and others (not native Chinese) carried on such trade.

The Chinese civil service expanded greatly under Empress Wu and the Tang rulers that followed her. During this period, the civil service examinations became a way for younger sons in aristocratic families to enter the government. And, since students studied Confucian texts to prepare for the examinations, they became the means by which Confucianism came to dominate the government of China. When eventually candidates who passed the test began to be admitted to higher government offices, they began to take the place of aristocrats, who had been the chief hindrance to the emperor's power. Unlike the aristocrats, the new civil servants were faithful to the emperor. In this way, the emperor increased in power, and government became more centralized.

## The Middle Kingdom in the Middle Ages

After the Tang Dynasty came to an end in 907, China was again divided between several governments. This lasted until 960, when the Song Dynasty reunited almost all of China. During the 300 or so years the Song emperors reigned, China fought continuous wars with a nomadic people called the Tatars and, later, the savage Mongols.

Yet, despite the wars, China under the Song Dynasty was prosperous and had the most advanced culture in the world. The wealthy lived lives of ease and beauty, and even poor farmers lived fairly well. But, under the Song emperors, only the wealthy were able to afford the training that was needed to take the civil service examinations. Thus, only the rich became civil servants. Yet, by the time the Song Dynasty came along, these civil servants had replaced the aristocracy in the government, thus bolstering the power of the emperor.

The growth of the Chinese population to over 100 million (the largest in the world) during the Song period meant more land had to be cultivated. Chinese farmers improved their tools and began planting crops that had much higher yields than anything the Chinese had previously known. Among these crops was an early ripening rice that had so short a growing period that farmers could harvest two and sometimes even three crops a year. Besides foodstuffs, Chinese farmers grew cotton, which provided clothing for rich and poor, and silk and hemp.

Mining of gold, silver, lead, and tin also increased during the Song Dynasty, as did manufacturing, especially, of porcelain. A network of state-maintained highways, as well as advances in bridge building, aided trade. Rivers continued to provide highways for merchants; large ships having multiple decks and propelled by paddles passed up and down China's interior waterways. Trade by sea was made easier and expanded because of the invention of accurate compasses and charts.

Another art that the Chinese brought to a high level of development during the Song Dynasty was printing. Since about the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D., the Chinese had been using paper; about 2,500 years before that, they had invented ink. Maybe sometime in the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D., the Chinese were printing images to paper using a wood block. An artisan would carve a raised image of a text or picture into the wood, cover it with ink, and press the image onto the paper. It was not until around 1140, however, that the Chinese began to use movable type. Instead of using a single wood block, artisans would make individual characters or letters out of a mixture of clay and glue, hardened by baking. These figures would then be arranged on an iron plate to form texts. The figures then could be detached from the plate and rearranged to form a new text. Yet, though movable type printing was invented in China (some three hundred years before it was discovered in Europe), it did not become widely adopted there.

Besides such practical arts as shipbuilding and bridge construction, printing, medicine, and even gunpowder (for guns and fireworks), Song China produced fine poetry, beautiful paintings, and new ideas in philosophy. New discoveries were made as well in medicine, including acupuncture and treatments for diseases such as rheumatism and paralysis. Under the Song emperors, the teachings of Confucius became the chief philosophy of life, and so the Chinese valued scholarship and moral living.

## **The Triumph of Neo-Confucianism**

When he took power, the first emperor of the Song Dynasty, Taizu (960-976), tried to base his rule on the ideals of Confucius. He lived modestly in his personal life and, as emperor, he sought to learn from the wisdom of his counselors. Desiring to be a just and kindly ruler, he tried to ease the burden of the taxes the people had to pay. And even in war, Taizu sought justice and gentleness. He did not treat his defeated rivals with anything but kindness and generosity.

Confucian ideals underwent a revival in the years after the death of Emperor Taizu. Confucian scholars began to take on Buddhist ideas, as well as those of the native Chinese religion, Taoism. They began to dedicate themselves in a more intense way to philosophy, ethics, and politics, as well as individual self-discipline and refinement. The goals of these Confucians were to better the moral lives of the people and keep China a great and powerful land.

This movement has been called Neo-Confucianism. Its most important figure was a civil servant named Zhu Xi, who lived from 1130 to 1200. Zhu Xi thought the Chinese people needed to rediscover the true teachings of Confucius --- and Zhu Xi believed his version of Confucianism embodied these teachings. His school of Confucian thought became known as the "School of the True Way" and, later, as the "School of Universal Principles."

Zhu Xi saw that the goal of education was to help people cultivate a sense of morality, teaching them to do what is right and avoid what is wrong. He was not content, however, with helping people be moral individuals; he sought to bring about a moral society which, he thought, would lead to good government. Zhu Xi believed followers of the True Way should reach out to the poor as well as the rich. The Neo-Confucians produced a kind of catechism as a means of teaching the way of virtue even to the simplest people. It was not long before storytellers and companies of actors and other performing artists were traveling about, spreading the teachings of the True Way.

But even though Zhu Xi and his followers did not seek political power for themselves, they earned the envy of powerful men in government, who thought the School of the True Way threatened the government. Because of this, Zhu Xi and many leaders of the True Way were banished to distant parts of the realm. Such treatment, however, made the Neo-Confucians heroes, and after only a few years the government lifted the ban on the School of the True Way.

In the years following the lifting of the ban, Zhu Xi's teachings grew in importance and in the favor of the court. When, in the 1230s, the Mongols conquered parts of the northern China and established what they called a Confucian state, the Song government proclaimed Zu Xi's teachings the true, orthodox Confucianism. Thus, the True Way became the official philosophy of the schools, and from the schools spread to all of China.

## The Song is Sung

The need to protect China from foreign invaders was what finally ended the Song Dynasty. Needing protection against the Tatars and other enemies, the Song emperors became allies with the Mongols. The Mongols were masterful horsemen and the most skillful and brutal warriors of their time. A nomadic people, they traveled from place to place, killing or enslaving the peoples who lived on the lands they coveted.

The Mongol leaders, Genghis Khan and his son, Ogodei Khan, defeated China's enemies. But then, the Song emperors and the Mongols quarreled, and Ogodei invaded China. In 1260, Genghis Khan's grandson, Kublai Khan, set up his capital in Beijing, a city in northern China. Determined to become emperor, he invaded southern China and in a few short years conquered all of China. In 1279, the last Song emperor in despair flung himself into the sea, and Kublai Khan became emperor of China, establishing what he called the Yuan Dynasty.

## The Yuan Dynasty—

### Rule of the Mongols (1279–1368)

When he became emperor of China, Kublai Khan ruled a vast territory, stretching from Eastern Europe and Mesopotamia to the Pacific Ocean. As emperor, however, Kublai began adopting Chinese ways. His reign was thus brilliant and very prosperous. Under his rule, roads were built and farming flourished. Trade with Europe increased, though merchants had to cross long miles over land and sea to go to and from China. As a result of this trade, Chinese inventions in printing, gunpowder, and porcelain, as well as Chinese medical techniques came into Europe. In Beijing, Kublai built a magnificent palace for himself, called the Forbidden City.

During Kublai's reign, merchants from Europe traveled to China. The most famous of these merchants were Nicolo and Maffeo Polo of Venice and Nicolo's son, Marco Polo. Marco Polo remained in China for several years in the service of Kublai and later wrote a famous account of his travels throughout the Middle Kingdom. European Catholic missionaries also traveled to China during this

#### Kublai Khan and Marco Polo

In 1275, a young Italian merchant, Marco Polo, visited the court of Kublai Khan in China. He remained there for 16 years, serving as an official in Kublai's court and traveling widely throughout China. When Marco Polo eventually returned to Europe, he told stories of inventions and wealth no one would believe. He spoke of cities without crime or sewage in the streets. He said that the Chinese dug from their hills black rocks (coal) that burned with hot flame. The Chinese, he claimed, could print whole books using blocks that pressed images of letters on paper (a printing press). Chinese culture, too, said Marco Polo, was very refined. There were floating palaces and elegant dinners where the diners ate with long sticks of ivory and never touched the food with their fingers.

period. The first of these missionaries was a Franciscan priest, John of Monte Corvino, who arrived in Beijing in 1294, where he set up China's first Catholic Church. John became archbishop of Beijing, and other missionaries came to China, including the pope's representative, John Marignolli.

While they were ruling northern China and before they conquered the Song, the Mongols were not favorable to Confucianism, though they tolerated it as one of the religions of their realm. Kublai Khan, however, welcomed Confucian scholars into the imperial court, and Confucian teachings influenced his government and the empire's educational system. The Mongol court offered official state sacrifices to Confucius and encouraged the study of Confucian writings. Yet, the court also observed Buddhist rites as well as traditional Mongol religious ceremonies. Kublai Khan, however, dealt a serious blow to Confucian power by discontinuing the examinations for the civil service, with their study of Confucian texts.

The examinations were restored under the Mongol emperor Buyantu (r. 1311-1320); but the government discriminated against native Chinese in favor of Mongols and other foreigners, who came to hold the most important posts in the civil service. Buyantu ordered the study of Neo-Confucian writings in preparation for the examinations and thus made the True Way the primary school of thought. It would continue to be so for the next 500 years. Yet, Neo-Confucianism never achieved the same dynamism it had in the days of Zhu Xi. Neo-Confucian scholars did not explore new ideas but merely preserved the doctrines that had been handed down to them.

After Kublai's death in 1294, the Mongol empire began to disintegrate. The Mongols fought among themselves, and the Chinese rebelled against them. Finally, in 1368, a commoner named Hong Wu drove the Mongols out of China and made himself emperor. He set up a new, native Chinese dynasty, which he called Ming.

## The Ming Dynasty

Hong Wu's Ming Dynasty ruled China for 300 years. This was a period of peace for China. The Ming emperors encouraged agriculture and the development of new inventions. Architects built grand buildings, and artists created pottery of delicate beauty. Slavery was abolished and the lives of poor farmers improved because they did not have to pay high taxes; and when their time of serfdom ended, they were allowed to move to different regions of China and seek a better life. Future generations looked back on the Ming Dynasty as a golden age.

During the Ming Dynasty, China carried on trade with many foreign nations. From seaports of the Middle Kingdom, Chinese merchants sailed out to trade with Japan and southern Asia, as well as India, Persia, and Africa. Chinese legend says that, in the early 1400s, Admiral Zheng De sailed a fleet of giant ships, some 400 feet long with nine bamboo masts, to Sumatra and Borneo. From these lands, the fleet crossed the Pacific to the coasts of an uncharted land of "fiery mountains at the feet of the dawn." Will we one

day discover that Chinese explorers reached the Pacific coast of America or at least the Hawaiian Islands several decades before Columbus landed in the New World?

At the same time, the countries of Europe were sailing eastward, and explorers from Portugal reached Asia, the Indies, and finally China. The Ming government tried to keep the Portuguese out of the Middle Kingdom, but they bribed their way in and eventually set up a profitable trade with China. The Spaniards and the Dutch soon followed and established their own trade with the Far East.

Catholic missionaries came to China with the Portuguese traders. The Catholic Church founded under the Mongols had disappeared from China, and the only Christians in China were a few Nestorian groups, who lived in the oldest Chinese cities. At first, however, no European was allowed to enter China; Portuguese traders had to stay in the port city of Macao in southwestern China. This changed in 1579, when the Chinese government allowed some Portuguese merchants to move further inland, to Canton. They were soon followed by Jesuit missionaries, one of whom was an Italian priest, Father Matteo Ricci.

## The Mission to China

Young Matteo Ricci was full of zeal for Christ and eager to bring the Catholic Faith to the rich and vast empire of China, so orderly and so respectful of learning and tradition. His own talents in science and mathematics won him the respect of powerful and learned men of China. Father Matteo had to learn to speak the elegant Chinese of the court and to adopt Chinese dress if he wished to be taken seriously. The Chinese knew only the roughest seamen and merchants from Europe; they thought of all Westerners as barbaric, unclean, and uneducated. Ricci and his fellow Jesuits showed the Chinese that Christian Europe, too, was a learned and civilized land. The work of the Jesuits was crowned with success when, in 1601, the emperor of China himself asked Ricci to come to Peking, the capital of Ming China.

Father Matteo was able to show the educated men of China that their ideas of right and wrong came from a Supreme Being, the Lord of Heaven. Ricci wrote a catechism, called *The True Doctrine of God*, in which he quoted Chinese writers, especially Confucius, to show that there is only one God, that the soul is immortal, and that other teachings of the Catholic Faith are true. Finally, he gained an audience with the emperor, after 16 years of trying, and only then because the clock he had brought from Italy caught the emperor's fancy.

Matteo Ricci died in 1610, but the work of the Jesuits continued. In 40 years time, they had assembled a Church of 150,000 people, made up both of the poor and the rich and learned Chinese. To aid their work, the Jesuits translated the liturgy and the Scriptures into Chinese so that the Chinese could read and pray in their own tongue. They allowed the new Chinese Christians, too, to continue to practice ancient ceremonies that honored their ancestors and Confucius, for the Chinese were very

reluctant to abandon their ancient traditions. After much study, Ricci had decided that the Chinese were not practicing idol worship when they honored their ancestors and Confucius.

But some missionaries disagreed. They thought the Chinese practice of honoring ancestors and Confucius was idolatry or, at least, **superstitious**. They complained to the pope in Rome. Arguments went back and forth, some saying Ricci was right, others that he was wrong. In 1715, Pope Clement XI ordered the missionaries in China to stop allowing the practice of honoring ancestors, and they obeyed. The result was that educated Chinese from that time on rejected the Christian Faith. In 1724, the emperor began persecuting the Church and ordered all missionaries to leave China. The work of the Chinese missionaries, it seemed, was destroyed.

**superstitious:** having to do with *superstition*, an ignorant belief or trust in magic

Yet, the Chinese Catholic Church was not entirely destroyed. Jesuit missionaries for a while remained in the service of the emperor, who respected the priests' knowledge of mathematics and astronomy. Missionaries worked in secret among the Chinese, and native Chinese priests were ordained to minister to the people. Lay Chinese Catholics, too, catechized people in the Faith. The Church in China, however, did not grow again until the 1900s, when Christian missionaries were again allowed to work in the Middle Kingdom.

## The Last Dynasty of Old China

In the 1600s the Ming dynasty fought a long war with invaders from the north, the Manchus from Manchuria, and lost. By 1662, the Manchus had completely overcome the Ming. Taking over the empire, the Manchus called themselves the Ching Dynasty. The Ching Manchus made harsh laws to keep the native Han Chinese from rebelling against them.

The Ching emperors were able rulers for about 150 years. They not only ruled Manchuria and China but added new lands to the empire. They conquered Mongolia, Tibet, and Turkestan, and Korea was forced to pay tribute to the Manchu emperor. Beginning in the late 1700s, however, rebellions began breaking out throughout China. Though the Manchus had adopted Chinese culture, they never stopped treating the "Sons of Han" as a conquered people. The proud Han Chinese resented this and tried again and again to overthrow the Ching Dynasty.

Just like the Ming Dynasty, the Manchus had to deal with foreign merchants from Europe. First, it was the Portuguese and Spanish, and then the Russians. In the 1700s, Great Britain and France began trading with China. In 1784, the first ship from the United States entered a Chinese port. The Manchus feared these foreigners and would not allow them to travel from port cities into China itself. In the end, this only angered

foreign countries. European countries and the United States were determined to enter China, whether the Manchu emperors liked it or not.

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, European powers and the United States, as well as Japan, would continue to seek greater control of Chinese trade. What the Chinese learned from these powers, as well as their struggles against them, would lead ultimately to the overthrow of the imperial government that had ruled the Middle Kingdom for thousands of years.

## CHAPTER REVIEW

### Summary

- ◆ The ancient name for China is the “Middle Kingdom,” for the Chinese believed their land was the center of the universe.
- ◆ China’s geographical features include extremes of climate, temperature, and terrain. Dangerous rivers, fertile farmlands, steppes, high mountains, cold northern plains, and southern jungles make up the diverse Chinese landscape.
- ◆ Chinese history is divided into eras named for the ruling families or dynasties. The first mythical dynasty was that of the Five Emperors, who were said to have invented civilization.
- ◆ The first historical Chinese dynasty was the Shang Dynasty (1766–1022 B.C.)
- ◆ The second dynasty was the Zhou Dynasty (1122 B.C. –A.D. 221) The Zhou dynasty saw the rise of Chinese philosophy and its most important thinker, Confucius.
- ◆ The Third Dynasty was the Qin Dynasty (A.D. 221–206), a brief period of terror and unification. The Emperor Zheng forced peasant armies to build the first Great Wall and the Grand Canal.
- ◆ The Fourth Dynasty, the Han Dynasty (206–220), supported Confucianism and spread literacy throughout the empire. A standard “Han culture” grew up in China. During this time, China established trade with the Mediterranean for the first time.
- ◆ The Fifth Dynasty, the Tang Dynasty (618–907), began with disunity; but the Tang finally united central China and added new lands. During the Tang, Buddhism became an important religion in China.
- ◆ The Sixth Dynasty, the Song Dynasty (960–1279), was an era of peace in China in which a luxurious civilization flowered. It was a time that saw developments in shipbuilding, poetry, medicine, science, and the arts.
- ◆ The Seventh Dynasty, the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), was the period during which the Mongols ruled China. The Mongols, led by Kublai Khan, overthrew the Song Dynasty in 1279.
- ◆ The Eighth Dynasty, the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), arose after the Mongols were weakened by disease, Chinese opposition, and infighting. The Ming period is a high point of Chinese civilization, a golden age.

- ◆ Though China continued to trade with foreign countries, the Ming grew wary of foreigners in their port cities. The ports were closed to foreigners, except the Portuguese. The Jesuit priest, Father Matteo Ricci, entered China with Portuguese traders. Jesuit and other missionaries made much progress in converting the Chinese until controversy over the Jesuits' methods led the pope to condemn them.
- ◆ The last dynasty, the Ching dynasty (1644–1901), belonged to Manchus from northern China.

## Key Concepts

**Middle Kingdom:** the ancient name for China

**Confucianism:** a school of philosophy founded by the Chinese thinker, Confucius, that gave China the social and moral ideas that have guided Chinese civilization. Confucianism stresses that human beings are primarily members of communities --- the family, especially, but also the local community, the school, and the kingdom. Confucianism teaches that rulers should govern more by moral example than by force. The people should honor ancestors, respect rulers, obey the laws, and participate in rituals that tie society together.

**Buddhism:** the religious philosophy ascribed to Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha ("enlightened one"). Buddhism seeks to provide an answer to sorrow and suffering in the world, saying that they come from desire for pleasure and fear of pain. If people want to rid themselves of sorrow and suffering, they have to purify the spirit through right thinking and right conduct.

**Neo-Confucianism:** The name given to the revival of Confucianism during the Song Dynasty. Neo-Confucianism borrowed ideas from both Buddhism and the traditional Chinese religion, Taoism. One of the great Neo-Confucian teachers, Zhu Xi, taught that the goal of education is to help people cultivate a sense of morality. A moral society, he said, would lead to good government. Neo-Confucians sought to spread their ideas among the poor as well as the rich.

## Dates to Remember

### B.C

**479:** the death of Confucius

### A.D.

**618** the founding of the Tang Dynasty

**636** the Nestorians build the first Christian church in China.

**960** the Song Dynasty comes to power in China.

**1279** Kublai Khan becomes emperor of China.

**1294** John of Monte Corvina establishes the first Catholic Church in China.

1610 the death of Matteo Ricci

1724 the Chinese emperor orders the persecution of the Catholic Church in China.

## Central Characters

**Confucius (551-479 B.C.):** the founder of the religious philosophy that became the foundation of Chinese civilization

**Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha (6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.):** the Indian religious thinker whose ideas became the basis of Buddhism, one of the most important religions of China and Korea

**Zheng (3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.):** the first Qin emperor. Zheng united China and built the first Great Wall.

**Liu Bang (256-195 B.C.):** the first Han emperor. He made Confucianism the basis of law in China.

**Taizu (A.D. 927-976):** the first emperor of the Song Dynasty. He tried to base his government on Confucian ideals.

**Zhu Xi (1130-1200):** one of the founders of Neo-Confucianism

**Kublai Khan (1215-1294):** the Mongol conqueror of China who entertained Marco Polo

**Father Matteo Ricci (1152-1610):** a Jesuit priest who led a mission that converted 150,000 Chinese to the Catholic Faith during the Ming period

## Questions for Review

1. How did the Chinese emperors assure that their civil servants would be able men?
2. Who was Confucius? What was the golden rule of his thought?
3. Why was the Han Dynasty so important to Chinese history?
4. Where do sorrow and suffering come from, according to Siddhartha Gautama? How are people to rid themselves of sorrow and suffering?
5. Name three accomplishments of Tang China.
6. What were the goals of Neo-Confucianism?
7. Why is the Ming Dynasty remembered as China's golden age?
8. When did the first Christian missionaries come into China? Who were they?
9. Why were Matteo Ricci and the Jesuits so successful in converting the Chinese? Who disagreed with their methods and why?

## Ideas in Action

1. The Great Wall was built in phases over several dynasties. Look up the Great Wall on the Internet or in an encyclopedia and find out: how many building phases did it take to finish the Great Wall? When were the phases completed? When was the

entire wall completed? How many miles long is it? How is the Great Wall used and preserved today? Make a map of the course of the Great Wall.

2. The Mongols once had the largest empire in the world. Use an encyclopedia or atlas to find the exact borders of the Mongol Empire at its height. Write a list of modern countries that were once under Mongol control. Did your ancestors in Europe, Asia, or the Middle East ever live under Mongol rule?
3. Ask students to find some of Confucius' sayings. Students should choose five Confucian sayings they like and explain whether they find his wisdom helpful in everyday life.
4. Chinese music is very strange to the Western ear. Listen to some Chinese music and compare its use of percussion, stringed instruments, and antique falsetto singing with Gregorian chant and Renaissance polyphony. Appropriate recordings can be found at the library, a music or book store, or the Internet.

## Highways and Byways

### The Chinese Language

The Chinese language is very different from the languages that have come from Europe. For instance, while English, French, and German words often have two or more syllables, Chinese words have only one syllable each. Chinese, too, has no plural nouns and no verb tenses. Chinese verbs are always in the present tense.

Chinese has several dialects, but the written Chinese language is the same everywhere. Chinese does not form words from an alphabet, like European languages do. Chinese is written in pictures, with each picture standing for an idea. Since each picture stands for an idea and not a sound (like our letters and words do), the same picture can be used for different words in the various Chinese dialects. An example of this is if we drew a picture of a fish to express the idea of a scaly water creature with fins. Such a picture could be understood by English speakers and Latin speakers, even though in English it would be called a "fish" and in Latin, *piscis*. In China, people could understand another person's writing, even if he could not understand his speech.

Chinese language drawings are called *ideograms*. People who read and write Chinese learn about 2,000 ideograms. Though each ideogram stands for a simple idea, it can be joined to other ideograms to express more complex ideas. The written languages of Japan, Korea, and Vietnam are based on Chinese characters. The characters are the same though the spoken languages sound completely different.