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the whole of China, and often neighboring regions as well. They belonged to different dynasties, lines of rulers who followed each other on the throne from generation to generation.China's history was traditionally divided into such dynasties, and this was true as late as the historical summary above. As we see in the historical summary above, as noted, the early rulers, of the Shang and Zhou dynasties, styled themselves "kings". From the late 3rd century BCE, however, the monarchs of the Qin and Han dynasties ruled over a united China, and as a result they styled themselves "emperors". In this they were followed by rulers of China until the end of the last imperial dynasty, in the early 20th century CE.The Mandate of HeavenChinese rulers bore the title "Son of Heaven". They claimed to be Heaven's representatives on Earth. Emperors were viewed as sacred figures: to disobey them was to disobey Heaven.The concept of the "Son of Heaven" was closely linked to the idea, very influential in Chinese history, of the "Mandate of Heaven". By this, a dynasty received divine authority to rule. However, it was believed that if emperors ruled badly or unjustly, their dynasty was liable to lose this mandate. In these circumstances, it was legitimate for rebels attempt to replace the dynasty with a new one, which (by dint of successfully seizing the throne) had shown that it now enjoyed the Heaven's favor.The CourtEmperors were surrounded by courts. These consisted of the royal family and its attendants, as well as ministers and officials responsible for helping the emperor in governing the huge country.The court was housed in the royal palace, located in the capital. It was the political center of the state, and what went there ultimately affected the entire empire. In particular, the decline of dynasties - the Han dynasty is a very clear example - can often be traced to events at court.The Civil ServiceThe ancient period of China's history saw the emergence of one of the most impressive governing institutions in world history, the Chinese civil service. This astonishing organization pre-dated Western civil services by some two thousand years.The roots of Chinese bureaucracy go back to the later Zhou dynasty, when the territorial princes were centralizing the government of their states. It came to maturity under the Han dynasty. During Han times, the civil service became a huge organization, employing many thousands of officials. It was responsible for keeping law and order, collecting taxes, maintaining irrigation systems and flood defenses, and a host of other tasks to do with keeping China governed effectively.More remarkably still, the Han dynasty inaugurated a revolutionary new system of recruiting public officials - by examining candidates for public posts. The examination system was established one of the most revered institutions in Chinese history.DefenseAncient China saw the transformation of armed forces from feudal forces based around aristocratic warriors, in Shang and early Zhou times, to mass armies composed largely of infantry troops, in the late Zhou, Qin and Han periods. These armies were made up of different kinds of recruits: long service, professional soldiers, peasant conscripts, and non-Chinese tribesmen.(The balance between these different types changed from period to period, as is detailed in the section on defense in The State in Ancient China.)The Great Wall Of ChinaThe defenses of China never relied solely on military manpower, however. In the 5th and 4th centuries BCE, the northern and western border states most exposed to raids by steppe nomads had begun to build long walls made of beaten earth to help keep these raids out. After the unification of China under the Qin, the new imperial regime merged these walls into a single system of defense. These walls were he ancestors of the famous Great Wall of China, refurbished into its present form under the Ming dynasty, in the 15th century CE.A section of the Great Wall of ChinaEconomy and Society in Ancient ChinaPopulationDuring the ancient period, the Han (as the Chinese would later call themselves) spread, through settlement and the assimilation of indigenous peoples, across northern China and down into the Yangtze region (this process is covered in the article Society in Ancient China). Population censuses began being taken during the Han Empire, which record a population of about 50 or 60 million. This makes it, along with the Roman Empire, the largest state in the Ancient World.The ruins of a Han dynasty watchtower. Photo by The Real Bear, Creative Commons 2.0.Even by the end of the Han dynasty the heart of Chinese civilization lay in the Yellow River region of northern China. It was here that the two capital cities, first Chang'an, and then Louyang, were located. The Yangtze region, and even more the far south and southwest, remained under-populated frontier regions inhabited largely by non-Chinese peoples.While the great majority of people remained engaged in agriculture and lived in farming villages, the ancient period saw towns and cities spread across China. Most of these were administrative centers, where provincial officials were based along with their staffs. Many were tiny by modern standards. The Han censuses show only twelve cities of more than 50,000 inhabitants; most of the rest would have been far smaller. Nevertheless, the capital of Han China was always among the largest cities in the world - at times, THE largest. Chang'an, the capital of the early Han emperors, had a quarter of a million inhabitants, and the later Han capital, Louyang, half a million.Farming and farmersAncient China's economy and society was based on agriculture. The vast majority of Chinese families lived in small farming villages, dotted across intensively cultivated landscapes.Chinese agriculture possessed, from ancient times, its own characteristics. Almost everywhere, it was dependent on the careful and unremitting management of water: to irrigate the fields of millet in North China, keep back the river floods near the great rivers, and swamp the paddy fields of southern China.Their social position and economic condition of farmers has been different at different time. In early times, under the Shang and early Zhou, they were serfs, semi-servile bondsmen tied to their particular lords. From middle Zhou times, as the old feudal aristocracy disappeared, more and more of them became free owners of their small farms. Later again, in later Han times, their status declined again.Whatever the farmers' condition, as the centuries went by Chinese agriculture became more and more productive. New crops and the spread of iron tools and new techniques led to more intensive farming. From later Zhou times, government became active in promoting agriculture, especially by bringing new land under irrigation. These various factors resulted in population growth.Trade and industry in Imperial ChinaAs agriculture became more productive and population increased, trade and industry also grew. The introduction of coinage in later Zhou times facilitated trade, and technological innovations such as the development of steel-making contributed to industrial expansion.Another major factor was state intervention. Under the Qin and Han, the standardisation in such things as weights and measures and road building would have had a major impact.International tradeInternational trade first gained prominence under the Han dynasty. By gaining control over the eastern steppes of central Asia, the Han enabled the Silk Road, that great trade route across Asia to the Middle East and Europe, to become established. At the same time, the conquest of south China opened up the maritime trade to south east Asia. Although the south remained an underpopulated frontier zone in ancient times, a few important ports were established on the coast. It was in this period that Canton began its long history as a center of international commerce.The Silk Road. Image Copyright Timemaps.Merchants and craftsmen in Chinese societyCraftsmen must have formed a privileged class in early China. Their products, including some of the finest bronzes ever produced, must have been highly valued by the ruling elite in Shang and early Zhou times, and this must have conferred a certain status on their makers.In middle and later Zhou times, merchants became more influential as a class, and the economic expansion under the Han dynasty especially benefitted the urban classes. Government policies designed to keep merchants in their place could not halt them from growing in numbers and wealth.The Ruling ClassesThe societies of early China, under the Shang and early Zhou dynasties, were dominated by an hereditary feudal aristocracy. Later, however, the position of this group declined, and a new social class emerged, that of the gentry - small landowners who provided rulers with their growing number of officials. By the time of the Qin and Han dynasties, a career in government was effectively open only to members of the gentry class.By mid-Han times, however, a new super-elite of great landowners was emerging, its members enriched by holding high office. This new class would dominate Chinese society and politics in the centuries that followed.The FamilyIn pre-modern China, the family was of almost sacred significance, an attitude giving rise to, and reinforced by, the practice of ancestor veneration.Women d in traditional hanfu - late Eastern Han-era Dahuting Tomb in Zhengzhou. Image - Public Domain.The existence of ancestor veneration is attested in the earliest texts from ancient China, the Shang dynasty oracles, and throughout China's long history the rise and decline of "higher" religions and modes of thought - Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism and so on - never undermined the practice, which might with some justification be thought of as the basic sacred tradition of China.Women had a subordinate place in the Chinese family from ancient times. Their duty was to obey, first their fathers, then their husbands, and then, after their husbands' deaths, their eldest sons. This should not be exaggerated, however: children of both sexes were taught to obey and respect their parents. Culture in ChinaAncient beliefs and practicesIt seems clear that many of traditional Chinese religious and philosophical ideas and practices were already present when written records begin, and probably for long before. Such elements as divination, ancestor veneration, feng-shui, the Dao and the supreme god Di are all evidenced in the Shang oracle bones inscriptions.Zhou Schools of ThoughtIt was in mid- and late-Zhou periods, however, that the schools of thought developed which were so profoundly to influence Chinese thinking down to the 20th century. Four of these stand out as by far the most influential.ConfucianismThis taught that people must accept their place in society if society is to be harmonious. However, social relationships should be reciprocal. Thus, while a son should obey his father, the father should act considerately towards the son. (More on Confucianism)DaoismThe Daoists believed that a person must live in accordance with the flow of nature; trying to change the way things are is futile.(More on Daoism)MohismThe philosopher Mozi (c. 468-382) believed that anything that helped people's welfare and contributed to peace was good; anything that did not was bad. People should practice universal love, and not live selfishly. (More on Mohism)LegalismThe legalists said that the most important thing was that the state should be strong. To achieve this, all people should obey the ruler and his officials without question. For his part, the ruler should do whatever it takes to strengthen the state, whether it is immoral or not. (More on Legalism)Throughout China's long history these philosophical strands have never been mutually exclusive. Many educated Chinese have been Confucians in public life, Daoists in the privacy of their own homes, and when serving in an official post have happily pursued Legalist policies. The different philosophies have also deeply influenced each other so that, for example, the dominant of the three, Confucianism, has had strong Daoist and Legalist elements within it.At first, though, these four schools seem to have regarded themselves as exclusive rivals for people's allegiances. The Qin dynasty came to power through the application of Legalist principles, and sought to eliminate all other schools of thought. After that dynasty fell, however, the Han dynasty enshrined Confucianism as the official ideology of the state. As such, it was probably forced to take in ideas from other schools, particularly Legalism and Daoism, in order to remain relevant to the needs of government and officials.In late Han times and after, Daoism, and even more, Buddhism, came to prominence. Buddhism was the first belief-system from outside China to have a widespread impact on the Chinese people.LiteratureApart from works on divination and religious rites, literature in Ancient China really got going in mid-Zhou times - the time of Confucius and other philosophers.A number of works, dating to Zhou and Han times, gained the status of "Classics", and came to be viewed almost as religious texts. They embodied the foundations of Confucian thought, and would have a profound influence on Chinese civilization.Works of historyThe other major strand of Chinese prose literature was history. The Han historian Sima Qian (c. 145-87 BC) set the standard for historical writing for the next two thousand years. Henceforth, history would be a major feature of Chinese literature.PoetrySo far as poetry was concerned, here again the Han period set in place foundations which would be followed and elaborated upon for hundreds of years. Two strands became popular: the first, Shih, consisted of short poems written in a compact, spare style; the second, Fu consisted of longer, more ornate verses. The interaction between these two styles would give a particular character to Chinese verse, reflecting a varying mix of the discipline of Shih with the expressiveness of Fu.ArtApart from the beautiful bronzes dating to Shang and early Zhou times, few works of art have come down to us from Ancient China. Nevertheless, wonderful small clay models of houses, horses and people designed to be placed in graves show that Han artists strove for realism as well as lively movement. Also, writings from the Han period mention lively paintings adorning the walls of fine houses.A Western Han painted ceramic mounted cavalryman. Photo by Editor at Large, Wikimedia Creative Commons 2.5. Further StudyMapsClick here for the start of a sequence of maps showing the history of Ancient ChinaFor a sequence of maps showing ancient China in the broader context of East Asian history: history of East AsiaArticlesThemed articles:The State institutions in Ancient ChinaThe Economy of Ancient ChinaSociety in Ancient ChinaThought and Culture in Ancient ChinaAlso, the article on The Origins of Civilization has a small section dealing specifically with China.The broader regional context is covered in The history of East Asia.Dynasties in Ancient ChinaShang Zhou dynasty ChinaQin dynasty ChinaHan dynasty ChinaDivided ChinaThe main sources I have used for the history of ancient China are:Hucker, C.O., China's Imperial Past, Stanford, 1975 - the most informative of the books I have used, and very readable.Roberts, J.A.G., The Complete History of China, Sutton, 2004 - also a very good introduction, and also highly readable.Eberhard, W., A History of China, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977 - very useful to be read in conjunction with other general histories, but to be used with caution - it embodies some sociological models which have been ditched in recent years.An even older book, but enormously informative and insightful, is Fitzgeralds, C.P., China: A Short Cultural History, Barrie & Jenkins, 1953 (despite the title, not that short - 624 pages).A recent book which has been well received is Keay, J., China, A History, 2010. (I haven't yet read this, but I have read his India, A History, which is good).Loewe, M., Crisis and Conflict in Han China, Allen & Unwin, 1975, offers a brilliant insight into the workings of Han government.A lavishly illustrated work on archaeology for the general reader which includes good sections on China, is Renfrew, C. (ed.), Past Worlds: The Times Atlas of Archaeology, Times Books, 1995, p. 92-3, 146-7, 190-5A work on general archaeology aimed more at students, but eminently readable and with very useful coverage of ancient China and the roots of Chinese civilization, is Scarre, C. (ed.), The Human Past, Thames & Hudson, 2005, p. 234ff., 552ff.If you want a quick introduction to the archaeology of ancient China, try the small but beautifully illustrated handbook by Debaine-Francfort, C., The Search for Ancient China, Thames & Hudson, 1999.For an insightful look at government in ancient China, see Finer, S. E., The History of Government, I, Ancient Monarchies and Empires, OUP, 1999, p. 442ff.WebsitesThe Ancient History Encyclopedia has a very useful series of pages on Ancient China: start at the general Ancient China page and follow the appropriate links.The British Museum's website Ancient China is a wonderful teaching resource.Wikipedia's coverage of Ancient China is as usual vast, and is particularly useful if you want to chase down a specific topic (though coverage of some topics can be a bit patchy). China has a very long history, and it's not surprising to find that it also has a lot of old cities. It is a country rich in history and culture, but it also has an impressive number of cities that have existed for centuries. China's cities are known for their sheer size, but the reason for this isn't just that China has a large population. It's because of the way in which these cities were built: instead of being planned, they grew organically, as the needs of their people demanded. The history of Chinese civilization is long and complex. Many Chinese cities that have existed for centuries or millennia bear names that recall the magic of their past or whose roots lie in myths and legends. If you're someone who's into this kind of topic, you've come to the right place, as this article will discuss nine of the oldest cities in China. 9. Lijiang Year Established: 1276 Province: Yunnan Former Name: Dayan Literal Meaning: Great ink stab photo source: Wikipedia According to existing records, Lijiang was designated as such in the year 1276. The Mu family, the local chieftains, used to dominate Lijiang throughout the Ming and Qing dynasties. The prefecture-level city of Lijiang, which is part of Yunnan Province, is situated between the Jinsha River and the southeastern part of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. Did You Know? It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, renowned for containing a variety of historical architectural styles and an intricate, prehistoric water delivery system. 8. The Old City of Shanghai Year Established: 1291 Province: Shanghai Municipality Former Name: Shen Literal Meaning: To sink photo source: Insight Guides Shanghai became a city for the first time in 1291 under the Yuan dynasty, as per official government records (1271-1368). The restructuring and opening-up processes have boosted Shanghai. Due to Pudong New Area's opening up and development during the 1990s, Shanghai has seen significant historical change in terms of both its economy and society. As well as being a major international hub for trade, banking, and shipping, it is now China's greatest economic hub. Did You Know? People from other regions of China are unable to comprehend the dialect used by Shanghai natives, known as Shanghaiese. 7. Luoyang Year Established: 605 Province: Henan Former Name: Henanfu/Henan Prefecture Literal Meaning: River South photo source: youngpioneertours.com The Sui and Tang dynasties (581-618) had their eastern capitals in Luoyang City, which was first constructed in 605 under the Sui Dynasty (581-618). For more than 40 years, the royals of the two dynasties, notably Empress Wu Zetian, resided there. Except for Chang'an City, the eastern capital was subpar. Did You Know? The city's conventional layout, which at the time was followed by Japan and Korea, played an important role in the development of Chinese cities. 6. Beijing Year Established: 1045 BC Province: Hebei Former Name: Peking Literal Meaning: Northern capital photo source: Encircle Photos Over 3,000 years of history may be found in Beijing. It had served as the capital of Ji and Yan's ancient empire for centuries before the First Emperor united China in 221 BC. In the first united empires of China, the Qin and Han, it served as a provincial hub. Ancient China's northern frontier was not far from the modern-day city of Beijing, and northern nomadic people regularly crossed the border to invade. Despite the fact that the dates in Sima Qian's history prior to 841 BC have not yet been conclusively linked to the Gregorian Calendar, the Beijing Government adopts 1045 BC as the official figure for the date of the city's inception. Did You Know? Beijing became a capital city six times in different dynasties. 5. Pingyao Ancient City Year Established: 827 BC Province: Shanxi Former Name: Pingyao Literal Meaning: Remote plain photo source: travelchinaguide.com About 2700 years ago, during the Xizhou dynasty, the Pingyao ancient town was initially constructed. It is a city that was entirely built with the traditional design principles and planned layout of the Han ethnic group. The Pingyao City Wall is among the most important historical and cultural landmarks. In 827 B.C., Pingyao's City Wall was initially constructed. All of China's towns started constructing the City Wall in the early Ming Dynasty in an effort to defend themselves against invaders. At the same time, construction of Pingyao's City Wall also began. Did You Know? There had been 26 repairs to the historic Pingyao town. 4. Nanjing Year Established: 495 BC Province: Jiangsu Former Name: Jianye Literal Meaning: The sword shines brightly photo source: Beijing Visitor In eastern China, around 300 kilometers from Shanghai, Nanjing serves as the provincial capital of Jiangsu. As one of the most well-known of the Four Great Ancient Capitals of China (Beijing, Xi'an, Luoyang, and Nanjing), the city is well-known both inside mainland China and abroad. This ancient city, which also goes by the names "Nanking" or "Nan-ching," is located in the lower reaches of the renowned Yangtze River Delta and mixes both old and contemporary structures. Did You Know? The city is filled with parks. The majority are free and well-kept. 3. Kaifeng Year Established: 364 BC Province: Henan Former Name: Daliang Literal Meaning: Varies photo source: Trip Advisor One of China's Great Six Ancient Capitals, Kaifeng is the center of Henan Province and a picturesque ancient city situated along the southern bank of the Yellow River. When the State of Wei first established Kaifeng in 364 BC under the name "Daliang," the city's lengthy history can be traced back to that time. After being abandoned for a while and going through name changes, Kaifeng eventually became the capital of various dynasties, including the Tang, Jin, Han, Later Zhou of the Five Dynasties, and Song Dynasty. Did You Know? Jewish merchants from India settled in Kaifeng City, which is known as the first Chinese city where they landed. 2. Guilin Year Established: 314 BC Province: Guangxi Former Name: Kweilin Literal Meaning: Sweet osmanthus forest photo source: Travel China Guide A tiny village on the Lijiang River was the site of the city of Guilin when it was established in the Qin Dynasty in 314 BC. When it comes to Guilin's human history, communities have been there since 314 BC. These early people were lured to the banks of the Li River. After this initial settlement, some 200 years later, during the Han Dynasty, when Shi An County was founded, the city's formal record began. Did You Know? The Zhuang ethnic group predominates in Guilin, which is a part of the Guangxi autonomous area and is home to about a dozen tiny ethnic groups. 1. Xi'an Year Established: 202 BC Province: Shaanxi Former Name: Chang'an Literal Meaning: Perpetual peace photo source: hey-xian.com One of the most impressive cities in antiquity was Chang'an Cheng, which was founded in 202 BCE and is the oldest city in China known today as Xi'an. Chang'an Cheng served as the capital of the Xi (Western) Han dynasty. It was largely destroyed during Wang Man's uprisings, which followed the Xin interim period of the Han. With the establishment of the Zhou dynasty in the eleventh century BC, Xi'an rose to prominence as a cultural and political hub of China. Did You Know? The Terracotta Warriors of Xi'an are renowned for representing Chinese history across the world.