Early China Becomes a Great Civilization

From at least 1766BC to the twentieth century of the Common Era, China was ruled by dynasties. A dynasty is a ruling family that passes control from one generation to the next. One Chinese dynasty lasted more than 800 years, while another lasted only fifteen years. The ancient Chinese people often supported their rulers because of what they called the Mandate of Heaven. The ancient Chinese believed their ancestors in heaven had chosen their leaders. The people would rebel against a weak leader if they believed he had lost the Mandate of Heaven.

The Shang Dynasty ruled China from approximately 1766BC to about 1040BC. The Shang were the first dynasty to leave written records. The Shang rulers expanded the borders of their kingdom to include all of the land between Mongolia and the Pacific Ocean. The Shang practiced human sacrifice. If a king died, many of his subjects would join the ruler in his grave. Some people were beheaded first but others were buried alive. When a Shang king died, his next oldest brother replaced him. When there were no brothers, the oldest nephew became king.

The Chou were nomads who lived west of the Shang. The Chou overthrew the Shang and ruled China from 1040BC to the third century before the Common Era. The Chou gained power in part from their ability to extract iron. They used the metal to create powerful weapons.

The Chou developed a feudal system in China. In a feudal system, the rulers appoint nobles to control smaller parts of an empire. The nobles divided the land into farms for extended families. An extended family might include many generations and would often include cousins and second cousins. The families were loyal to their nobles and the nobles were in turn loyal to the Chou rulers. The Chou rulers taxed their subjects, but they used the wealth they collected to build huge walls around their cities to defend the citizens from nomadic warriors. The Chou also built roads, irrigation systems, and dams.

The Chou dynasty ended slowly as nobles became more powerful. Eventually, the nobles became more powerful than the emperor in a period that became known as the Age of Warring States. It was during this period that a great teacher named Confucius tried to develop good government. The Ch'in state managed to unify China by 221BC.

The Ch'in rulers clearly explained and strictly enforced laws. They standardized weights and measures and carried out irrigation projects. The Ch’in also gave peasant farmers the land they lived on. The West first learned of China during the Ch'in dynasty. It is from Ch'in that we get the word China.
A group known as the Legalists influenced the Ch'in Dynasty. The Legalists tried to suppress all thoughts that disagreed with their philosophy. People who discussed ideas not approved by the Legalists faced execution. One Ch’in ruler ordered 460 scholars to be buried alive because the scholars disagreed with the teachings of the Legalists.

China grew into a powerful empire during the Han Dynasty, between 202BC and AD220. Scholars trained in the teachings of Confucius ran the Han governments with great skill. During the Han Dynasty, the Chinese invented paper, Chinese writers recorded the history of their land, and the Chinese first learned of Buddhism.

The last Chinese dynasty to rule came from Manchuria, in northeast China. The Manchus were unable to stop other nations from interfering with China.

Text taken from

1. What was the Mandate of Heaven? _________________________________________________________

2. Why do we not know if any dynasties preceded the Shang? ________________________________

3. Explain why historians do not have an exact date for the ending of the Chou dynasty. ___________

4. Why did the Legalists order that many Chinese books be burned? ____________________________

5. What are some good things the Chin Dynasty did for their people? ___________________________

6. How did China get its name? ____________________________________________________________

7. What are some good things that happened during the Han dynasty? __________________________

8. Explain what a nomad is: __________________________________________________________________

9. Explain how the feudal system works: ______________________________________________________