

An overview of imperial China's dynasties

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Image 1. The Great Wall of China stretches more than 13,000 miles. The most well-known sections were built during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). Photo: Jeff Hu/Getty Images

The Chinese empire was one of the most enduring empires on Earth. Throughout its long history, various dynasties — families that ruled the empire across generations — rose and fell.



Single dynastic families often remained in power for hundreds of years, until being replaced by another powerful family group. The throne was passed down from father to son.

Myth Or Reality?

The Xia dynasty is traditionally said to be the first of many ancient Chinese ruling houses. It is thought to have existed from around 2070 B.C. until 1600 B.C. Yet the actual existence of this dynasty has been debated. Many researchers see it as nothing but a myth.

The first Xia king, Yu, is said to have repaired the damage caused by a major flood. For this reason, legend has it, the gods awarded him the Mandate of Heaven, or the right to rule. Archaeologists have found evidence of large-scale floods from around the Xia time period, so the traditional story might be at least partly true.

The Xia dynasty is said to have been overthrown in 1600 B.C. by the first Shang leader. Given that the existence of the Xia dynasty is debated, the Shang dynasty is sometimes seen as the first of China's dynasties. The Shang rulers maintained control for around 600 years. The period of their rule saw the invention of writing, and later historians viewed it as a "Golden Age." In 1046 B.C., the Shang king was overthrown by the Zhou king, ending the Shang dynasty.

The longest of ancient China's dynasties was the Zhou dynasty, which lasted from 1046 B.C. to 256 B.C. The Zhou period is divided into two eras: Western Zhou (1046–771 B.C.), with the capital at Haojing, and Eastern Zhou (770–256 B.C.), with the capital at Luoyang, where it was moved due to conflict.



The Zhou dynasty was a period of great intellectual achievement as some of ancient China's most important writers and philosophers, such as Confucius and the first Taoist thinkers, lived during this time. However, the peace that made their work possible would not last. The years from 476 B.C. to 221 B.C. are known as the "Warring States Period." During this time, the seven regions controlled by the Zhou began serious infighting. Ultimately, the Qin armies emerged victorious in 256 B.C. and overthrew the Zhou leaders.

"China" And The Terracotta Warriors

The Qin dynasty only lasted 15 years (221–206 B.C.), but it was an important time in Chinese history. It was a period of unification, during which territories surrounding China were brought under Chinese rule. Indeed, the first Qin leader, Qin Shin Huang, (also sometimes called Shi Huangdi or Qin Shi Huang) was the first Chinese ruler to be known as "emperor."

Qin Shin Huang began work on what would become the Great Wall of China. He died in 210 B.C. and was buried in a mausoleum with a massive terracotta army consisting of almost 8,000 statues. Qin Shin Huang was followed by his son, Qin Er Shi, whose reign lasted for only three years before he was unseated in 206 B.C. The leader of the rebels, Liu Bang, became the first emperor of the Han dynasty.

The Han dynasty (206 B.C. to A.D. 220) marked another Golden Age of China. During this time, Confucianism became the official state religion, and the Silk Road — a trade route from Asia to the Mediterranean — was established. In A.D. 220, the last Han emperor was deposed. Han rule was followed by a period known as the Three Kingdoms.



During the Three Kingdoms period (A.D. 220–280), China was divided into three states: Cao Wei, Shu Han, and Dong Wu. The region further fractured into the northern and southern territories between A.D. 386 and 581.

In A.D. 581, the Sui dynasty emerged. While short-lived, the Sui dynasty managed to unify the northern and southern territories. In 618, however, the Sui were overthrown by the Tang.

The Tang dynasty (A.D. 618–906) is often described as the greatest of the dynasties. Its members included China's only female ruler, Empress Wu Zetian (A.D. 625–705), who reigned for 20 years.

Mongol Takeover

A period of warring followed the Tang dynasty. In the year 960, the Song dynasty came to power. During the Song period, the world's first paper money was issued. The Song dynasty lasted until 1279 when it was defeated by the Mongols under the leadership of Kublai Khan. The Mongols then ruled China as the Yuan dynasty from 1279 until 1368.

The Yuan dynasty was deposed in 1368 by the Ming Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang, who set up a stable yet autocratic state. The Ming emperors expanded and strengthened the Great Wall of China to preserve their crumbling borders. Invading Manchu forces from the northern border regions eventually ended the Ming dynasty in 1644. The Manchu are an ethnic minority with their own language and customs.

The Last Emperors

The Manchu invaders established the Qing dynasty, which ruled from 1644 to 1911. The Qing empire was relatively stable. However, the 19th and 20th centuries brought China into increasing conflict with Western powers. In 1911, the last of the Chinese emperors, Puyi, stepped down. China then became a republic.

