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Ancient China (Civilization)

Social Condition

- **Social structure** was very important in ancient China.
- The Chinese **believed in strict social groups** and people were expected to **behave according to their social position**.
- This belief was further reinforced by the Chinese philosopher **Confucius, who taught that strict social order and discipline** was the key to a successful society.
- **Men and women in ancient China were not equal and men were afforded far more privileges than women.**
- The Chinese **strongly believed in the wisdom of the elders** and, as such, grandparents were greatly respected.

Social order

Beneath the emperor, there were **four main social classes** in ancient China. These **four classes were**

- **nobles and officials,**
- **peasants,**
- **artisans and**
- **merchants**

Imperial family

- The **emperor and his family were at the top of the social scale** in ancient China.
- Emperors **believed** that they were **appointed by heaven** and therefore did not need to obey humans.
- Once the emperor chose the son that he wanted to succeed him, the **mother of the son would become the empress.**

- She was then able to grant favours to her family - often in the form of posts in the royal household and plots of land.

Nobles (The Shi)

- The noble class in ancient China was very privileged.
- Nobles were typically the extended family of the emperor and empress and those people that excelled in their fields, particularly in the military.
- The status of nobles, however, changed frequently depending on who gained or fell out of favour with the emperor.
- When a new emperor came to power, it was common for him to favour a new set of nobles.
- Nobles often **became landowners and collected taxes** from those that lived on their land, meaning that they would become wealthier.
- They were required to give some of their income to the emperor and in return received privileges and were afforded some protection.
- During the ancient **Shang and Zhou dynasties, the shi were regarded as a knightly social order** of low-level aristocratic lineage compared to dukes and marquises.
- **This social class was distinguished by their right to ride in chariots.**
- If nobles **committed a crime** for which they were sentenced to death, the emperor could grant them a special favour that would allow **them to commit suicide**, which was considered a much more honourable death.

Officials

- Officials were another group that **held high social status** in ancient China.
- Boys whose families could afford to send them to school began their education at an early age so as **to become officials and were required to pass a difficult exam.**
- If they did not pass, however, they were usually still able find jobs as they were considered well educated.
- Officials were arranged in ranks.
- The two most **senior officials acted as advisers to the emperor.**

Peasants (The Nong)

- Although peasant farmers in ancient China were one of the lowest social classes, they were still considered important as they produced the food that sustained the society.
- Most peasants were very poor and led simple lives.
- They worked very hard and rarely had a day off. Peasant men worked in the fields and had to endure harsh conditions.
- They worked through the burning heat of summer and the bitter cold of winter. The harsh conditions could also ruin their crops and land. If the crops were ruined, poor families had very little to survive on during the winter.
- Some **peasant women also worked in the fields** but women's main tasks were confined to the household.
- Even the poorest peasants were **required to pay taxes**, even if their crops had not been successful.
- Although soldiers were not highly respected members of society, **soldiers traditionally came from farming families.**

Artisans (The Gong)

- Artisans were part of the commoner class and included painters, carpenters, potters and jewellery makers.
- Artisans **earned more than farmers but less than merchants.** They did **not have a high social status but were respected for their skills.**
- **Metal-workers became very important during the Han period.**
- They learned how to work with metal moulds rather than shaping the metal while it was still very hot.
- Since ancient times, the skilled work of artisans and craftsmen was handed down orally from father to son, although the work of architects and structural builders were sometimes codified, illustrated, and categorized in Chinese written works.

Merchants (The Shang)

- The merchant class included **traders, animal breeders and money lenders.**
- Merchants were considered the lowest social class in ancient China.
- People believed that they did not contribute to the good of the whole society but only worked for their own gain.
- Despite their low social status, some merchants became very wealthy and lived in luxury.

- **During the Han dynasty, some merchants became so wealthy that they were considered a threat to the emperor and the nobles.**
- In order to limit their wealth, merchants had certain restrictions placed on them.
- Such restrictions included heavy taxes and being sent away to join the army.

Slavery

- In ancient China, some people were born in slavery because their mother was slave.
- Others were sold into slavery, perhaps to pay a debt. During the Qin Dynasty, captured people were made into slaves.
- **Slaves who worked for the emperor, the royal family, and sometimes the nobles, had the worst of it.**
- They could only do what they were told to do. They were treated in any way that their master and his family felt like treating them. Many were treated with great cruelty.
- When their master died, they were killed, and buried with their master in his tomb, so they could continue to serve their master after his death.
- The slave society in China started in very ancient times, and continued up until the Qin Dynasty. Qin did not do away with slavery, but rather the reverse. First Emperor Qin was more ruthless than any other master.
- **After the Qin Dynasty was overthrown, the concept of slavery in the Han Dynasty was not nearly as popular or as cruel as it once was in other dynasties.**
- The Tang Dynasty tried to discourage slavery; slavery was reduced during this family's rule. But slavery rose in popularity again when this family's rule was over.

Women

- Women in ancient China were inferior to men, but older people, both men and women, were greatly respected.

- Villages often had a "wise woman", who was a very old woman, believed to have special gifts.
- Many people in the village, men, women, and children, might consult the wise woman for advice and help.
- Another way for a woman to gain importance was if her husband had died and she was the oldest living member of the family.
- That gave her power over the family as she was the oldest living member.
- Confucius taught that women's roles were in the home.
- Marriages in ancient China were arranged. Women, when they married, moved into their husband's home.
- Wives were no longer allowed to worship their own ancestors.
- A wife's loyalty had to be to her husband's family, both living and dead.
- Once a woman gave birth to a son, she received more respect.
- Men from wealthy families quite often had several wives, in the hope of having several sons.
- **Women** in ancient **China** did not enjoy the status, either social or political, afforded to men.
- Women were subordinate to first their fathers, then their husbands, and finally, in the case of being left a widow depend on their sons.
- A male-dominated society.
- At least in theoretical terms, women's contribution, indeed necessity, to society was recognised in the principle of **ying (female) and yang (male)**.
- Another social convention was that **widows should not remarry**.
- During the **Han Dynasty**, for example, unmarried women brought a special tax on their family and women with babies were given a three-year exemption from tax and their husband a one-year exemption.

- For **upper-class women**, their lives were perhaps more **strictly controlled** than at any other social level.
- Women of lower status, such as farmer's wives, were expected to work in the fields - especially in regions where rice was cultivated.
- Although Chinese men usually had only one wife.

Economic Condition of Ancient China

Agriculture

- The great majority of the people lived in farming.
- Crops- sowing, ploughing, weeding, harvesting, storing.
- In northern China millet was the staple crop.
- In the Yangtze basin and southern China, rice was the staple.
- The Yangtze basin was the earliest home of domesticated rice.
- In **Shang** and **early Zhou time's domestication of animals**- cattle, sheep and goats were important in the economy.
- In the **late Shang period** (late second millennium BCE) soya beans spread to northern China, adding a valuable source of nutrition in the the diet.
- From **mid-Zhou times, there was an intensification of agriculture in northern China.**
- The observation of the sky and the weather was important for the arrangement of agricultural activities.
- The Shang-period **word for "year" was nian harvest**, in the context of agriculture.
- **Archaeological evidences (tombs of the higher class)** show agricultural tools made of stone or bronze- **adzes, sickles, spades** were

found, which shows that the royal house and the princely lineages were directly involved in agricultural activities.

- **Shang divided lands into four classes.**
- It can be seen from **oracle inscriptions that the use to grade fields according to quality was known during the Shang period.**
- The soil was prepared by **ploughing deeply.**
- **Agriculture in the Zhou dynasty was very intensive** and, in many cases, directed by the government.
 - All farming lands were owned by nobles, who then gave their land to their serfs.
 - **A piece of land was divided into nine squares** in the [well-field system](#), with the grain from the **middle square taken by the government and that of surrounding squares kept by individual farmers.**
- Large-scale irrigation schemes brought more land under cultivation.
- Human waste began to be used as a fertilizer.
- Field rotation also came into use, to keep the soil productive.
- The wider use of iron ploughs from the 5th century BCE onwards allowed the soil to be turned more deeply.
- **Shi-Huang Ti (Qin/Chin Dynasty) known for the reform in agriculture-**
 - Landownership given to peasants.
 - Systematic irrigation.
 - Restoration of old canals and construction of new canals.
 - Agricultural production increased.
- The need for taxes encouraged princes and their advisors to pay attention to their states' resources.
- They ordered the clearing of new land for farming, and inaugurated drainage and irrigation projects to increase agricultural productivity.
- These policies were carried over into the early imperial period of the Qin and the [Han dynasties](#).

- The political stability of the latter allowed farming to expand into new lands, notably with the settlement of regions near the northern frontiers, to help supply the Han armies there.
- The Han also sponsored the dissemination of new farming techniques and inventions. The spread of iron tools was stepped up, and during this period the seed drill and the wheelbarrow were developed.

Industry

- **Craftsmen**- textiles were spun and woven, clothes sown, silk was produced.
- **Shang**- Bronze industry was in grip of Government
 - **Weapons, ceremonial vessels, containers etc of bronze.**
- The introduction of the use of iron was a major step forward for manufacturing.
- **Leizu** discovered [silkworms](#). She discovered [sericulture](#), and invented the [silk](#) loom.
- This development **continued into the Qin and Han dynasty** periods.

Trade and Commerce

- Trade routes spanned China in early [Shang dynasty](#) times, but it was from [mid-Zhou](#) times that trade & commerce expanded markedly.
- State **governments** became **active promoters of trade**.
- **Metal coinage was introduced into China in the late 5th century BCE**, and circulated more and more widely.
- **This facilitated trade** and the expansion of trade led to the emergence of new towns and cities.
- The urban classes of merchants and craftsmen increased in numbers, as we have seen, and became wealthier and more important.

- The standardization of coinage, weights and measures, and the script under the short-lived [Qin dynasty](#) will have undoubtedly given a significant boost to trade & commerce.
- During Qin dynasty internal trade was flourished.
- **New roads and Highways constructed by Qin rulers which unified China** and trade expanded.
- During the **Han period (Wu-Ti) international trade** took on a completely new dimension.
- By imposing their control over the eastern steppes of central Asia, the Han **allowed the [Silk Road](#)**, that great trade route across Asia to the Middle East and Europe, to become firmly established.
- **[Silk Road](#)- start from Antiyok (Syria) to Changan (China).**
- **Trade controlled by State and officers posted.**
- **Taxes on Salt and Iron imposed, which was fully controlled by State.**
- **Wang-mang (Han dynasty)**
 - **Dissolved large estate** and their lands distributed among peasants.
 - **Slavery ended**
 - **Trade relation** with contemporary states- Rome, India
 - **Ta-Chin** word was used for Rome
 - **Kalidas in Shakuntlam** used the word चीनांशुक for silk cloth.
- **Two trading routes** in Han Dynasty **Priplus and Ptolmy** mentioned
 - **Silk Route**
 - **Spice Route (Sea Route)**
- Many luxury and exotic goods travelled along this route, but the **chief commodities were silks, sold by the Chinese in exchange for horses.**
- At the same time, **the conquest of south China opened up the maritime trade to south-east Asia.**

- **Seagoing trade largely remained in the hands of foreign merchants and seamen, mostly Indians and Arabs;** but Chinese businessmen benefited from the handling of goods for import and export, and the increased internal trade that foreign trade always brings.

Art in China

- The [Bronze Age](#) in China began with the [Xia dynasty](#).
- [Chinese ritual bronzes](#) from the [Shang and Western Zhou dynasties](#) come from a period of over a thousand years from c. 1500, and have exerted a continuing influence over Chinese art.
- The spectacular [Terracotta Army](#) (more than 7,000) was assembled for the **tomb of [Qin Shi Huang](#)**, the first [emperor](#) of a unified China from 221–210 BC, as a grand imperial version of the figures long placed in tombs to enable the deceased to enjoy the same lifestyle in the afterlife as when alive, replacing actual sacrifices of very early periods.
- Excavations of Chu tombs (Yangtze River valley) have found painted wooden sculptures.
- During the Qin Dynasty, Chinese font, measurement systems, currency were all standardized in order to bring further unification.
- [The Great Wall of China](#) was expanded as a defensive construction against the northern intruders.
- **Bronze mirrors** have been mass produced in **Han Dynasty** (206 BC-220 AD), and almost every tomb excavated that has been dated as Han Dynasty has mirror in the burial.
- 14 royal tombs have been unearthed near Anyang, culminating in the 1976 excavation of the first major tomb- tomb contained more than 440 bronze vessels and 590 jade (stone) objects among its numerous exquisite works.

- A **small quantity of stoneware** is covered with a thin, hard, yellowish green glaze applied in liquid form to the vessel.
- Shang potters also developed a fine soft-bodied **white ware**, employing kaolin (later used in porcelain); **this ware was probably for ceremonial use** and was **decorated with motifs** similar to those on the ritual bronzes.