

# Systems of Thought and Belief

By John C. Didier

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter traces developments in Chinese thought and religious beliefs and practices from the 16th century B.C. to the beginning of the third millennium A.D. Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism—known as the Three Teachings—are central to this history, but before, between, and within these systems other philosophies waxed and waned with social, political, and economic shifts. After approximately 100 A.D., the stimuli for change originated from both within and without the Chinese cultural systems so that subsequently Chinese thought and belief constituted a series of world amalgams that nevertheless retained a preponderance of Chinese content. This pattern of continuous adaptation and blending has never ceased, belying the once-common assumption that China was somehow “other” and unknowable.

## 1. THE SHANG DYNASTY

The earliest knowable Chinese religious system was that of the Shang dynasty (1545–1045 B.C.). Also known as the Yin, this dynasty established some basic patterns of thought that persisted through later periods. The patterns include a commitment to the leader’s rule by right, rather than merely might, and a belief that humans enjoyed with otherworldly beings a reciprocal relationship.

Most of our knowledge about the Shang derives from artifacts excavated primarily at and around the later Shang capital of Anyang, Henan. The most useful artifacts for the study of Shang religion are 150,000 inscribed bones excavated so far and tens of thousands of bronze vessels used in ritual performances.

### Theocratic Rule

Shang religion and rulership were inseparable. The Shang king served as both chief priest and chief ruler. In this theocratic system the king, in order to make important decisions of state, sought guidance or assistance from various unseen superhuman powers. These powers were of three general types: (1) a supreme god

called Di, often translated as “God”; (2) spirits of natural phenomena; and (3) spirits of former humans.

Di was unpredictable and unapproachable. In fact, it was not the exclusive god of the Shang, but at times even seems to have helped other tribes or groups of competing peoples against the Shang. Since Di was very powerful and efficacious, it was very important for the Shang to access this god’s favor. This they did largely through petitions to either deceased ancestors of the ruling clan (usually former kings or queens) or nature spirits. Shang leaders hoped that these spirits would interact with Di to bring about a favorable result.

### Pyromancy

The Shang contacted these powers by means of pyromancy, or divination by fire. Divination is the process of communicating with divine beings. The king’s diviners drilled holes in shoulder bones (scapula) of oxen or stomach plates (plastrons) of tortoises. Shang divination is also called either “scapulimancy” or “plastrimancy.” With holes pre-drilled, the diviners then engraved into the bone statements or ques-

tions originating with the king. These charges, or queries, usually took the form of positive and negative pairs regarding mysterious phenomena or future acts, events, or kingly decisions. Often the queries, in fact, represented the king's beseeching the spirits/gods for favors.

For instance, if the king wished to know what the weather would be like within the next 10-day period, hoping for rain, he might order the diviners to inscribe into the bone these statements: (A) "In the next moon it will rain"; (B) "In the next moon it will not rain." The diviners then inserted heated rods into the pre-drilled holes of the bone. This produced cracks that the king interpreted. For instance, he might announce, "Good fortune. It will rain." His assistants then recorded this statement on the bone. This was the king's prognostication, or prediction, regarding future events. Eventually, when actual events later either confirmed or contravened the king's prognostication, the diviners carved this result into the opposite side of the scapula or plastron.

### **Pyromancy and the Right to Rule**

However, usually the diviners did not record a king's misinterpretations of the cracks. Therefore, most excavated bones contain only a king's accurate prognostications. The reason is that much of the king's power in the human world rested on his ability to access the gods and spirits via pyromancy. These beings provided the

king with knowledge of strange phenomena and future events. If the king were commonly wrong in interpreting or predicting events, then the spirits apparently did not favor him with privileged knowledge. Thus, recording the king's mistakes would have weakened his claim to rule.

### **Ritual Sacrifice and Human Sacrifice**

In order to persuade spirits to act on behalf of the Shang, the king and others of the royal clan performed sacrifices to their deceased ancestors. They offered them ritual food in bronze vessels. Authoritative clans associated with the ruling Shang did likewise for their own ancestors at their own ancestral temples. For all, bronzes symbolized wealth and power.

Often humans were sacrificed at major events, such as the death of a member of the royal clan or the consecration of a new building. Regular, scheduled sacrifices to dead kings also involved the ritual killing of people. While many of the sacrificial victims were slaves who had been taken as prisoners of war from competing tribes, others were servants of deceased royalty. These servants, like others of the royalty's valued possessions, such as bronzes, horses, chariots, and weapons, were buried with the deceased. In Shang belief, since the afterworld resembled the physical world and the possessions of this world could be transferred to the afterworld, then the deceased royalty continued to need such possessions.

## **2. THE ZHOU DYNASTY, PART I (C.1045–550 B.C.)**

The Zhou were a competing tribe from modern Shanxi Province, far west of the Shang capital. In about 1045 B.C., they conquered the Shang and established a feudalistic system of governance developed on the model of the Shang system. Qualifying royal clan members, political allies, military associates, and the old Shang ruling clan were each allotted a parcel of land, similar to later European fiefs.

### **Tian and the Mandate to Rule**

In many ways, the early Zhou continued the Shang outlook and religion, although significant differences can be detected. The Zhou believed that their high god, Tian ("sky" or "heaven"), like Di of the Shang, substantially influenced both the collective royal Zhou fortunes and individual royal clan members' lives. In fact, the Zhou belief in a "mandate of heaven" whereby heaven

# Chronology

By Michael Golay and Ronald J. Formica

## INTRODUCTION

Chronologies covering a vast amount of time can present several problems. In the case of a China chronology, further complications arise by the differences in Eastern and Western calendars, as well as disputes in pinpointing exact dates for events, especially for events that occurred 100,000 to 10,000 years ago. This chronology uses the Western calendar for its dates. That said, there are still contradictions among scholars and reference books as to the exact dates for some events and for the time periods for the Chinese dynasties. This chronology uses the most consistently agreed upon dates employed in the major Chinese reference works.

You may notice that some of the dynasty dates overlap, with two dynasties seeming to exist at the same time. For example, the Sui dynasty began in A.D. 581, yet the Six Dynasties began prior to the Sui and lasted until A.D. 589. Keep in mind that China is a vast country, and while one part of China was being ruled by a new dynasty, another part of China may have still been under the rule of another dynasty. In this case, the Sui dynasty was firmly entrenched in North China by 581, yet it wasn't until 589 that South China fell to the Sui, thus placing all of China under the Sui dynasty. Likewise, the Yuan and Southern Song dynasties overlap as well, with the end of the Southern Song coming in 1279 but the beginnings of the Yuan happening earlier in parts of China in 1276. The reason for this is explained in the introductions to both dynasties in the chronology.

Another anomaly with dates occurs with the Qin dynasty and the Han period. The Qin dynasty ends, according to our dates, in 206 B.C. Liu Bang (Liu Pang) was also installed as the Han leader in 206 B.C. Thus, many historians regard 206 B.C. as the beginning of the Han dynasty. However, it took four years of fierce civil war before the Han firmly established their rule in China. Thus, some other historians would rather point to 202 B.C. as the real beginning date of the Han Dynasty.

## 1. PRE-SHANG CHINA

(400,000 B.P.–1766 B.C.)

*Homo erectus* walked the north China plain four hundred thousand years ago—some scholars believe it might have been at least 690,000 years ago. These early people were small people, around five feet tall, with thick skulls and receding chins. They hunted and gathered for sustenance. They used fire for warmth and for cooking. They lived in caves—most notably the series of caverns southwest of present-day Beijing, excavated beginning in the 1920s, that gave *Homo erectus* of China the name Peking man. Peking man was not the first known *Homo erectus* in China. Yuanno man and Liantian man predated Peking man.

Much of China's legendary or pre-history is based on material that was passed down orally and embellished from generation to generation. This legendary history opened around 3000 B.C. with the appearance of a series of heroes who taught the nomadic tribes the sedentary arts of civilization. By the time of the Yellow Emperor (c. 2700 B.C.), the first

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of the Five Premier Emperors, the Chinese had developed a system of writing and a calendar. The Yellow Emperor created a unified nation by means of force, and his successors consolidated and extended his nation-building achievement.

Again, the record of these early reigns is in part legendary because it is based on oral histories and a sparse written record. With modern carbon dating, some scholars can see a rough fit between legend and history. For instance, while the semi-legendary Emperor Yu (c. 2200–1750 B.C.) is believed to have established the Xia, the first of China's three ancient dynasties, historians still dispute the Xia's existence.

- 400,000 B.P.** Tribes of *Homo erectus* appeared on the north China plain. They subsisted on edible leaves, nuts, and berries and used stone tools to kill deer, antelope, sheep, and other large mammals.
- 200,000 B.P.** Communities of *Homo erectus* were well dispersed in northern China.
- 200,000–50,000 B.P.** Middle Paleolithic early *Homo sapiens* inhabited China.
- 50,000–12,000 B.P.** Late Paleolithic *Homo sapiens* were established in half a dozen centers in China.
- 8000 B.C.** Scattered agricultural communities developed on the northern China plain. These Neolithic people lived in villages, farmed, used polished stone tools, and made pottery.
- c. 5000 B.C.** Inscriptions were scored into Neolithic pottery by this date. Some scholars suggest that the inscriptions were an early form of Chinese writing.
- 4000 B.C.** In farming areas below the south bend of the Yellow River, village people lived on a millet diet with supplements of game and fish. They hunted with bows and arrows, kept domestic animals such as dogs and pigs, wove hemp, and decorated their painted pottery jars with animal and plant designs.
- 4000 B.C.** Settled communities developed along the southeastern coast and on the island of Taiwan. Rice cultivation began in the lower reaches of the Yangtze River.
- c. 4000 B.C.** In northern China, Neolithic tribes produced the distinctive Yangshao painted pottery that was reddish with bold, black geometric designs.
- c. 3000 B.C.** A household industry of silk production, using silkworms fed on mulberry leaves to produce raw silk thread, began to develop in communities of northern China.
- 3000–2200 B.C.** Neolithic farming culture expanded in northern China, the Yangtze Valley, and along the southeastern coast. Pottery appeared in new shapes, such as cooking tripods.

- c. 2800–2300 B.C.** The Longshan culture, with its thin, black, shiny pottery, flourished at several sites in present-day Hunan, Shandong, Anhui, and Jiangsu provinces. The Neolithic Longshan people practiced a settled agriculture, including the cultivation of rice.
- 2698–2599 B.C.** Xuanyuan Gongsun (Hsüan-Yüan Kung Sun), the chieftain of a tribe in present-day central Henan, reigned as the semi-legendary Yellow Emperor, the first of the Five Premier Emperors. Legend credited his record-keeper, Cangxie (Cang Hsieh), with inventing the written Chinese language.
- c. 2600 B.C.** By archeological evidence, domesticated worms were feeding on the leaves of mulberry trees to produce raw silk.
- 2514–2437 B.C.** By tradition, Zhuansu (Chuan Hsu) reigned as second of the Five Premier Emperors. He put down an uprising of the Jiuli tribes to the south and claimed dominion south of the Yangtze.
- 2436–2367 B.C.** By tradition, Ku reigned in an era of general peace and plenty.
- 2357–2258 B.C.** By tradition, the great sage and king Yao reigned.
- 2300–2200 B.C.** By tradition, scholars prepared the *Yaodian*, or *Canon of Yao*. This outline of principal events of the 23rd century is the earliest authenticated written Chinese document.
- c. 2258 B.C.** Near the end of Yao's long reign, a legendary Great Flood inundated the valleys of the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers. Widespread famine and political upheaval followed.
- 2255–2208 B.C.** By tradition, Shun rose from poor peasant origins to become emperor. His chief minister, Yu, kept back the flood by digging canals, dredging river channels, and creating reservoirs. The outlines of the ancient system of feudal land tenure began to emerge. Shun reorganized the bureaucracy, establishing government departments for agriculture, justice, education, and public works. Before his death, he appointed Yu as his successor.
- 2208 B.C.** By tradition, Yu succeeded Shun; he was honored as the founder of the Xia, by tradition the first dynasty of ancient China. By legend, Yu descended from the Yellow Emperor.
- c. 2208–2195 B.C.** By tradition, Yu reigned for a peaceful and prosperous 13 years. Sixteen kings succeeded him in a dynasty that survived for nearly 500 years.
- c. 2100–1800 B.C.** The Erlitou culture, successor to the Longshan, flourished in present-day-day northwestern Henan and southern Shanxi. Excavations of large palaces at Erlitou (in the present-day city of Yanshi) suggest it might have been a capital of the Xia dynasty.

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- c. 2000 B.C.** Humans were buried under the foundations of important buildings on the northern China plain—evidence, according to modern archeological sources, of human sacrifice, probably of war captives.
- c. 2000 B.C.** Ceramic copies of wrought metal vessels were in use at settled sites in the Yellow and Wei River valleys.
- c. 1800 B.C.** The Xia dynasty ends with the reign of a degenerate king. Often in China's history, chroniclers will present the last ruler of a dynasty as corrupt or incompetent or both.

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# China A to Z

By Michael Golay and Ron Irwin

**Academia Sinica:** The Academia Sinica was founded in Nanjing, China, on June 9, 1928, by the Nationalist government to conduct research into the fields of the humanities and to raise academic standards in the country. It is the highest and most respected academic institution in the Republic of China. After 1949, its name was changed to the Chinese Academy of Sciences. It continued operating more than one hundred research institutions on behalf of the State Science and Technological Commission while the Academia Sinica itself continued in Nankang, Taiwan.

The Academia Sinica is composed of 24 institutes and preparatory offices under three divisions: The Division of Mathematics and Physical Sciences, the Division of Life Sciences, and the Division of Social Sciences and Humanities. Its goals for the 21st century are to concentrate on interdisciplinary research projects and provide greater opportunities for research collaborations with foreign institutions.

**Ancient Text School:** The Ancient Text School of Confucian studies arose in opposition to the preponderance of the Modern Text School of the Qin (221–206 B.C.) and Han (202 B.C.–A.D. 220) periods. The latter had accepted classical Confucian texts preserved after the First Emperor of China in 213 B.C. had supposedly destroyed the original Confucian classics. However, toward the end of the Western Han period (206 B.C.–A.D. 8), a descendant of Confucius claimed to have discovered original Confucian texts written on the walls of his ancestral home. Despite widespread skepticism regarding the authenticity of these texts, a scholar named Liu Xin (46 B.C.–A.D. 23) sought to establish them as the cornerstone of what would become the Ancient Text School during the Xin period (A.D. 8–23). With the downfall of the Xin dynasty, the Ancient Text School declined. It was restored again toward the end of the Later

Han period (A.D. 25–220) upon the appearance of several great Ancient Text scholars, including Zheng Xuan (A.D. 127–200). His work ensured that the precepts of the Ancient Text School would dominate Confucian studies into the late 19th century.

**An Lushan (A.D. 703–757):** A Tang general of nomadic background, he was the adopted son of the consort of the Emperor Xuanzong. With her patronage, he rose to command a powerful army along China's northeastern frontier.

An Lushan led his troops in revolt in 755, taking Luoyang and Chang'an, the twin capitals, and forcing the emperor to flee into Sichuan. His own son killed him two years later, but by then, he had already permanently weakened Tang central control.

**Anti-Rightist Movement:** The Anti-Rightist Movement was launched against so-called rightist elements—critics of Maoist policies—who revealed themselves after Mao's injunction to encourage the expression of the “hundred schools” of Chinese political and cultural thought during the Hundred Flowers period of 1956 to 1957. Because of the Anti-Rightist campaign, many critics of governmental policies were sent to labor camps or were forced to sign “self-reform pacts.” They pledged their allegiance to the state during the so-called “socialist education movement” launched by the Maoist government in 1957.

**Bagua:** A Daoist form of martial arts dating back to the late 17th century but with origins stretching as far back as 1,000 years. Referred to as *Baguazhang* in martial arts circles (literally “eight trigram palm circles”), the discipline uses a basic series of eight “palm movements.” Each position change in the art corresponds to one of the trigrams that combine to form the sixty-four hexagrams of the *I Ching* (p. Yijing, “Book of changes”). Baguazhang is

the second of the “three sisters” of Neijia, or Internal Martial Arts practice—the other two being Taiji and Xingyi.

**Ba Jin (1904–):** Ba Jin is the pseudonym of Li Feigan. He is a prolific Chinese writer whose most famous novel *Jia* (The family), the first of the *Jiliu* (Torrent) trilogy, attacked the traditional family system. In 1966, Ba was labeled a “counterrevolutionary” during the Cultural Revolution of 1966 to 1976 and was publicly tortured. In 1975, he was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature. After being “revived” in China in 1977, Ba Jin was elected a deputy to the National People’s Congress in 1978; in 1981, he was elected chairman of the Chinese Writer’s Association.

**Bai Juyi (772–846):** Bai Juyi (sometimes pronounced Bo Juyi) was perhaps the first Chinese poet to have an international reputation. During the mid-800s, his ballad “The Song of Lasting Regret” was sung in teahouses across the Chinese empire, and he was widely read in Korea and Japan. He lived during the Tang dynasty (618–907), the “golden age” of Chinese poetry which saw the ascendancy of such famous poets as Du Fu, Wang Wei, Li Bai, and Li Shangyin. Bai Juyi wrote in simple diction that appealed to educated and uneducated readers alike. His work is often compared to that of that of Yuan Zhen (779–831), with whom he often collaborated.

**Ban Gu (32–92):** One of China’s most noteworthy historians, Ban Gu lived during the Eastern Han dynasty (A.D. 25–220) and wrote the cornerstone text *Han shu* (The history of the Han dynasty). This volume became the model for recording official histories of successive ruling houses in China. Modeled on the *Shi Ji*, the tremendous, comprehensive history of China written by Ssu-ma-Chien (d. 90 B.C.), the *Han Shu* is an exhaustive overview of the entire Han empire (206 B.C.–A.D. 220). The *Han Shu* is factual, detailed, and relatively unbiased, leading some scholars to refer to Ban as China’s first historiographer. The book also has sections on law, science, geography, and literature.

**Banners:** The Manchu leader Nurhaci developed this system of military organization in the 17th century. It grouped soldiers and their families into divisions

identified by different colors. The Manchus established eight banners altogether, using the colors red, blue, yellow, and white in four solid and four bordered banners. The banners proved useful for identification in battle and were a means of registering the civilian population.

Bannermen carried Qing power into the west of China and pacified these outlying regions for the dynasty in the later 17th and 18th centuries. As time went on, the banner soldiers gained a reputation for incompetence and cruelty. The New Qing Army abandoned the system early in the 20th century.

**Baojia:** Imperial China employed this system of household organization and mutual security from the Song (960–1279) through the Qing (Ching) (1644–1911) dynasties. Based on forms described in ancient texts, baojia organized 100-household units as *jia*, with 10 *jia* making up a *bao*.

All Chinese households were supposed to be registered in these groups. The elected leaders of individual units, chosen on a rotating basis, were responsible for maintaining order, directing public works such as dike and road repairs, and collecting taxes. The “headmen,” as they were called, also commanded the local militia.

Late Qing reformers attempted, without much success, to adapt baojia to the 20th century. In the 1940s, Communist cadres imposed their own form of the baojia system.

**Beijing (Peking) Opera:** The Beijing (Peking) Opera developed in Beijing between 1790 and 1828 during the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). It is widely considered one of the highest expressions of Chinese culture. A comprehensive performing art that includes elements of grand opera, ballet, acrobatics, and drama, its oeuvre includes thousands of pieces that cover the entire history of China. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) the established operas were banned and replaced by the Eight Model Plays, stories concerning highlights of Chinese Communist history. Reintroduced to a declining audience in 1978, traditional Beijing Opera performances have been aired on national television to find new and badly needed supporters.