

Society in Ancient China

Introduction

Ancient China's society was, like all societies at that time, essentially rural. The vast majority of Chinese families lived in small farming villages, of a dozen or so families.

Over time, an increasingly elaborate society grew up on this foundation. The economy became more dynamic as trade and industry expanded; government became more complex, and new social classes appeared. While continuing to be based on agriculture, Chinese civilization and society was probably the most sophisticated that world history would produce until modern industrialized nations began to appear in 19th century Europe.

The Population of Ancient China

Today, and since ancient times, the Chinese people have called themselves the Han, after the Han dynasty which united them within a single state (202 BCE to 220 CE). They regard themselves as a single race, with a single culture and history. But when China first emerges into the light of history, in the second millennium BCE, it was inhabited by many peoples, with different languages and cultures.

Ancestral states

However, the continuous history of China can indeed be traced back to a particular people who originally lived in an area of northern China. It was amongst them, under early dynasties such as the Xia and Shang, that the institutions – political, religious, cultural – took shape which would later evolve in a straight line into those of imperial and then modern China.

At the same time that this evolution was taking place, this people were expanding ever outwards, to fill the area which today we call "China". In the process they assimilated or in some cases pushed out all the other peoples whom they encountered; compared with the Han people, only a small number of "tribal" peoples of non-Chinese ethnicity and culture remain.

Different regions

By one perspective, the history of China is therefore of how one particular people and their culture came to dominate such a large region. Under the Shang dynasty the Chinese people covered a sizeable portion, but by no means all, of the Yellow River region.

Under the Zhou it came to dominate most of northern China, and began expanding into the Yangtze basin to the south. Nevertheless, even by the end of the Han dynasty, the Yangtze region was still being settled by the Chinese, and its native inhabitants being assimilated. Northern China still remained home to the great majority of the Chinese people, and the heart of Chinese civilization.

The Expansion of the Chinese People

Most expansion started with military conquest, but not all. In Zhou times it seems that some non-Chinese kingdoms, including some quite large ones, were gradually assimilated into the Chinese culture area through constant contact with other Chinese states.

Starting with their royal families and aristocracies, their societies intermarried with their Chinese neighbours and were eventually absorbed peacefully into the dominant civilization.

Conquest

Usually, though, it was a conquering army that brought an area under Chinese rule. In its wake garrisons of farmer-soldiers would be stationed at one or more strategic points, often long distances from each other. In early Zhou times these would consist of the followers of the feudal lords who acquired the new territories as fiefs. In later times the garrisons would be under military officers appointed by a king, or after Qin times, the emperor.

After the area had been pacified, civil administrators would be brought in to organize taxation and other matters.

Assimilation into the Chinese world

The farmer-soldiers of the garrison, and the officials of the administration, would be headquartered in a walled town. Traders and artisans would arrive to meet the demand for goods created by the Chinese soldiers and officials.

As time went by, the surrounding non-Chinese population would come under tighter control, and some of them would start to participate in the trading system of the Chinese world. Gradually the Chinese settlers would intermarry with the local people, who would adopt Chinese culture. In the process, they would transmit some of their own ways into the ever-changing Chinese civilization.

Migrations

Sometimes, however, there would be a major inflow of Chinese farmers from outside the region. This would firm up Chinese control of an area, but create tensions in the area. The indigenous people might be pushed off their land into neighboring hills, forest or swamplands. There they would have to farm more marginal terrain, and become second class citizens within the Chinese world. From time to time they might rebel, leading to massacres and counter-massacres.

For this reason the Chinese authorities usually tried to appease the indigenous peoples. However, they were often unable to prevent the constant encroachment on their lands by Chinese settlers.

The southern frontier

The south, and even more so the southwest, remained frontier regions inhabited by non-Chinese peoples throughout Ancient China's history. A few scattered Chinese towns along the coast or on major roads were surrounded by indigenous peoples.

What happened to these many non-Chinese peoples? Put simply, the great majority became assimilated into the Chinese nation, while some moved out into new lands to the south.

Outflows into South East Asia

Other indigenous peoples migrated away from their original homelands altogether. Over the centuries, the expansion of the Chinese people led to large-scale migrations of peoples from southern China into Vietnam, Laos and Thailand, where they created new political states and culture areas. Throughout the history of Ancient China, there was a constant flow of peoples from central to southern China, and from there southwestwards into South East Asia.

Population growth

What enabled the Chinese population to expand over this vast area? The answer must lie to some extent in sheer weight of numbers.

The heartland of ancient China was, as we have seen, the Yellow River region of north-central China. Here, the very productive North China Plain and Loess plateau allowed the populations to grow much more strongly than in surrounding areas. In due course population growth powered geographical expansion.

A new crop

At about the time that the Zhou replaced the Shang, a new crop, the very nutritious soya bean, was spreading in northern China, which will have made them better-fed and healthier, with more of their children surviving to adulthood and becoming parents themselves. It may have been at least partly this that drove Zhou expansion.

Iron

Later, in middle and late Zhou times, the spread of iron and its use in farming tools in early , plus innovations such as a rudimentary horse collar which made horses more efficient traction animals, and the widespread of irrigation, including some very large land reclamation projects, will have increased agriculture productivity, and have led to further population growth.

Growth under the Han dynasty

Finally, the enduring unification and stability which came with the Han dynasty, would have allowed the economy to flourish and the population to continue its growth.

Under the Han, new areas near the northern frontiers were opened up for agriculture, and good farming practices, including innovations such as the wheelbarrow and seed drill, were officially sponsored.

Setbacks in growth

The growth of the Chinese population was not without setbacks in ancient times. The heartland of the Chinese culture area, the Yellow River valley, is a very fertile region, but a very vulnerable one. Agriculture – and millions of people's very lives – depends on constant care to keep the turbulent river from flooding on a massive scale. For this, an ordered society and sound government are essential. When these are not in the mix, disaster soon follows.

The outstanding example of this was at the time of Wang Mang's usurpation (AD 9 to 23). This came after two centuries of peace and population expansion, and population densities in the North China Plain had reached very high levels. In the floods and famines of these years, and the widespread fighting that accompanied Wang Mang's downfall, as many as ten million lives may have been lost.

The population at the end of the Han dynasty

Under the Han, the first population censuses began being taken. These tell us that the population of the Chinese empire at the beginning of the first century CE (i.e. shortly before Wang Mang's rebellion) was some 60 millions.

About 140 years later the figure had dropped somewhat, to 50 millions. This was as a result of the upheavals linked to the Wang Mang episode of 9 to 23 CE; but also perhaps to the declining well-being of the common people under the late Han dynasty.

This was the situation at the end of the ancient period; in Medieval China and into modern times, the Chinese people have been continuing to expand, firstly completing the settlement of the Yangtze basin, then the southern provinces, and finally the south west and the north, in Manchuria.

Class in Ancient China

According to the traditional Confucian view, society is made up of four classes: government officials, farmers, artisans and merchants.

This scheme exalts public officials as shepherds of the flock; it esteems farmers as the economic basis for the whole of society; and recognizes artisans as being of some use; but it denigrates merchants as being greedy, parasites on the rest of society, making themselves rich by making others poor.

The view of society reflected Confucian ideals much more than it did social realities at any time in Chinese history. However, it does express a basic truth – that Ancient China was (like all ancient societies) a hierarchical society. It contained different social groups, with differing levels of wealth and influence. The roles of these different groups – their composition and relative position in relation to one another – was always changing.

This can be clearly seen when we look at the different elements. We will start from the top.

The Aristocracy

Shang dynasty society was dominated by an hereditary warrior aristocracy, and the same was true under the early Zhou dynasty. Its economic power was based on fief-holding: the highest nobility were regional lords controlling large chunks of territory, and answering to them were lesser lords holding smaller territories. All these fiefs were farmed by serfs – peasants tied to their lands, who had to provide their lord tribute in kind as well as with labour and military service.

Clans

As this class emerges into the light of history, it was organized into clans – groups of families tracing their descent back to a common ancestor. This was especially the case with the lesser lords, for whom, in the tumultuous conditions of the day, these clans constituted a sort of self-help group, offering protection and support to its individual families.

As time went by some clans became more and more prominent, and in the Spring and Autumn period (traditionally 771-476 BCE) they became a threat to the power of the regional princes (who themselves had reduced the Zhou king to a cipher).

The decline of the aristocracy

This situation was highly destabilizing and could not last. Wars between the regional lords led to some subduing others to form states. At the same time, bitter civil wars within these expanding states eliminated many of the most powerful clans.

To consolidate their positions, the regional princes – now effectively rulers of independent states – began gathering the reins of power more firmly into their own hands. They brought their armies more directly under their own control and created bureaucracies answerable to themselves to administer their states.

It was in these institutions that power now resided, and to staff them the princes turned, not to the aristocrats, but to members of the gentry' class. Such men had lower status and less wealth than the nobles but more education and greater loyalty.

The aristocracy's power dwindled, and as a class it was further eroded by the disappearance of the old fiefs. These were either confiscated by the princes, or were progressively degraded as, firstly, control over the peasant's labour and military service passed from the lords to the princes' officials, and secondly, as peasants ceased to be serfs and became free men, either as tenants or as owners of their own land.

The Gentry

The gentry class originated in Shang and early Zhou times as groups of warriors who made up the personal retinues of the lords.

Thus they remained until the Spring and Autumn period, when the princes of the expanding states into which China was now divided looked to them to officer their new armies and staff their new bureaucracies. The princes rewarded these servants with estates – not nearly as large of the fiefs of the old aristocracy but able to sustain a gentleman and his family in a suitable lifestyle – and the gentry became a landed class. Some members of this group rose to high office, as army commanders and ministers.

Scholar-officials

The gentry class thus emerged as the most influential class in Chinese society. Men of this class looked to educational achievement rather than feats of arms as their badge of honour, and fixed their ambition on a career in government instead of military service.

An official career in Han times was for the most part open only to members of the gentry class, which, although much larger than the old aristocracy had been, still remained a very small group within the wider society of ancient China. Members of this group, being landowners, albeit mostly on a modest scale, had enough wealth to pay private tutors to prepare their sons for a career in government. Already by the dawn of the imperial age, that quintessential figure, the scholar-official, could be discerned, that would remain a continuing presence in Chinese history through to the 20th century.

A new landowning elite

At the beginning of the Han dynasty, few aristocrats, or indeed wealthy landowners of any sort, had survived the tumultuous times which went before. However, under the Han, senior public officials, including ministers, governors and commanders, received good salaries, which were presumably sometimes supplemented by generous presents from the emperor or from people

wanting a favour. They could become very wealthy, as could a few merchants, particularly wholesale grain traders and those in the iron and salt industries.

A new class of big landowners

The safest way for these new super-rich groups to invest wealth was by buying land, and over time a new class of big landowners began emerged.

In 9 AD, however, a chief minister called Wang Mang seized the throne, and attempted to put the clock back by championing the poor peasants at the expense of the landowning elite.

This aroused such opposition that in 23 CE he was killed, and after a period of widespread disturbance the Han dynasty was restored the throne.

The rich get richer....

The emperors of the later Han dynasty (or Eastern Han, as it was traditionally called) owed their throne to the support of this new landed class. As a result, government policies now favoured this group. Landed estates grew unchecked and many peasants lost their land to become tenant farmers or serfs.

The rich, in short, got richer and the poor got poorer. This process was aided by the fact that provincial officials tasked with recommending candidates for “fast-track” promotion tended to recommend men of this group. High posts at court and in the bureaucracy increasingly went to members of this super-elite, and they ensured that the interests of the great landowners were well served.

This class held its dominance in Chinese politics and society for many centuries – through the long period of division which followed the fall of the Han dynasty and well into the period of unification under the Sui and Tang dynasties.

The flip side of the rise of this new aristocracy was the decline of the peasantry, which was a direct cause of the downfall of the Han dynasty.

The Peasantry

Under the Shang, most of the population were peasants farming small plots of land. Since this land was controlled by aristocrats, the peasants had to give part of their crops as tribute and were required to follow their lord to war, or to work on a project which he wanted carrying out, such as digging a canal, building a dam or constructing a palace.

The well-field system of early Zhou times

The peasants continued in this condition of hereditary serfdom under the early Zhou. It is probably from this time that the “well-field” system came into being.

In this, settlers in new frontier communities would lay out a field pattern which gave each family a portion of land, with every ninth field being allocated to the local lord. The peasants would farm this on his behalf. The name derives from the fact that these portions of land would be clustered round a spring or a well, thus all being within easy reach of fresh water.

Frontier settlements

In this system, when a group of peasant families (according to the later ideal, eight in number) were settled in an area of land by a local lord, each was allotted a plot to farm. A ninth plot

(probably the most valuable because it had the settlement's well) was reserved for the lord, and all the peasants were required to work on this land as well as their own, to provide for the needs of the lord and his family.

This system, idealized in later times, probably formed an organizing structure in many rural areas, particularly where a farming colony had been set up in frontier territory (as we have noted, the early Zhou period was a time of rapid expansion).

The peasantry in later Zhou times

In any event, as late as the 6th century BCE most peasants were serfs, tied to the lands they farmed. From that time onwards, however, more and more of them cast off their bondage to become free farmers.

In the intense competition between the states into which China had become fragmented, the princes felt the need to maximise their tax base. In the mid-fourth century BCE, they therefore converted the feudal obligations of the peasants on these lands into obligations to the state – in other words, to pay tribute and render military and labour services to the prince rather than to a local lord.

The decline of serfdom

The princes also freed the peasants from their ancestral bondage to their plots, giving them the right to buy and sell land. They thus gave the peasants an incentive to work hard to develop their farms and invest in the new iron tools which were coming into use, so that, eventually, they could grow more food and pay more taxes.

Moreover, it would naturally be the most hard-working and successful peasants who would buy out the less efficient ones, thus further increasing the productivity of the land (and the taxes flowing therefrom).

This process was undoubtedly helped along by the fact that the aristocratic clans were busy eliminating themselves in vicious civil wars of the time, so that more and more land ended up in the hands of the princes.

The status for many peasants thus changed, from serfs tied to another man's lands to free citizens farming their own lands.

Face-to-face with the state

This development also brought the peasantry more directly under the state's control. As serfs, they had been beholden to their lords; as citizens of their states, peasants had to pay taxes (at this time, usually in grain rather than coin) to the prince, render labour service on public works such as irrigation projects and royal palaces, and serve as soldiers in the prince's army.

Some prosper, others don't

There was of course a downside to this development. Some of the freehold farmers prospered, but others did not. Whilst the former were able to increase their holdings, and even become small landlords, the latter had to sell even the small plots they had and become tenants.

Even so, they were no longer semi-free serfs tied to their land on an hereditary basis.

The peasantry under the Han

Under the Han dynasty, all peasants benefitted in a very specific way from the government's desire to rule for the benefit of the people as a whole, as their Confucian ideology urged them to do.

Ever-normal granaries

This led them to establishing a network of "ever-normal granaries" – storehouses of surplus grain purchased by the government in good times so that it could be sold to people at a fair price in times of scarcity. This was intended to alleviate the suffering of the people during famines.

Late Han times

The Later Han government increasingly served the interests of the great landowners. Landed estates grew unchecked and many peasants lost their land to become tenant farmers.

Moreover, the complex and costly operations which in the early and middle Han had been undertaken on a regular basis, such as maintaining the large-scale irrigation systems on which much agriculture depended, keeping the dykes in good order and dredging rivers, began to fail. Flooding occurred more often.

Unsurprisingly peasant unrest increased, and played a major role in the fall of the Han dynasty.

The Urban Classes: Artisans and Merchants

In ancient China the urban population probably never numbered more than 10-15% of the population. According to the traditional Chinese view, the town dwellers – artisans and merchants – were the least favoured of the four classes.

In reality, these classes were usually better off than the peasants, and during the long Zhou period, as the economy expanded, the merchants especially flourished.

Towns and cities could be found in China as far back as the Shang dynasty, if not before. Here, a class of highly skilled craft workers produced luxury goods – amongst them some of the most beautiful bronze vessels ever produced – for the kings and their courts. Likewise, in the small walled towns of the early Zhou artisans were mainly engaged in supplying the needs of the ruling class.

Economic growth, urban expansion

From middle Zhou times (c. 800 – 500 BCE), however, as trade and industry expanded strongly, a much larger urban population grew up. The merchant class especially became more numerous, wealthier and more influential as a class.

In Qin and Han times

Both the Qin and Han regimes discriminated against the merchants, and from time to time levied arbitrary taxes on them. But of course a large nation such as China needs a thriving commercial sector so that goods can be distributed efficiently over longer or shorter distances.

Peace and stability resulted in economic expansion, to the advantage of the urban classes. Official government policies could not halt the general trend throughout China's ancient history for the merchant class to grow in numbers, wealth and influence. Some Han merchants became

extremely wealthy indeed, especially those in the iron and salt industries, and wholesale grain merchants. These men were much better off than all but the wealthiest of the gentry class.

Slaves

Slaves were not even mentioned as one of the four classes of traditional Chinese thought: they were not regarded as members of society – they were possessions, like oxen and pigs.

Under the Shang there existed a large class of slaves. This perhaps reflects the comparative under-population of northern China at this time, at least when compared to later periods of Chinese history.

War captives and possibly criminals would have been put to work on public works projects, such as the construction of town walls, places, temples and flood-defences, or in fields belonging to kings and aristocrats. Here, they would have been working alongside peasants undertaking their period of forced labour, though probably suffering greater mistreatment.

Decline of slavery

In Zhou times slavery became less prominent. As we have seen above, the Zhou period saw strong population growth, so peasant labour would have been sufficient for the states' needs. Slavery would have been less important, and anyway, perhaps the Zhou were less inclined to enslave defeated people and instead benefit from the tribute their new subjects could yield them.

Slaves remained a part of society throughout Ancient China's history, but only as a tiny part of the total. This was quite unlike in Greek and Roman society, for example. They were mostly used in domestic service, and perhaps in mines and quarries and other workplaces with terrible conditions.

Social Mobility

In Shang and early Zhou times, the social groups in society – the aristocracy and their warrior-entourages, the traders and artisans, the peasants and slaves – were fixed hereditary classes; there was probably very little movement between them.

The upper classes in changing times

Linked to all the other changes in Chinese society from mid-Zhou times onwards, social classes became much more fluid. The aristocracy found their feudal privileges undermined, and their fiefs taken from them. A new office-holding class of landed gentry took their place, the backbone of the administrations of the territorial princes. Some members of this class rose very high in the service of the princes, gaining fame and wealth as ministers or army commanders. Some wholesale merchants also became extremely wealthy.

As in all pre-industrial societies, the best way to invest wealth was to buy up land, and so these men, merchants, ministers and generals were able to become big landowners. Such was the turbulence of the later Zhou period and then the Qin period, however, that it is doubtful whether many of their descendants or they were able to hang on to their estates for many generations.

Stable conditions

Things were otherwise under the stable conditions of the long-lasting Han dynasty, however. The gentry class continued to fill the new imperial civil service, but again, in each generation, some reached the top of government, and were rewarded with magnificent salaries and gifts.

At the same time, despite official discrimination against them, some merchants were also able to acquire huge wealth. These top officials and super-rich merchants were able to establish big landowning families which would endure for centuries, becoming the nucleus for a new aristocracy which, by the end of the Han dynasty, completely dominated Chinese society.

Social mobility amongst the peasantry

Those lower down the social scale could also experience social mobility. Under the Shang and early Zhou, peasants formed a hereditary class of serfs, tied to the lands they farmed. From mid-Zhou times more and more of them ceased to be serfs, and became freehold farmers.

Through luck or skill, some prospered and were able to buy out their less fortunate neighbours; small-scale landlordism emerged in rural society, with some families rising in a generation or two into the new gentry class. Many other peasants, on the other hand, had to sell their lands to richer neighbours and become tenant farmers, or even landless labourers.

The Family in Ancient China

The traditional Chinese family was a large group of people who traced their ancestry back to a single male ancestor, with the family name and identity passing through its males, from father to sons.

Clans

Through the Zhou dynasty period the nuclear family of father, mother and children was apparently the basic social unit among commoners (although different families within a village were often related to one another). Amongst the early Zhou aristocracy, however, groups of families tracing their descent from a common ancestor formed clans. These were of great importance, as the different families within a clan felt duty bound to support one another in ups and downs of political life.

From the mid-Zhou period (probably as politics became more and more turbulent) the clans became more highly organized. Their heads (the eldest son of the eldest son and so on) controlled clan affairs and controlled the clan's property. Some clans became so powerful that they became a threat to the position of the prince.

Decline

In the destructive civil wars of the period, however, these great clans shattered their power. Many were eliminated altogether.

Princes took steps to prevent their re-emergence, and the rulers of the state of Qin even discouraged the formation of extended families by doubling taxes on households with more than two adult sons living with their parents.

This was a policy deliberately aimed at fragmenting society into nuclear families. In the place of clans, the Qin divided society up into mutual-support groups of five and ten nuclear families

each, which were responsible to the authorities for the good behaviour of all their members. If one committed a crime, all were punished.

Veneration of Ancestors

Though by Qin and Han times clans had lost their political significance, the continued practice of ancestor veneration kept the idea of the clan alive. Under the Han regime the clan became an important social unit again. This was especially true amongst gentry families, but it was also the case lower down the social scale.

For the Chinese, the family is of almost sacred significance, an attitude giving rise to, and reinforced by, the practice of ancestor veneration.

The existence of ancestor veneration is attested in the earliest texts from ancient China, the Shang dynasty oracles, and its roots undoubtedly reach far back into Neolithic times.

The practice was given a boost by Confucianism, which emphasised the importance of the family. It elevated “filial piety” – treating one’s elders, especially ones father, grandfather and more distant ancestors, with respect – into one of the chief virtues. As a key part of filial piety, Confucius stressed the importance of venerating one’s ancestors.

Women in Ancient China

The Chinese family was deeply patriarchal. Confucianism reinforced the subordination of women within the family. Elder males were accorded the greatest respect. Women were in a subordinate position within the family. They were to obey their fathers until they married, at which time they transferred their allegiance to their husband and his family.

New wives went to live in their husband’s family, and from then on were completely identified with it. Not only were they subordinate to all the males in the family but also to their mothers-in-law. The young woman was powerless figure; only later, when she became a mother of sons, did her status rise in the family. As a mother-in-law herself she could be a formidable figure.

Property

Family property was usually divided equally between sons; daughters did not receive anything except the dowry – which went to enrich the families they married into, not her.

Women were unable to own property in their own right. On marriage they were often passed to their husband’s family with a dowry, which represented a net loss of wealth to her original family. This is one reason why the birth of a daughter was often met with dismay. Female infanticide was common, and it was a common practice for poor families to sell their daughters into servitude or concubinage (polygamy was an entirely acceptable practice, as was concubinage).

None of this stopped women from making their presence felt: Chinese literature is full of references to strong minded women exerting their wills on the males within their families.

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