

# UNIT 4



# Imperial China

- Chapter 16** The Political Development of Imperial China
- Chapter 17** China Develops a New Economy
- Chapter 18** Chinese Discoveries and Inventions
- Chapter 19** China's Contacts with the Outside World



# Setting the Stage

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## Imperial China

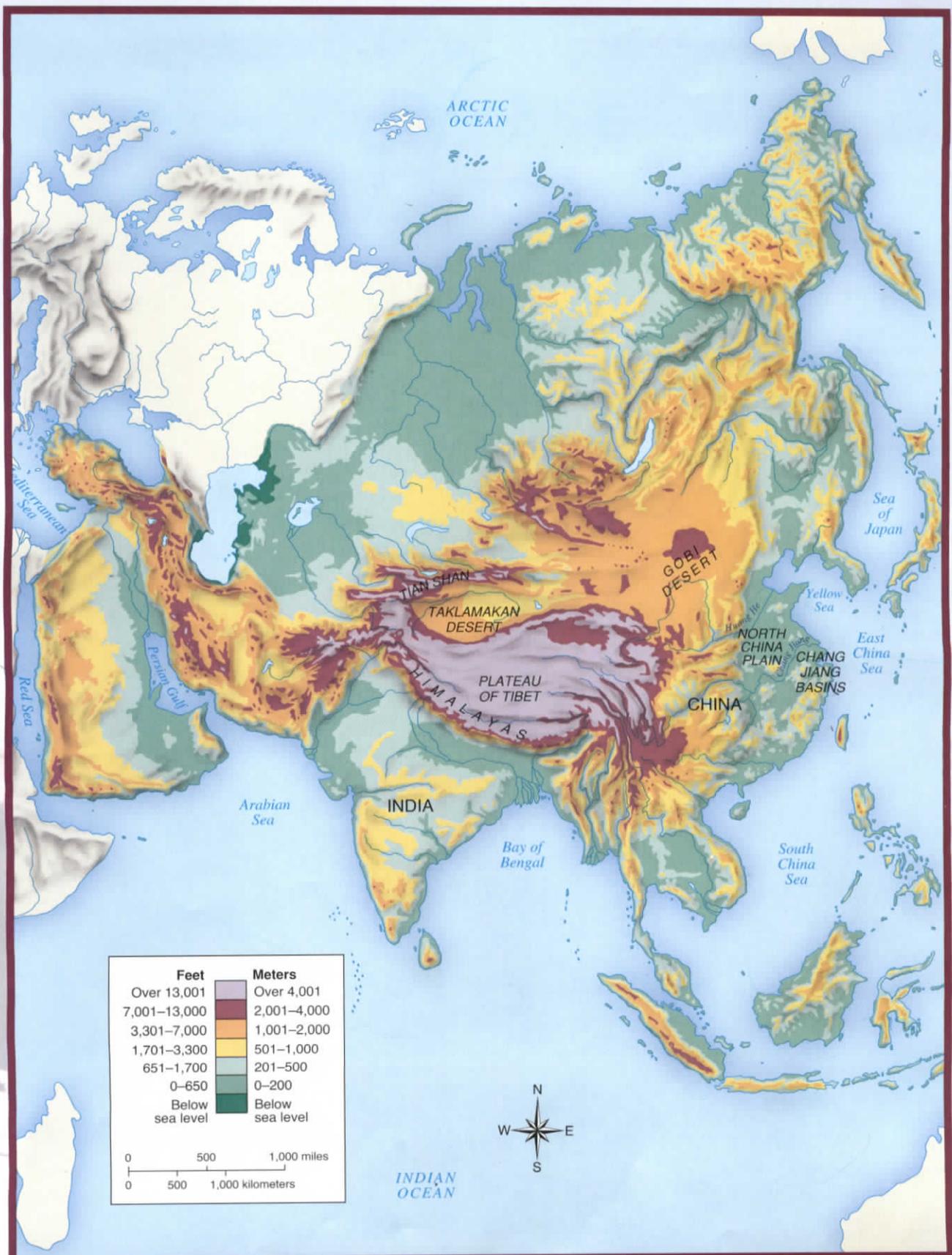
In the last unit, you learned about the kingdoms of West Africa. In this unit, you will explore imperial China during the period from 220 to 1644 c.e. (The word *imperial* means “ruled by an emperor.”)

China, a huge country about the size of the United States, takes up most of the landmass of East Asia. China stretches from Siberia in the north to the tropical regions of the south. Mountains and deserts cover much of the land. Five large rivers run through it. One of the most important is the Chang Jiang, the third longest river in the world. Another is the Huang He, or Yellow River. The Huang is sometimes called “China’s Sorrow” because its flooding causes so much damage. It is called “Yellow” because of the heavy amount of silt it carries.

China is a land of extremes. In some places it is bitterly cold; in others it is either hot and dry or hot and humid. China has some of the world’s highest mountains. It also has deserts far below sea level. Each area of the country is different. The northwest has deserts, glaciers, and tall mountains. The northeast has mountains and forests. Southern China has fertile lowlands.

Chinese civilization developed on the North China Plain, around the Huang He, and spread southward to the Chang Jiang Basins. Most of the events you’ll read about took place in this region. The area’s rivers, fertile soil, and fairly warm and rainy climate made it easy for people to grow and transport food. As Chinese civilization developed, it expanded to include more territory, particularly in the north and the west. By the 1700s, all of these regions became part of a unified China.

Unifying and governing such a large and diverse country was a major challenge for China’s rulers. The expansion of China was the work of a number of imperial dynasties, or ruling families. The Qin dynasty (221 to 206 B.C.E.) was the first to bring China under the rule of an emperor. The Han dynasty (206 B.C.E. to 220 C.E.) expanded the emperor’s rule and created a “golden age” of stability and prosperity. In this unit, you will focus on Chinese history from the end of the Han dynasty to 1644 c.e. (the end of the Ming dynasty).



Feet	Meters
Over 13,001	Over 4,001
7,001–13,000	2,001–4,000
3,301–7,000	1,001–2,000
1,701–3,300	501–1,000
651–1,700	201–500
0–650	0–200
Below sea level	Below sea level

0 500 1,000 miles  
0 500 1,000 kilometers

**Asia**



◀ Scholars took exams to become scholar-officials and help the emperor rule.

# The Political Development of Imperial China

## 16.1 Introduction

Welcome to **imperial China**. Historians divide Chinese history into periods ruled by **dynasties**, or ruling families. In this chapter, you will learn about China's political development under several dynasties from 220 to 1644 C.E.

China was first unified under an emperor in the third century B.C.E. From the beginning, emperors needed help to rule their large country. Emperor Han Wu Di, for example, once sent out this announcement:

### *Heroes Wanted! A Proclamation*

*Exceptional work demands exceptional men.... We therefore command the various district officials to search for men of brilliant and exceptional talents, to be our generals, our ministers, and our envoys to distant states.*

Over time, Chinese emperors tried several ways of finding qualified people to administer their government. One method was to rely on an **aristocracy** of wealthy landowners. Emperors like Han Wu Di, however, preferred to choose officials for their merit, or worth. During the Han dynasty, candidates for government jobs had to prove their knowledge and ability by passing strict tests. As a result, a class of scholar-officials evolved. Under later emperors, this system developed into a **meritocracy**, or rule by officials of proven merit.

In the 13th century C.E., a nomadic people called the Mongols build a great empire in Asia. Toward the end of the century, the Mongols took over China. Under Mongol emperors, government officials were foreigners. Under this **government by foreigners**, some officials were Mongol friends and relatives of the emperor. Others were trusted people from other lands.

How did these three approaches to government affect China? Which won out in the end? In this chapter, you'll explore these questions.



Use this illustration as a graphic organizer to understand how Chinese emperors chose people to help govern the country.

## 16.2 The Government of Imperial China

In 221 B.C.E., Prince Zheng, the head of the state of Qin, became the first Chinese ruler to claim the title of emperor. He took the name Qin Shihuangdi, which means “First Emperor of Qin.” From that time on, China generally had an imperial government headed by an emperor or, sometimes, an empress.

**China’s Imperial Dynasties** Chinese emperors named a relative—often a son—to become emperor after their deaths. In this way they established a dynasty, or line of rulers from the same family.

From ancient times, Chinese rulers based their right to govern on the Mandate of Heaven. According to this idea, Heaven had chosen a particular dynasty to rule. The Chinese believed that Heaven supported the dynasty for as long as an emperor ruled well. Natural disasters such as floods, famines, plagues, and earthquakes were taken as signs that Heaven was displeased. If an emperor ruled badly and lost the Mandate of Heaven, the people could overthrow him.

The table lists the imperial dynasties that ruled China between 221 B.C.E. and 1644 C.E. In this unit, you’ll focus on the dynasties that followed the Han dynasty.

**China’s Imperial Dynasties**

Dynasty	Time Period	Known For
Qin dynasty	221 – 206 B.C.E.	unification of China under an emperor
Han dynasty	206 B.C.E. – 220 C.E.	a golden age for a united China
Six dynasties	220–581 C.E.	a period of chaos and division
Sui dynasty	589–618 C.E.	reunification of China
Tang dynasty	618–907 C.E.	economic development and growth; many inventions and discoveries
Five dynasties in the north Ten kingdoms in the south	907–960 C.E. 907–970 C.E.	a period of chaos and division
Song dynasty	960–1279 C.E.	economic development and growth; many inventions and discoveries
Yuan dynasty (the Mongols)	1279–1368 C.E.	control of China by foreigners
Ming dynasty	1368–1644 C.E.	opening up of China to foreign influences at the start of the dynasty, closing down of China by the end of the dynasty



**China's Breakup and Reunification** The Han dynasty of ancient China held power for more than 400 years. This was a golden age of expansion and prosperity for China. In 220 C.E., however, the Han lost their grip on power. A long period of disunity followed. This period ended when the Sui and Tang dynasties reunified China.

What happened to bring about the end of Han rule? Like earlier emperors, the Han governed China with the help of a large **bureaucracy** of government officials. As long as the bureaucracy was skilled, honest, and hard working, China prospered. By 220, however, corrupt (dishonest) relatives and servants of the emperor had seized control of the government.

The result was disastrous. High taxes ruined families. Workers were forced to labor for long periods of time on public projects. Bandits attacked the countryside. This led **warlords** to oppose the emperor and fight with one another. The government grew weak and could not protect farmers.

Small farmers also suffered because they had to pay taxes and give half of everything they produced to their landlords. As they fell into debt, they had to give up their land to large landowners and work for them.

At last the farmers rebelled. The Han dynasty had lost the Mandate of Heaven.

No new dynasty took over from the Han. Instead, China broke apart into separate kingdoms, just as Europe did after the fall of Rome. Nomadic invaders ruled the north. Several short-lived dynasties ruled the south.

In 589, the northern state of Sui conquered the south and reunified China. The Sui dynasty created a new central government and ruled for 29 years. By 617, however, heavy taxes led to unrest and a struggle for power.

In 618, a general named Li Yuan declared himself emperor and established the Tang dynasty. Tang rulers built on the accomplishments of the Sui dynasty. They strengthened the central government and increased Tang influence over outlying areas.

Under the Tang, a unified China enjoyed a period of wealth and power that lasted nearly 300 years. Let's look now at how Tang rulers approached problems of government.

China was divided into warring kingdoms from 220 to 589 C.E.

**bureaucracy** a highly organized body of workers with many levels of authority

**warlord** a military leader operating outside the control of the government

### civil service examination

a test given to qualify candidates for positions in the government

Civil service exams to choose government officials were based on the teachings of this man, Confucius.



## 16.3 Aristocracy: The Tang Dynasty

Like emperors before them, Tang rulers relied on a large bureaucracy. Officials collected taxes and oversaw building and irrigation projects. They provided for the army and made sure the laws were obeyed. But how could emperors make sure they chose the best people for these positions?

Earlier emperors answered this question in different ways. Before the Han dynasty, emperors chose aristocrats to help them govern. Aristocrats, or nobles, were wealthy and powerful landowners. But simply being wealthy did not make a person talented and knowledgeable.

To improve the bureaucracy, Han emperors created **civil service examinations**. Candidates took long tests to prove they were qualified to hold office. The tests had questions on Chinese classics, poetry, and legal and administrative issues. Mainly they were based on the works of Confucius, China's great philosopher and teacher. This was the beginning of a system in which a class of scholar-officials ran the government.

Tang emperors also used civil service exams to fill some government positions. Early in the dynasty, however, emperors chose aristocrats for most high-level jobs. Some officials were hired because their fathers or grandfathers had held high government rank. Some were hired because of personal recommendations. Often, aristocrats gained positions by marrying into the imperial family:

Even the civil service exams favored aristocrats. The tests were supposedly open to all except for certain groups, such as merchants, actors, and beggars. In theory, any man could attend the university where students prepared for the exams. In reality, however, only the wealthy could afford tutors, books, and time to study. As a result, aristocrats held almost all offices in the early part of the dynasty.

Peasant rebellions and battles between generals ended the Tang dynasty in 907. Once again, China split apart. Five military dynasties followed one another to power in the north. The south broke up into independent kingdoms.

Beginning in 960, the Song dynasty rose to power. Gradually, Song emperors reunified the country. As you will see, they built on the civil service system to reform the way government officials were chosen.

## 16.4 Meritocracy: The Song Dynasty

Under Song emperors, the idea of scholar-officials reached its height. The Song relied on civil service exams and opened them up to far more candidates. In this way, they created a meritocracy: rule by officials chosen for their merit.

The exams were influenced by a new school of thought known as neo-Confucianism. This new teaching blended the teachings of Confucius with elements of Buddhism and Daoism (two traditional Chinese religions). A neo-Confucian scholar, Zhu Xi, selected and commented on classic Chinese writings. In 1190, his work was published as the *Four Books*. This work became the basis of study for all civil service exams.



Confucius taught that people must act properly in five important relationships: ruler and subject, father and son, older sibling and younger sibling, husband and wife, and friend and friend. Except for friends, one person in each relationship is above the other. Those above should be kind to those below. Those below should respect and obey those above. In particular, subjects must be loyal to rulers. Song emperors and scholars believed that officials who had studied Confucius would be rational, moral, and able to maintain order.

Under the Song, people from lower classes gained the ability to become scholar-officials. They could attend the new state-supported local schools and go on to the university to become scholars. If they passed a local test, they could take the imperial exam in the capital. Here they wrote essays and poems in a certain style. They answered questions about political and social problems based on Confucian ideas.

The exams were set up to prevent cheating. Candidates were locked in a small room for several days. A second person copied each paper so that the examiners wouldn't know whose work they were reading.

Only a small proportion of candidates passed the difficult exams. Those who failed could take the tests again in the future. Those who passed had to wait a few years before their first appointment. When it came, it was for a job far from their hometown so that they couldn't play favorites among family and friends. At the end of three years, officials could move up in rank.

Despite the hardships, people were happy to get such respected jobs. As government officials, they also enjoyed certain privileges, such as being excused from taxes and military service.

During the Sung dynasty, scholar-officials performed many tasks. Here scholars are arranging ancient manuscripts.

## 16.5 Government by Foreigners: The Period of Mongol Rule

In the 13th century, the Mongols conquered almost all of Asia. In 1276, the Mongols captured China's imperial capital. Three years later, the last Song emperor died in flight.

The Mongol leader, Kublai Khan, took the title of emperor of China. He called his dynasty the Yuan dynasty. For nearly 100 years, from 1279 to 1368, China was under Mongol rule.

Under the Mongols, Chinese society was divided into four classes. The Mongols were at the top. Next came foreigners from outside China who were their friends. These people included Tibetans, Persians, Turks,

and Central Asians. Many of them were Muslims. The third class was made up of the northern Chinese, who were more accustomed to the Mongols than the southerners were. The southern Chinese came last.

Kublai Khan ended the system of civil service exams. He did not believe that Confucian learning was needed for government jobs, and he did not want to rely on Chinese to run his government. To fill important positions, he

chose other Mongols that he felt he could trust. Some of these people were his relatives.

But there weren't enough Mongols to fill every job. Besides, many were illiterate (unable to read and write). Kublai and later Mongol emperors needed people who could handle the paperwork of a complex government. They were forced to appoint trusted foreigners to government positions, even some Europeans. Chinese scholars were used only as teachers and minor officials. Other Chinese worked as clerks, and some of them rose to important positions.

Without the examination system, however, there was a shortage of capable administrators. In 1315, the Mongols restored the exam system. Even then, they set limits on who could take the exam, which favored Mongol and other non-Chinese candidates.

As time went on, fighting among Mongol leaders weakened the government. So did their greed. Officials were often corrupt, perhaps in part because they had not been taught Confucian ideals.

The Mongols had also made enemies of many native Chinese. In the 1350s and 1360s, rebels rose up to fight them. In 1368, the Mongol dynasty collapsed, and the Chinese reestablished their own government under the Ming dynasty. The Ming ruled China for nearly 300 years.



Even though scholars did not hold government jobs during the rule of the Mongols, they still enjoyed a comfortable life.

## 16.6 The Revival of the Civil Service System

Under Ming emperors, civil service exams were again used to fill government positions. This system lasted into the 20th century.

In many ways, the exam system served China well. It provided a well-organized government. The education of its scholar-officials emphasized moral behavior, justice, kindness, loyalty to the emperor, proper conduct, and the importance of family. These values helped to unify Chinese culture.

The civil service system gave poor men who were ambitious and hard working the chance to be government officials. At the same time, it ensured that officials were trained and talented, not merely rich or related to the emperor.

Yet China's civil service system may also have stood in the way of progress. The exams did not test understanding of science, mathematics, or engineering. People with such knowledge were therefore kept out of the government. Confucian scholars also had little respect for merchants, business, and trade. Confucians had often considered merchants to be the lowest class in society because they bought and sold things rather than producing useful items themselves. Under the Ming, this outlook dominated, and trade and business were not encouraged. In addition, the bureaucracy became set in its ways. Its inability to adapt contributed to the fall of the Ming in 1644.



Civil service exams lasted for several days. Candidates were locked in small cells like these during the tests.

## 16.7 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you learned how China was governed between 220 and 1644 C.E. Chinese emperors relied on a bureaucracy to help them govern. At different times, they used various ways of choosing government officials.

Early emperors chose officials from the aristocracy. The Han tried to improve government by creating a civil service examination system. Candidates for government jobs had to pass tests based mostly on Confucian learning.

After the long period of division, the Sui and Tang dynasties reunified China. Civil service exams continued, but aristocrats filled most government jobs under the Tang.

The Song dynasty used civil service exams to create a meritocracy of scholar-officials. Mongol emperors, however, relied on family members, friends, and trusted foreigners. Under the Ming, the Chinese restored their civil service system.

Now that you have an overview of Chinese government, it's time to look at other aspects of Chinese history. In the next chapter, you'll learn about the growth of China's economy during the Song dynasty.