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the Qin, the new imperial regime merged these walls into a single system of defense. These walls were the ancestors of the famous Great Wall of China, refurbished under its present form under the Ming dynasty, in the 15th century CE.A section of the Great Wall of ChinaEconomy and Society in Ancient ChinaPopulationDuring the ancient period, the Han (as the Chinese would later call themselves) spread, through settlement and the assimilation of indigenous peoples, across northern China and down into the Yangtze region (this process is covered in the articleSociety in Ancient China). Population censuses began being taken during the Han Empire, which record a population of about 50 or 60 million. This makes it, along with the Roman Empire, the largest state in the Ancient World.The ruins of a Han dynasty watchtower. Photo by The Real Bear, Creative Commons 2.0.Even by the end of the Han dynasty the heart of Chinese civilization lay in the Yellow River region of northern China. It was here that the two capital cities, first Changan, and then Louyang, were located. The Yangtze region, and even more the far south and southwest, remained under-populated frontier regions inhabited largely by non-Chinese peoples.While the great majority of people remained engaged in agriculture and lived in farming villages, theancient period saw towns and cities spread across China. Most of these were administrative centers, where provincial officials were based along with their staffs. Many were tiny by modern standards. The Han censuses show only twelve cities of more than 50,000 inhabitants; most of the rest would have been far smaller. Nevertheless, the capital of Han China was always among the largest cities in the world at times, THE largest. Changan, the capital of the early Han emperors, had a quarter of a million inhabitants, and the later Han capital, Louyang, half a million.Farming and farmersAncient Chinas economy and society was based on agriculture. The vast majority of Chinese families lived in small farming villages, dotted across intensively cultivated landscapes.Chinese agriculture possessed, from ancient times, its own characteristics. Almost everywhere, it was dependent on the careful and unremitting management of water: to irrigate the fields of millet in North China, keep back the river floods near the great rivers, and swamp the paddy fields of southern China.Their social position and economic condition of farmers has been different at different time. In early times, under the Shang and early Zhou, they were serfs, semi-servile bondsmen tied to their particular lords. From middle Zhou times, as the old feudal aristocracy disappeared, more and more of them became free owners of their small farms. Later again, in later Han times, their statusdeclined again.Whatever the farmers condition, as the centuries went by Chinese agriculture became more and more productive. New cropsand the spread of iron tools and new techniques led to more intensive farming.From later Zhou times, government became active in promoting agriculture, especially by bringing new land under irrigation. These various factors resulted inpopulation growth.Trade and industry in Imperial ChinaAs agriculture became more productive and population increased, trade and industry also grew. The introduction of coinagein later Zhou times facilitated trade, and technological innovations such as the development of steel-making contributed to industrial expansion.Another major factor was state intervention. Under the Qin and Han, thestandardisation in such things as weights and measures and road building would have had a major impact.International tradeInternational trade first gained prominence under the Han dynasty. By gaining control over the eastern steppes of central Asia, the Han enabled the Silk Road, that great trade route across Asia to the Middle East and Europe, to become established. At the same time, the conquest of south China opened up the maritime trade to south east Asia. Although the south remained an underpopulated frontier zone in ancient times, a few important ports were established on the coast. It was in this period that Canton began its long history as a center of international commerce.The Silk Road. Image Copyright Timemaps.Merchants and craftsmen in Chinese societyCraftsmen must have formed a privileged class in early China. Their products, including some of the finest bronzes ever produced, must have been highly valued by the ruling elite in Shang and early Zhou times, and this must have conferred a certain status on their makers.In middle and later Zhou times, merchants became more influential as a class, and the economic expansion under the Han dynastiespecially benefitted the urban classes. Government policies designed to keep merchants in their place could not halt them from growing in numbers and wealth.The Ruling ClassesThe societies of early China, under the Shang and early Zhou dynasties, were dominated by an hereditary feudal aristocracy. Later, however, the position of this group declined, and a new social class emerged, that of the gentry small landowners who provided rulers with their growing number of officials. By the time ofthe Qin and Han dynasties, a career in government was effectively open only to members of the gentry class.By mid-Han times, however, a new super-elite of great landowners was emerging, its members enriched by holding high office. This new class would dominate Chinesesociety and politics in the centuries that followed.The FamilyIn pre-modern China, the family was of almost sacred significance, an attitude giving rise to, and reinforced by, the practice of ancestor veneration.Women d in traditional hanfu late Eastern Han-era Dahuting Tomb in Zhengzhou. Image Public Domain.The existence of ancestor veneration is attested in the earliest texts from ancient China, the Shang dynasty oracles, and throughout Chinas long history the rise and decline of higher religions and modes of thought Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism and so on never undermined the practice, which might with some justification be thought of as the basic sacred tradition of China.Women had a subordinate place in the Chinese family from ancient times.Their duty was to obey, first their fathers, then their husbands, and then, after their husbands deaths, their eldest sons. This should not be exaggerated, however: children of both sexes were taught to obey and respect their parents. Culture in ChinaAncient beliefs and practicesIt seems clear that many of traditional Chinese religious and philosophical ideas and practiceswere already present when written records begin, and probably for long before. Such elements as divination, ancestor veneration, feng-shui, the Dao and the supreme god Di are all evidenced in the Shang oracle bones inscriptions.Zhou Schools of ThoughtIt was in mid- and late-Zhou periods, however, that the schools of thought developed which were so profoundly to influence Chinese thinking down to the 20th century.Four of these stand out as by far the most influential.ConfucianismThis taught that people must accept their place in society if society is to be harmonious. However, social relationships should be reciprocal. Thus, while a son should obey his father, the father should act considerately towards the son. (More on Confucianism)DaoismThe Daoists believed that a person must live in accordance with the flow of nature; trying to change the way things are is futile. (More on Daoism)MohismThe philosopher Mozi (c. 468-382) believed that anything that helped peoples welfare and contributed to peace was good; anything that did not was bad. People should practice universal love, and not live selfishly. (More on Mohism)LegalismThe legalists said that the most important thing was that the state should be strong. To achieve this, all people should obey the ruler and his officials without question. For his part, the ruler should do whatever it takes to strengthen the state, whether it is immoral or not. (More on Legalism)Throughout Chinas long history these philosophical strands have never been mutually exclusive. Many educated Chinese have been Confucians in public life, Daoists in the privacy of their own homes, and when serving in an official post have happily pursued Legalist policies. The different philosophies have also deeply influenced each other so that, for example, the dominant of the three, Confucianism, has had strong Daoist and Legalist elements within it.At first, though, these four schools seem to have regarded themselves as exclusive rivals for peoples allegiances.The Qin dynasty came to power through the application of Legalist principles, and sought to eliminate all other schools of thought. After that dynasty fell, however, the Han dynasty enshrined Confucianism as the official ideology of the state. As such, it was probably forced to take in ideas from other schools, particularly Legalism and Daoism, in order to remain relevant to the needs of government and officials.In late Han times and after, Daoism, and even more, Buddhism, came to prominence. Buddhism was the first belief-system from outside China to have a widespread impact on the Chinese people.LiteratureApart from works on divination and religious rites, literature in Ancient China really got going in mid-Zhou times the time of Confucius and other philosophers.A number of works, dating to Zhou and Han times, gained the status of Classics, and came to be viewed almost as religious texts. They embodied the foundations of Confucian thought, and would have a profound influence on Chinese civilization.Works of historyThe other major strand of Chinese prose literature was history.The Han historian Sima Qian (c. 145-87 BC) set the standard for historical writing for the next two thousand years. Henceforth, history would be a major feature of Chinese literature.PoetrySo far as poetry was concerned, here again the Han period set in place foundations which would be followed and elaborated upon for hundreds of years. Two strands became popular: the first,Shih, consisted of short poems written in a compact, spare style; the second, Fu consisted of longer, more ornate verses. The interaction between these two styles would give a particular character to Chinese verse, reflecting a varying mix of the discipline of Shihwith theexpressiveness of Fu.ArtApart from the beautifulbronzes dating to Shang and early Zhou times, few works of art have come down to us from Ancient China. Nevertheless, wonderfulsmall clay models of houses, horses and people designed to be placed in graves show that Han artists strove for realism as well as lively movement. Also, writings from the Han period mention lively paintings adorning the walls of fine houses.A Western Han painted ceramic mounted cavalryman. Photo by Editor at Large, Wikipedia Creative Commons 2.5. Further StudyMapsClick here for the start of a sequence of maps showing thehistory of Ancient ChinaFor a sequence of maps showing ancient China in the broader context of East Asian history:history of East AsiaArticlesThemed articles:The State institutions in Ancient ChinaThe Economy of Ancient ChinaSociety in Ancient ChinaThought and Culture in Ancient ChinaAlso, the article onThe Origins of Civilizationhas a small section dealing specifically with China.The broader regional context is covered inThe history of East Asia.Dynasties in Ancient China:Shang dynasty ChinaZhou dynasty ChinaQin dynasty ChinaHan dynasty ChinaDivided ChinaThe main sources I have used for the history of ancient China are:Hucker, C.O.,Chinas Imperial Past,Stanford, 1975 the most informative of the books I have used, and very readable.Roberts, J.A.G.,The Complete History of China, Sutton, 2004 also a very good introduction, and also highly readable.Eberhard, W.,A History of China, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977 very useful to be read in conjunction with other general histories, but to be used with caution it embodies some sociological models which have been ditched in recent years.An even older book, but enormously informative and insightful, is Fitzgeralds, C.P.,China: A Short Cultural History, Barrie & Jenkins, 1953 (despite the title, notthatshort 624 pages).A recent book which has been well received is Keay, J.,China, A History, 2010. (I havent yet read this, but I have read hisIndia, A History,which is good).Loewe, M.,Crisis and Conflict in Han China, Allen & Unwin, 1975, offers a brilliant insight into the workings of Han government.A lavishly illustrated work on archaeology for the general reader which includes good sections on China, is Renfrew, C. (ed.),Past Worlds: The Times Atlas of Archaeology, Times Books, 1995, p. 92-3, 146-7, 190-5A work on general archaeology aimed more at students, but eminently readable and with very useful coverage of ancient China and the roots of Chinese civilization, is Scarre, C. (ed.),The Human Past, Thames & Hudson, 2005, p. 234ff., 552ff.If you want a quick introduction to the archaeology of ancient China, try the small but beautifully illustrated handbook by Debaine-Francofort, C.,The Search for Ancient China, Thames & Hudson, 1999.For an insightful look at government in ancient China, see Finer, S. E.,The History of Government, I, Ancient Monarchies and Empires, OUP, 1999, p. 442ff.WebsitesThe Ancient History Encyclopedia has a very useful series of pages onAncient China: start at the general Ancient China page and follow the appropriate links.The British Museums websiteAncient Chinais a wonderful teaching resource.Wikipedias coverage ofAncient Chinais as usual vast, and is particularly useful if you want to chase down a specific topic (though coverage of some topics can be a bit patchy).

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