

Chapter 5: Early Society in East Asia

Overview

The cultures of east Asia had relatively little direct contact with the complex societies to the west; nevertheless, powerful states (the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties), sophisticated technologies, and highly stratified societies developed along the banks of the Yellow and Yangzi rivers in China. These early societies were built on a foundation that would endure for millennia, some of the significant components of which include the following:

These societies believed in the principle that the emperor was granted the power to rule through “the mandate of heaven.” Thus the emperor, known as the son of heaven, served as a crucial link between the heavenly powers and the people on earth.

The extended family was the primary institution of society. The patriarchal head of the family wielded tremendous power and shouldered great responsibilities. It was his job to see that appropriate religious rituals were observed in the worship of the family's departed ancestors. Those ancestors were believed to have control over the living family's well-being.

A writing system spread widely throughout China and still persists in its basic form, although modified through time. Consequently Chinese society has experienced a virtually uninterrupted literary tradition. Sharp distinctions and clearly defined roles within the society were based on class, gender, and age.

Chapter Outline

I. Political organization in early China

- A. Early agricultural society and the Xia dynasty
 1. The Yellow River
 - a. Water source at high plateau of Tibet
 - b. Loess soil carried by the river's water, hence "yellow"
 - c. "China's Sorrow"--extensive flooding
 - d. Loess provided rich soil, soft and easy to work
 2. Neolithic societies after 5000 B.C.E.
 - a. Yangshao society, 5000-3000 B.C.E.
 - b. Excavations at Banpo village: fine pottery, bone tools
 3. The Xia dynasty
 - a. Archeological discovery of the Xia is still in its early stages
 - b. Established about 2200 B.C.E.
 - c. Legendary King Yu, the dynasty founder, a hero of flood control
 - d. Erlitou: possibly the capital city of the Xia
- B. The Shang dynasty: 1766-1122 B.C.E.
 1. Arose in the southern and eastern areas of the Xia realm
 2. Many written records and material remains discovered
 3. Bronze metallurgy, monopolized by ruling elite
 4. Horses and chariots traveled with Indo-European migrants to China
 5. Agricultural surpluses supported large troops
 6. A vast network of walled towns
 7. The Shang capital moved six times
 8. Lavish tombs of Shang kings with thousands of objects
 9. Other states besides Shang, for example, Sanxingdui
- C. The Zhou dynasty: 1122-256 B.C.E.
 1. Zhou gradually eclipsed Shang
 2. Mandate of heaven, the right to rule
 - a. The Zhou needed to justify the overthrow
 - b. Ruler as "the son of heaven"
 - c. Mandate of heaven only given to virtuous rulers
 3. Political organization: decentralized administration
 - a. Used princes and relatives to rule regions
 - b. Consequence: weak central government and rise of regional powers
 4. Iron metallurgy spread through China in first millennium B.C.E.
 5. The fall of the Zhou
 - a. Nomadic invasion sacked Zhou capital in 711 B.C.E.

- b. Territorial princes became more independent
- c. The Warring States (403-221 B.C.E.)
- d. The last king of the Zhou abdicated his position in 256 B.C.E.

II. Society and family in ancient China

- A. The social order
 - 1. The ruling elites with their lavish consumption of bronze
 - a. Hereditary aristocrats with extensive landholding
 - b. Administrative and military offices
 - c. Manuals of etiquette
 - 2. Free artisans and craftsmen mostly worked for elites
 - 3. Merchants and trade were important
 - a. Trade networks linked China with west and south
 - b. Oar-propelled boats traded with Korea and offshore islands
 - 4. Peasants, the majority of population
 - a. Landless peasants provided labor
 - b. Lived in small subterranean houses
 - c. Women's work: wine making, weaving, silkworm raising
 - d. Wood, bone, stone tools before iron was spread in the sixth century B.C.E.
 - 5. Slaves, mostly war prisoners
- B. Family and patriarchy
 - 1. Early dynasties ruled through family and kinship groups
 - 2. Veneration of ancestors
 - a. Belief in ancestors' presence and their continuing influence
 - b. Burial of material goods with the dead
 - c. Offering sacrifices at the graves
 - d. Family heads presided over rites of honoring ancestors' spirits
 - 3. Patriarchal society evolved out of matrilineal one
 - a. The rise of large states brought focus on men's contribution
 - b. After the Shang, females devalued

III. Early Chinese writing and cultural development

- A. The secular cultural tradition
 - 1. Absence of organized religion and priestly class
 - 2. Believed in the impersonal heavenly power--tian
 - 3. Oracle bones used by fortune-tellers
 - a. Inscribed question, subjected to heat, read cracks
 - b. Discovery of the "dragon bones" in 1890s
 - 4. Early Chinese writing, from pictograph to ideograph
 - a. More than two thousand characters identified on oracle bones
 - b. Modern Chinese writing is direct descendant of Shang writing
- B. Thought and literature
 - 1. Zhou literature--many kinds of books
 - a. The Book of Change, a manual of diviners
 - b. The Book of History, the history of the Zhou
 - c. The Book of Rites, the rules of etiquette and rituals for aristocrats
 - d. The Book of Songs, a collection of verses--most notable work
 - 2. Most Zhou writings have perished

IV. Ancient China and the larger world

- A. Chinese cultivators and nomadic peoples of central Asia
 - 1. Nomadic peoples of the steppe lands--herders
 - a. Exchange of products between nomads and Chinese farmers
 - b. Nomads frequently invaded rich agricultural society

- c. Nomads did not imitate Chinese ways
 - d. Nomads relied on grains and manufactured goods of the Chinese
- B. The southern expansion of Chinese society
 - 1. The Yangzi valley; dependable river; two crops of rice per year
 - 2. The indigenous peoples of southern China
 - a. Many were assimilated into Chinese agricultural society
 - b. Some were pushed to hills and mountains
 - c. Some migrated to Taiwan, Vietnam, Thailand
 - 3. The state of Chu in the central region of Yanzi
 - a. Challenged the Zhou for supremacy
 - b. Adopted Chinese political and social traditions and writing