Ancient China

In ancient China, civilization developed much like it did in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Indus Valley. But while these other civilizations grew side by side, knew of each other, and traded extensively, Chinese civilization developed independently, with very little influence from the cultures to the west. An urban civilization did not emerge in China until about 2000 BC, about a thousand years later than in Mesopotamia, but it emerged as a large and highly developed kingdom.

The first three dynasties to rule China were the Xia (or Hsia) dynasty, the Shang dynasty, and the Zhou (or Chou) dynasty. While the Xia may have been purely mythological, the Shang and Zhou were certainly real dynasties whose kings exerted enormous influence. They did not yet rule the huge area that makes up modern China, but they controlled a massive swath of territory around the Yellow River.

While the first Chinese emperors did not rule until China was unified under the later Qin (Ch'in) dynasty, in this early period China was ruled by kings. For the most part, there was only one king at a time, who effectively ruled of all of China. Under the Zhou dynasty, however, the power of the kings weakened, and many powerful men called themselves “kings” at the same time, as they vied for control of the country. It was only at this point that there emerged the concept of a Chinese emperor, or Huangdi (a term that had previously been used for the mythological leaders who were said to have ruled China at the beginning of time), who would rule over all these various kings.

It was during the ancient period of China, before the emergence of the first emperors, that Chinese civilization developed its own unique culture. During the Shang and Zhou dynasties, respectively, China experienced the Bronze and Iron Ages. While many of the developments that took place in China in these periods mirror what was happening in other parts of the world, other developments were very different, and differentiate Chinese civilization from all others.