

221 BC — 589 AD

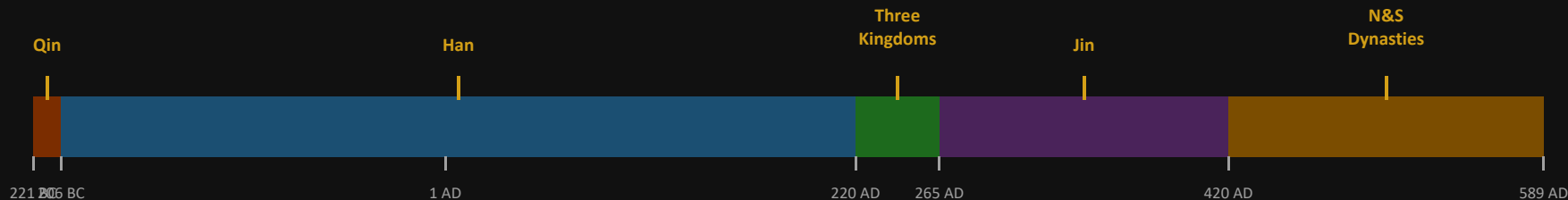
Chinese History

Part II

Qin · Han · Three Kingdoms · Jin · Northern & Southern Dynasties

Eight centuries of unification, cultural flowering, political fragmentation,
and the seeds of a civilization that endures to this day.

Eight Centuries at a Glance



~810

Years of History

5

Major Dynasties

57M+

Peak Han Population

6,000+

Terracotta Warriors

The Qin Dynasty

China's First Unified Empire

Background

For centuries, China was divided into rival Warring States. In 221 BC, King Zheng of Qin conquered all rivals and proclaimed himself Qin Shi Huang — the First Emperor.

His reign was brief (221–210 BC), yet its impact was immeasurable. He crushed the old feudal order and built China into a centralized state governed by laws and bureaucracy.

Key Events

- 221 BC** Zheng unifies China; takes title Qin Shi Huang
- 220 BC** Construction of the Great Wall begins
- 213 BC** Burning of Books to suppress dissent
- 210 BC** Emperor dies; massive terracotta army buried
- 206 BC** Peasant uprisings topple the dynasty

Legacies of the Qin

Standardization

Unified weights, measures, coinage, and the written script — allowing different regions to communicate and trade for the first time.

The Great Wall

Connected and extended earlier walls to form a 13,000 km barrier against northern nomads — a feat of human labor on an unimaginable scale.

Centralized Government

Abolished feudalism; replaced hereditary lords with appointed officials. This bureaucratic model defined Chinese governance for 2,000 years.

Terracotta Army

Over 8,000 life-sized clay soldiers buried with the emperor — one of history's greatest archaeological discoveries, found in 1974.

206 BC – 220 AD

The Han Dynasty

China's Golden Age

The Han Era

After Qin's rapid collapse, Liu Bang — a peasant general — founded the Han dynasty in 206 BC. He softened Qin's harsh legalist rule, embracing Confucian values.

The Han era is China's first true golden age: a period of territorial expansion, cultural achievement, and economic prosperity that lasted over four centuries.

Han identity was so enduring that the Chinese majority still call themselves "Han people" today.

Western Han (206 BC – 9 AD)

Capital at Chang'an. Peak under Emperor Wu (141–87 BC): expanded to Central Asia, Vietnam, and Korea.

Eastern Han (25 AD – 220 AD)

Capital moved to Luoyang. Saw advances in paper, astronomy, and medicine. Ended in civil war and warlordism.

Innovation & Empire

Paper Invented

Cai Lun refined papermaking c. 105 AD — transforming record-keeping, literature, and communication across Asia.

The Silk Road

Zhang Qian's missions (139 BC) opened trade routes connecting China to Rome, spreading silk, spices, and ideas.

Confucian State

Emperor Wu made Confucianism the official doctrine. Civil service exams based on Confucian texts shaped China for millennia.

Science & Medicine

Seismoscopes, acupuncture, star catalogues, and early mathematics flourished. Zhang Heng invented the world's first seismograph (132 AD).

Silk & Trade

China's exports of silk, porcelain, and tea made it the world's wealthiest economy. Population reached ~57 million.

Territorial Expansion

Han expanded into Korea, Vietnam, and Central Asia, establishing the largest empire in the world at the time.

The Silk Road

Connecting East & West

China Exported:

Silk · Porcelain · Tea · Paper · Jade

China Imported:

Dunhuang

Horses · Glass · Spices · Cotton · Buddhism

Antioch

Chang'an
(Xi'an)

Dunhuang

Samarkand

Antioch

Rome

The Silk Road was not a single road but a shifting network of overland and sea routes spanning 7,000 miles. Beyond trade, it transmitted religions (Buddhism, Islam), technologies, diseases, and artistic styles between civilizations that had little other contact. It fundamentally shaped the ancient world.

220 – 280 AD

The Three Kingdoms

Wei · Shu · Wu

When the Han dynasty collapsed in 220 AD, decades of warlord conflict gave rise to three rival states. Each claimed legitimate rule over China — and each pursued a strategy shaped by its geography, resources, and founding leader's vision.

Wei 魏

Northern China

Founder: Cao Pi (son of Cao Cao)

Capital: Luoyang

The largest and most powerful of the three states.

Cao Cao — its de facto founder — was a brilliant general, administrator, and poet who dominated the late Han court before his son Cao Pi proclaimed Wei in 220 AD. Controlling the fertile Yellow River plains, Wei had the strongest economy and military. It absorbed Shu Han in 263 AD.

Shu 蜀

Sichuan Basin

Founder: Liu Bei (Han royal claimant)

Capital: Chengdu

Founded by Liu Bei, a distant Han royal claimant who styled himself as restorer of the Han dynasty. His prime minister Zhuge Liang became the kingdom's strategic genius, launching five northern campaigns to reclaim the heartland. Despite remarkable loyalty and ingenuity, Shu's mountainous terrain and smaller population made sustained expansion impossible. It fell in 263 AD.

Wu 吳

Southeast China

Founder: Sun Quan

Capital: Jianye (Nanjing)

The most geographically secure and long-lasting of the three kingdoms, surviving until 280 AD. Sun Quan's navy famously defeated Cao Cao at the Battle of Red Cliffs (208 AD) — one of history's most celebrated battles. Wu developed the Yangtze River delta through agriculture and maritime trade, laying the economic foundations for southern China's

future importance.
Chinese History | Three Kingdoms 220 – 280 AD

The Age of Heroes

The Three Kingdoms era (220–280 AD) is one of history's most romanticized periods. Constant warfare between Wei, Shu, and Wu claimed millions of lives — the population fell from ~50 million to under 20 million.

Yet the era also produced legendary strategists, poets, and soldiers. Zhuge Liang's brilliance, Cao Cao's poetry, and the loyalty of Guan Yu became the subjects of Romance of the Three Kingdoms — a 14th-century novel still read across East Asia.

In 265 AD, the Jin dynasty absorbed Wei and eventually reunified China in 280 AD when it conquered Wu — ending 60 years of division.

60

Years of Division

~30M

Population Lost

3

Rival Capitals

"Out of chaos, great heroes rise."

The Jin Dynasty

Brief Unity, Lasting Crisis

Western & Eastern Jin

The Jin dynasty reunified China in 280 AD under Sima Yan, but unity lasted only decades. Internal court struggles — known as the War of the Eight Princes (291–306 AD) — shattered the empire.

Northern nomadic peoples (Xiongnu, Xianbei, Di, Jie, Qiang) seized the opportunity. In 316 AD they sacked Luoyang and Chang'an, forcing the Jin court to flee south.

The Eastern Jin (317–420 AD) survived in the south, centered at Jiankang (modern Nanjing), while the north fractured into the chaotic Sixteen Kingdoms.

265 AD	Sima Yan founds Western Jin
280 AD	China reunified — Wu conquered
291 AD	War of the Eight Princes begins
304 AD	Sixteen Kingdoms period starts
316 AD	Northern Jin falls; court flees south
420 AD	Eastern Jin dynasty ends

Northern & Southern Dynasties

A Century of Division

The North

Controlled by non-Han peoples (mainly Xianbei). The Northern Wei dynasty (386–534 AD) — founded by the Tuoba clan — eventually unified the north.

Emperor Xiaowen Di (471–499 AD) enacted sweeping Sinicization: banned Xianbei language and clothing, and moved the capital from Datong to Luoyang. The assimilation of nomadic peoples into Chinese culture was irreversible.

After Northern Wei collapsed, the north split into the Eastern Wei, Western Wei, Northern Qi, and Northern Zhou — all short-lived.

The South

The south remained under Han Chinese rule, cycling through four dynasties: Song, Qi, Liang, and Chen — all based at Jiankang (Nanjing).

The south became the cultural and economic heartland of the Han world: Buddhism flourished, the arts thrived, and rice cultivation expanded.

Despite political instability, the southern dynasties preserved classical Chinese culture while the north transformed under nomadic influence.

In 589 AD, the Sui dynasty conquered the south, reunifying China after 270 years of division.

The Rise of Buddhism

A Transformative Force in Chinese Civilization

Buddhism arrived in China via the Silk Road during the late Han dynasty (~1st century AD). It found fertile ground during the centuries of political turmoil that followed.

When the Han order collapsed, Confucianism — tied to stable state institutions — lost some of its hold. Buddhism offered a different answer: individual salvation, compassion, and escape from suffering.

Northern Wei emperors became great Buddhist patrons, sponsoring the carving of thousands of cave sculptures at Yungang and Longmen. Southern rulers funded temples and translations of texts.

By 589 AD, Buddhism was woven into the fabric of Chinese life — coexisting with and transforming Confucianism and Daoism.

~67 AD

Buddhism officially reaches China (Han court)

148 AD

First major translation center opens in Luoyang

399 AD

Faxian makes pilgrimage to India for scriptures

460–490

Yungang Grottoes carved by Northern Wei

493–510

Longmen Grottoes begun at new capital Luoyang

~6th c.

Chan (Zen) Buddhism emerges as a Chinese form

Life, Society & Culture

Social Structure

Society was hierarchical: emperor, scholar-officials, peasants, artisans, merchants. The civil exam system created a merit-based elite that persisted for 2,000 years.

Women & Family

The family was society's core unit. Women had legal property rights under early Han law. Confucian emphasis on filial piety and family loyalty shaped social life at all levels.

Art & Architecture

Lacquerware, bronze work, silk painting, and jade carving flourished. Han tombs reveal extraordinary craftsmanship. The Yuefu (folk music) tradition began under Emperor Wu.

Writing & Literature

Unified script linked diverse regions. Poetry was the highest literary art. Sima Qian wrote the *Shiji* — China's first comprehensive history — under Emperor Wu.

Technology

Cast iron tools, the crossbow, wheelbarrows, and watermills were Han innovations. Steel production, blast furnaces, and canal networks drove economic growth.

Philosophy

Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism competed and blended. Neo-Daoist philosophy (*xuanxue*) flourished during the Three Kingdoms era among aristocratic thinkers.

Lasting Legacies

How These Centuries Shaped the World

01

The Concept of China

The Qin unified the written language; the Han defined the culture. The very word 'China' derives from 'Qin.' Han identity endures in the phrase 'Han people' used by 92% of the population today.

02

Confucian Statecraft

The civil examination system, bureaucratic governance, and Confucian ethics created a governing model that persisted until 1905. It influenced Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and beyond.

03

The Silk Road Network

Han expansion opened permanent trade routes. The exchange of goods, religions, and ideas set the pattern for Eurasian globalization centuries before the modern era.

04

Buddhism as Chinese Faith

The Buddhism absorbed during these centuries was reshaped into distinctly Chinese forms. It became the religion of millions and profoundly influenced art, philosophy, and compassion ethics.

CONCLUSION

The Foundation of a Civilization

The eight centuries from 221 BC to 589 AD are not merely a sequence of dynasties — they are the crucible in which Chinese civilization was forged.

The Qin gave China its structure. The Han gave it its soul. The Three Kingdoms and the dynasties of division tested and tempered that identity. Buddhism arrived and was made Chinese. Nomadic peoples were absorbed and shaped the culture in turn.

By 589 AD, the Sui would reunify the empire — but the values, institutions, languages, and beliefs that would define China for the next 1,400 years were already in place.