

Chinese Timeline Neolithic through Ch'ing



Neolithic Era 3000 - 1500 BCE.

The earliest known Chinese Stone Age culture was the relatively sophisticated Yang-shao, whose people lived in rudimentary settlements and hunted for game with carved stone spears. The succeeding and more advanced Lung-shan culture identified the social status of the deceased by the type and number of precious jade objects and ceramics in their burial mounds. Chinese Neolithic pottery, both delicate and durable, was artfully decorated and served both practical and ritual purposes.



Shang 1523 - 1028 BCE.

Pronunciation: "shahng"

Their cast-bronze weapons gave Shang kings military might. Eventually, the same material was cast as vessels bearing the *t'ao-t'ie** (monster) mask motif. These objects, often inscribed with the names and titles of clans and rulers, were buried in their owners' tombs. Jade objects increased in religious significance. Woven silk, glazed ceramics, and lacquerware first appeared in the Shang.

*Pronounced: TOW (as in "tower") - TYUH (rhymes with "the").



Chou (Pinyin: Zhou) 1027 - 256 BCE.

Pronunciation: "joe"

Chinese culture changed radically during this 770-year period, as power extended across family lines to create aristocratic cities and principalities; eventually, these separate states battled for dominance. Bronzes lost their religious associations and became instead ornate symbols of personal status. Because clay was cheaper, ceramic copies of bronze ritual items were placed in burials. Jade work flourished. Two enduring schools of thought—Confucianism and Taoism—evolved, and the Chinese literary tradition began.



Ch'in (Pinyin: Qin) 221 - 206 BCE.

Pronunciation: "chin"

During this very brief dynasty, a dynamic leader named Shih-huang unified the "warring states" of the preceding era and declared himself China's first emperor. Buried with him in his tomb were more than 6,000 terra-cotta soldiers and horses; obviously, this dynasty supported a sophisticated ceramic industry. The first sections of the Great Wall were built and so was an extensive highway system.

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Han

206 BCE. - 220 A.D.

Pronunciation: "hahn"

Military expansion, political centralization, and cultural achievements made this the first of China's four greatest dynasties. The Han invented paper and lead-glazed ceramics, and greatly improved silk-weaving techniques. Their quest for alliances with foreign powers prompted them to establish an extensive trade route that extended to the Roman Empire and would become known as the Silk Road. An emphasis on funerary art is evident in tombs artfully decorated with figures and geometric shapes; these images provide clues to Han costumes, architecture, and aristocratic pastimes.



Six Dynasties

220- 586

The wars, plagues, and political instability that characterize this lengthy period forced the Chinese to question traditional belief systems, especially Confucianism, and encouraged many to embrace Buddhism and Taoism. Despite the pervasive turmoil, the arts flourished and evolved. The invention of woodblock printing made it possible to teach the tenets of Buddhism to the masses. Poetry, painting, and sculpture, no longer associated with the state, became personal modes of expression. Even penmanship took an artistic turn, as calligraphers perfected increasingly picturesque styles.



Sui

581 - 618

Pronunciation: "sway"

First ruled by a progressive leader and then by his ne'er-do-well son, this brief period closed with the arrival of a third emperor, one who would usher in the T'ang dynasty, another Chinese golden age. But first, Sui potters took preliminary steps toward inventing porcelain by molding white clay into simple forms and applying a clear glaze. A strong Indian influence is evident in both the abundant sculpture and the numerous Buddhist temples and meditation caves dating from the Sui.

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T'ang

618 - 906

Pronunciation: "tahng"

The second of the four greatest dynasties, the T'ang combined aggressive military and economic expansion with political stability and creative achievement. Traffic along the Silk Road was brisk with both import and export trade. Among its notable artistic contributions were sophisticated figure painting, tricolored ceramic tomb figurines, and exquisite porcelain. A significant development of this period is the use of rare, cobalt blue glazes. The T'ang revered both horses and camels, figures of which were placed in the burials of the royalty and aristocracy, along with gold and silver ornaments.



Five Dynasties

907 - 960

Brief and unremarkable in terms of military activity and economic progress, this period is nonetheless noteworthy in terms of two artistic advances. First, as porcelain technique continued to develop, ceramists introduced so-called whiteware, a thin, strong "china" with a pure white glaze. Second, a distinctive style of painting called "monumental ink landscape" dominated. Inspired by the Taoist notion that mountains were essentially sacred pillars connecting heaven with earth, artists, using black ink on silk, depicted the natural world as the source of harmony and enlightenment.



Sung (Pinyin: Song)

960 - 1279

Pronunciation: "soong"

Considered the third Chinese golden age, this complex dynasty was divided almost evenly into Northern (960 – 1126) and Southern (1127 – 1279) halves. The former was a tranquil time characterized by philosophical and artistic development, political centralization, and economic growth. The latter, however, was quite the opposite; brutal invaders drove the Chinese from their northern territory, forcing them to migrate south and establish a new capital city. The psychological effects of this devastating upheaval are apparent in Sung paintings; misty, ethereal landscapes reflect conflicting emotions of regret, acceptance, and longing. The variety and quality of ceramics increased dramatically, and wooden sculpture was convincingly realistic.

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Yuan
1280 - 1365

Pronunciation: “yoo-EN”

Mongol invader Genghis Khan and his hordes conquered much of Asia, including China; his grandson Kublai Khan established this dynasty, during which the Mongols reopened and expanded overland trade routes linking China, Central Asia, and the Mediterranean. Venetian merchant Marco Polo spent seventeen years exploring this exotic outpost, where he was surprised to discover advances as yet unheard of in Italy. The Yuan exported the first blue-and-white porcelain. And its artists regarded painting as a medium for self-expression, a departure from the “courtly” tradition of previous generations.



Ming
1368 - 1644

The last of the outstanding dynasties, the Ming was vibrant during its first half but racked with internal discord during its second. Scores of workers constructed the renowned Forbidden City, an imperial palace of staggering proportions and opulence. Ming leaders revived a sense of cultural identity and respect for traditional artifacts and craftsmanship. For example, bronze incense burners resembling those of the Shang and Chou dynasties were cast, and bright green and gold ceramic funerary objects recalled the T'ang. Three distinct schools of painting emerged: the Che echoed the formal approach of the Sung; the Wu consisted of, and appealed to, the intelligentsia; and the Eccentric fostered spontaneity and freedom of expression.



Ch'ing (Pinyin: Qing)
1644 - 1912

Pronunciation: “ching”

The last Chinese dynasty began on a positive note—of energetic collecting, cataloging, and exporting—but ended disastrously. European demand for blue-and-white porcelain, lacquer, and jade, as well as for tea, soared. Vivid colors returned to ceramics, increasing the popularity of so-called pictorial porcelain—oversized platters and vases adorned with meticulously painted scenes. Members of the Eccentric school of painting developed a unique style of expressionism that emphasized spontaneous brushwork and revealed imaginative uses of color. Artisans carved delicate handheld items such as snuff bottles, lacquer boxes, and cricket cages out of jade and exotic hardwoods.