

# Ancient China: Society and Class Divisions

By Ancient History Encyclopedia on 07.27.17

Word Count **897**

Level **1130L**



People in ancient China discovered how to produce silk very early on from the cocoons of mulberry silkworms. Wearing the precious material was a clear sign of wealth and social status. Image from Wikimedia.

Daily life in ancient China changed through the centuries but the Chinese maintained a belief in the gods and one's ancestors during almost every time period. In the prehistoric age, about 5000 B.C., people lived in small villages in the Yellow River Valley, which cuts through most of northern China. One of these villages, Banpo, shows evidence of a matriarchal society in which women governed and dominated religious life.

Small villages like Banpo grew into larger communities and then into cities. The Xia Dynasty, which lasted from 2070 to 1600 B.C., was the first form of government in China that established large cities. The dynasty was thought to be a myth, until archaeological evidence was discovered that may prove it actually existed.

After the Xia came the Shang Dynasty, 1600 to 1046 B.C., when writing was developed. During this time period, the first written evidence shows what life was like for people in ancient China.

### **Social class, clothing and adornments**

Silk is thought to have been invented about 2696 B.C. The ancient Chinese believed it was discovered by the goddess Leizu, wife of the supreme god Shangti. She was having tea and a cocoon fell into her cup. The cocoon unraveled into one long thread of silk, and she planted mulberry trees for silkworms to eat. The nobles and royalty were the only people who could wear silk. Even those who made silk clothing and sold it were not allowed under law to wear silk. Most of the population of China wore clothing made of hemp.

One's social class was determined, more or less, by birth. If one's father was a peasant, one would also be a peasant. The social division between a ruling class, nobles, merchants and the working class peasants became even wider with the invention of writing; people became divided between an upper class who could read and an illiterate peasant population. From the Shang Dynasty on, though, a person could improve their station in life by passing the difficult Imperial Examinations, which enabled them to work for the government and move up to a higher class.

### **There are many differences among the classes**

Distinctions between the classes in ancient times were also seen in hair styles and other personal choices. Men and women of all classes wore their hair long because it was thought that one's hair came from one's ancestors and it was disrespectful to cut it. Just like the hair, the body was thought to be a gift from one's ancestors and should not be abused. For this reason, most people looked down on those with tattoos.

Along with tattoos, body odor was also associated with barbarians and criminals, and the Chinese were very meticulous about perfuming themselves thoroughly.

Both men and women of the upper classes grew their fingernails long to show that they did not have to work. They had servants do everything for them, even feed them, so they would not damage their nails.

During the period known as the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms, which lasted from 907 to 960 A.D., the practice of foot binding began. Soon the idea developed that a beautiful woman should have tiny feet.

Girls as young as toddlers would have their feet wrapped in long strips of cloth so tightly it broke their toes and curled them under the foot. Girls were in constant pain for years. Although this practice started among the upper classes, it soon became common for all women in China, and made working in the rice fields or doing any kind of manual labor very difficult. Foot binding was outlawed in 1911. Many women described crying from the pain for years and said it never made them feel any more beautiful.

## **Education and health care**

Only males received an education in ancient China. Girls were expected to stay home and learn how to be housewives and mothers. In the early days, young boys stayed home as well and helped with outdoor work, and only teenagers from the upper classes went to school. Confucius, a teacher and philosopher who lived around 500 B.C., set the standard for the basics of Chinese education. Everyone was expected to know the Five Virtues of Confucius by heart. The Li, or manners, considered the most important were Ren (kindness), Xin (loyalty), Yi (honesty) and Zhi (knowing the difference between right and wrong). In the early days of schools, the students would write on wooden sticks and then on wood scrolls bound together. In 105 B.C., paper was invented. During the Tang Dynasty, which lasted from 618 A.D. to 907 A.D., woodblock printing made it possible to mass-produce books of paper, which were then used in schools. Students learned the texts known as The Five Classics and The Four Books, which were mainly based on the writings of Confucius.

Doctors were also all males by the time of the Tang Dynasty. Herbalists in rural areas could be women but the medical profession was dominated by men. Most doctors were priests or had a background in religious practices. Prior to the Tang Dynasty, doctors were essentially shamans who cured the sick through herbal remedies and exorcisms. They believed illness was caused by evil spirits or ghosts that had to be driven out.

After Buddhism arrived in China, Buddhist priests ran facilities that were a combination of hospitals, clinics, orphanages, retirement homes, and counseling centers.