

## Chapter 4 Podcast Transcript

On March 29, 1974, several farmers were struggling to dig a well in northwestern China. They lived in Lintong County, about twenty miles outside the ancient Chinese capital of Xi'an. They were struggling through a season of drought in a decade of economic hardship that coincided with the China's Cultural Revolution. The soil was dry. The crops were dry. So, they dug. Two feet. Three feet.

About four feet below the surface of the dry soil, they struck what they described as "hard red earth." Under the surface, they found arrowheads and pieces of pottery. These weren't terribly unusual in the area. But that isn't all they found. They also found a life-size model of a human head, fashioned out of terracotta. Little did they know, but they had made one of the most important discoveries in the long history of China.

Zhao Kangmin was an archaeologist who lived just outside of Xi'an. Born in 1936, Zhao grew up as a farmer. At the age of twenty-five, he was sent to work at the museum and cultural center in rural Lintong County. He loved history, but he had no formal training. He was self-taught, and initially he was the museum's only employee. Zhao made the best of the situation, though, and made several discoveries in the early 1960s, including three terracotta (clay) crossbowmen. He thought they might be uniquely ancient, but he wasn't sure.

The Cultural Revolution was a bad time to be a historian or archaeologist. It was a bad time for most professions, to be honest, but one of its tenets included the destruction of the "four olds": Old Ideas, Old Culture, Old Customs, and Old Habits. Essentially, it was an attempt to cleanse China of parts its pre-Communist culture. During the Cultural Revolution, militant students destroyed an ancient statue in Zhao's museum. They also forced Zhao to denounce himself in public for "encouraging feudalism."

Zhao received a phone call about the farmers' discovery in the wheatfield. He hoped the find might answer his questions about other artifacts from the area. His boss ordered him to investigate. So he and a colleague raced to the site on bicycle. "Because we were so excited," he would later explain, "we rode on our bicycles so fast it felt as if we were flying." Once on site, he saw seven or eight pieces of sculpture—legs, arms, heads—lying near the well. The farmers were immediately ordered to stop digging, and Zhao and his colleague began the delicate process of gathering, transporting, and assembling the broken pieces. Three days later, they had assembled two life-size terracotta statues representing warriors from the Qin Dynasty. They were 2,000 years old.

Zhao tried to keep the statues a secret. He was afraid that militant students or other extremists might try to destroy them, as they had done to the one in his museum. A visiting journalist from the state news agency caught wind of the discovery, and all attempts at secrecy went out the window. Fortunately, the Chinese government decided to preserve and excavate the archaeological site. What they found is astounding.

The site was actually the Mausoleum of the First Emperor of the Qin Dynasty. The terracotta warriors comprise an entire army constructed to protect the tomb of the emperor. Each warrior is different, with different facial features and expressions. They are sized according to rank, but many of them weigh more than 600 pounds each. They are accompanied by chariots and horses. Even today, the site has not been fully excavated. Current estimates suggest that the terracotta army includes more than 8,000 individual soldiers, 130 chariots pulled by 520 horses, and 150 cavalry horses—along with governing officials, acrobats, and musicians. The emperor's tomb, itself, has yet to be opened or explored.

The site provides a wealth of information for historians and archaeologists. The terracotta soldiers held real weapons, which provides modern scholars with an opportunity to study the design, composition, and manufacture of early Chinese swords, daggers, spears, and other tools. Most importantly, perhaps, the site provides a window into the culture, characteristics, and history of the first Chinese empire.

The Story of East Asia is the Story of Empire. It is a story shaped by the dramatic rise of powerful kingdoms and empires—and often by the dramatic collapse of the same. After more than 1000 years of expansion and civil war, China first unified under one government around 200 BC—around the same time that the Roman Republic expanded its reach across the Mediterranean Sea. Although China plays a major role in this story, the history of East Asia is about much more than China. It is a history of the migration of peoples, the rise and fall of great dynasties, and the competition between China, Korea, and Japan for opportunity, for influence, and for independence. It is a story that continues to this day.

The textbook traces the details of the region's prehistory, empires, and dynasties, so today we will focus on few overarching questions about East Asian history: How does geography affect history in this region? Why was the Qin Dynasty so important? What were some of the defining traits of culture and philosophy in East Asia?

Geography is an important part of understanding history. The word "geography" come from Greek, and it means "describing the earth." If history is the story of what happened in the past, geography tells us about the setting for that story. Historians are sometimes nervous about exploring that connection. We always want to emphasize that history is made by humans living, learning, shaping, and changing the world that e live in. We don't want to go too far and imply that there was only way that history could have turned out, because of the geography. But there is no doubt that geography affects our life. If you live by the ocean, the ocean shapes your climate, your food sources, and your access to transportation.

When our textbook talks about East Asia, it focuses on three areas: the islands of Japan, the Korean Peninsula, and the part of China we call China Proper—essentially the eastern half of China that has historically been controlled by Chinese kingdoms. The most important geographical features in China include two rivers: the Yellow River in the North and the Yangzi

River in the South. The Yellow River is one of the global “hearths” of civilization—one of the locations on earth where civilization first emerged. This is partly because the region around the Yellow River—the North China Plain—is so good for agriculture. The Yellow River is a meandering river that is prone to flooding. It passes through a dusty plateau, collecting mud and silt along the way. When the river floods, it deposits silt on the surrounding plain, creating very rich soil that is good for farming. This should sound pretty familiar; the Mississippi River and Red River in America were very similar prior to flood control. In China, the need to control flooding on the North China Plain, and the availability of good soil for farming, provided a great environment for civilization to develop. This is where Chinese civilization—and the first Chinese states—emerged, including the Xia Dynasty, the Shang Dynasty, and the Zhou Dynasty. The Yangzi River was also important. Its floodplain provided a home for the domestication of rice, which would become one of the most important food staples in all of East Asia.

The geography of Japan and Korea also shaped the region’s history. Both were close enough to China to be influenced by its culture, including religion, philosophy, art, architecture, and form of writing. But both—and especially Japan—maintained enough separation from China to develop cultural, religious, and political traditions unique to themselves. They developed with China, but often separate from it.

It is impossible to talk about all of China’s dynasties and imperial states in a short podcast like this one. Even one chapter in a book can only cover so many. If this topic interests you, I encourage you to seek out a textbook on Chinese history, or enroll in a course about Chinese history. For the purposes of today, I want to highlight the importance of one dynasty in particular: The Qin Dynasty.

The Qin Dynasty was the first to unite much of China Proper under one government. The Qin emerged out of a long period of conflict at the end of the Western and Eastern Zhou Dynasties. Under the Zhou Dynasty, China was a feudal state; this meant that a lot of power was held in the hands of local nobility who owed allegiance to the Zhou king. When those relationships broke down, China slipped easily into Civil War. Between the 600s and 400s BC, there were 540 wars in northern China. By the end of this period, power was consolidated in the hands of 15 states. One of those states, located in the northwest, was the state of Qin. For the next 250 years, these fifteen states fought continuously—usually at least one major battle every year. We call this period the “Warring States Period.” You may be familiar with Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*; unsurprisingly, it emerged during this period.

This period of conflict ended when only one state remained: the state of Qin. The Emperor of Qin celebrated this accomplishment in a monument quoted in the textbook: “They recall and contemplate the times of chaos / When they apportioned the land, established their states, and thus unfolded the pattern of struggle / Attacks and campaigns were daily waged; They shed their blood in the open countryside / Now today, the August Emperor has unified All-under-Heaven into one family—Warfare will not arise again!” This was perhaps a little too optimistic, but after almost 600 years of constant warfare, his enthusiasm was understandable.

The Qin Dynasty did not last very long, but it laid a foundation for Chinese development, culture, and organization. The Qin established the office of Emperor and the bureaucracy that supported it. The Qin also formalized systems of writing, currency, weight, and measures that later dynasties and governments would modify and use into the twentieth century and beyond.

The Qin Dynasty is only one of many fascinating dynasties you can read about in this chapter. Other important ones include

- the Han Dynasty, which existed around the same time as the Roman Empire and shared connections with it through the Silk Road
- the Song Dynasty, which saw the use of a formal civil service examination to encourage scholarship in government service and the use of new technologies like printing and gunpowder
- the Yuan Dynasty, which was established by the Mongols and was visited by Europeans like Marco Polo

With such a long and fascinating history, how do we know what to focus on in an introductory course like this one? I think all of us will choose different aspects of history to learn more about, or to mine for ideas for understanding the world. For this podcast, though, I think it is important to recognize China's three great religious and philosophical traditions—Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Confucianism and Daoism emerged during the troubled period at the end of Zhou Dynasty, while Buddhism arrived several hundred years later from South Asia.

Confucianism is based on the writings of Confucius. Confucius was born to a family of minor nobility, living from 551-479 BC. This is around the same time as Pythagoras in Greece and shortly before the birth of Socrates. Due to his upbringing, Confucius had access to an education and opportunities to serve the state in government or as a soldier. He chose education and government service. Confucius lived during a period when social and political order in China was breaking down, and he dedicated his life to promoting tradition, order, and virtue—all of which he believed had given China a golden age in the past that, though lost, could be recovered. Quotes attributed to Confucius reflected these values. He said, "Young men should filial at home and respectful to their elders when away from home." In other words, respect and order begin at home and radiate outward through society. Confucius did not succeed in holding a major office, or in reforming the state, like he had hoped, but he did gather a dedicated group of students who carefully recorded his teachings, preserving and transmitting them to future generations. Confucians—those who follow his teachings—commit themselves to the respect of tradition, the respect of elders, and the value of personal character and conduct. Later, governing officials in China would recognize that Confucian ideals could encourage stability (thus helping them maintain power). They promoted a form of Imperial Confucianism as guide for how people and society should function.

As social and political conflict turned into open civil war, during the Warring States period, other philosophers adopted a different way of looking at the world. We call this philosophy Daoism.

Whereas Confucius focused on the active virtues of self-control, personal growth, and social order, Daoists emphasized a natural order that exists outside of people and governments and traditions. Daoists sought to understand and follow the Dao, or “the Way”, by emptying themselves of their desires and ambitions and allowing this natural force to work through them. Daoism expanded to include an emphasis on harmony, as reflected in ideas about the life force Qi and its division into yin and yang. In time, Daoism developed into an institutional religion with temples, monasteries, and a priesthood.

After the Qin and Han Dynasties, China again entered a period of social and political disorder. This provided an opportunity for new religious and philosophical ideas to spread, including Mahayana Buddhism in particular. Traveling along the Silk Roads, merchants and monks from South Asia slowly introduced Buddhist ideas into China. Once started, though, this process dramatically changed Chinese society. After only a few centuries, China was home to over 30,000 Buddhist temples and over 2,000,000 monks and nuns. Though very old, these traditions Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism continue to shape the lives of billions of people in East Asia and worldwide.