China’s past and major dynasties

SHANG (1766-1122 B.C.) A Yellow River Valley society emphasizing agriculture. This was a war-oriented period, which saw the perfection of bronze casting (weapons and religious vessels), horse-drawn war chariots, an advanced writing system, and the start of ancestor worship.

ZHOU (1122-221 B.C.) A collection of rival city-states ruled by vassal lords for their kings, this period featured invasions by barbarians from the west and north. The appearance of irrigation and iron casting improved farming methods. Multiplication tables, lacquer ware, and Confucius all made their appearances during this war-torn time.

QIN (221-210 B.C.) A short, but vital dynasty that brought all of eastern China under its control. Begun in 214 B.C., the Great Wall was reinforced and linked together; money, measures, and weights were standardized, along with cart axle length. Many roads and numerous palaces were constructed. Chopsticks came into general use and the first compass was designed.

HAN (202 B.C.-A.D. 220) Four hundred years of prosperity and growth. Chinese today still call themselves “sons of Han”. Territory was expanded to approximately modern-day boundaries; Han culture was the equal of the Roman Empire, which also flourished at this time. Contact was established between China and the Mediterranean area. The Silk Road stretched from Xi’an in the east to Tyre and Antioch in the west. Roman glass traveled east along the Silk Road to China as precious silks made their way to Rome. Some technological strides included paper, the wheelbarrow, seismograph and sundial.
SIX DYNASTIES (A.D. 220-589) Also known as the Three Kingdoms Period and the Southern and Northern dynasties. The period was characterized by anarchy (disorder due to lack of authority) and the breakup of the empire. The first hospital was set up in A.D. 510 in Shanxi province. Buddhism had a great influence on art and literature.

SUI (A.D. 589-618) A time for recovering lost territories. The Grand Canal (longest artificial river in the world) was built and a system for civil service examinations was established.

T’ANG (A.D. 618-906) Truly the greatest dynasty of China’s history. With its capital at Chang An, the T’ang fostered a tremendous cultural flowering of literature and the arts. The oldest book with a printed date, The Diamond Sutra, was written in 868. Poetry reigned supreme (had a lot of power). Religious tolerance (acceptance) allowed for many faiths to be practiced in China. Landscape and figure painting reached their zeniths (highest point). Lavishly beautiful palaces and gardens were designed and built. The bizarre practice of foot binding began at court, inspired by dancers who danced the Golden Lily. Foot binding is the custom of applying painfully tight binding to the feet of young girls to prevent further growth.

FIVE DYNASTIES (A.D. 906-960) A time of war and unrest. China was divided into ten independent kingdoms. Gunpowder was first used for military purposes.

SUNG (A.D. 960-1279) A reunification (coming together) of the Chinese empire. The Sung Dynasty saw the beginnings of commercial printing, the discovery of enamel (protective coating), the primary use of porcelain as an art form, and fireworks lighting the sky. Genghis Khan
and his Mongols conquered northern China. In 1234, the Mongols began a march on the south.

**YUAN (MONGOL) (A.D. 1279-1368)** Kublai Khan and his army subdued (to bring under control) all of China in 1279. Marco Polo sojourned (stay somewhere temporarily) at court and drama enjoyed tremendous growth.

**MING (A.D. 1368-1644)** A relatively peaceful period with Chinese culture again thriving. Many novels were written and the glorious blue and white porcelains were exported far and wide. Naval fleets traveled the high seas as far away as the east African coast. Over sixty ships and 28,000 men sailed the seas for China. Unfortunately, the military and commercial value of these ships remained unrecognized. Portuguese traders arrived in China in 1514 to open the door to world trade.

**QING or MANCHU (A.D. 1644-1911)** The second foreign dynasty and the end of dynastic rule in China. The Qing Dynasty came from Manchuria in 1644 and based their administration on the existing Chinese model. The infamous pigtail was forced on the Chinese as a form of submission (accepting superior force). Expansion and bolstering of the empire continued for the first one hundred and fifty years. Centuries of greatness past lulled the Chinese into the mistake belief that innovation and change were unnecessary. Foreign trade, open ports, weapons and ideas could not be dealt with in the ancient ways.

Presently, China has a communist government.