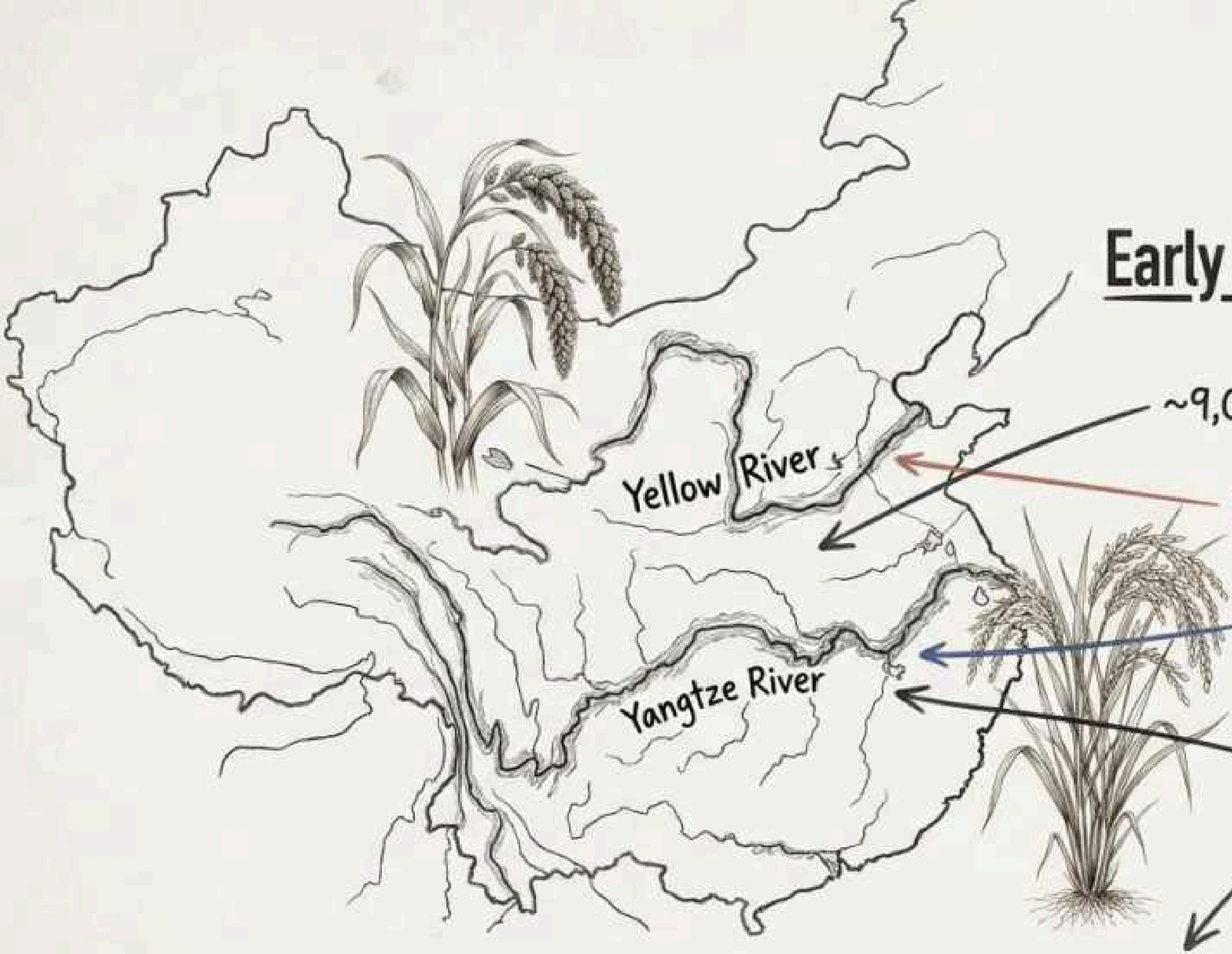
¶ 1.1

Early China and the First Empires



~9,000 years ago: Origins of agriculture.

North: Yellow River (millet).

Center/South: Yangtze River (rice).

The state emerges from the existential need to control catastrophic flooding.

Fertile Silt + Flooding = Constant Governance Task

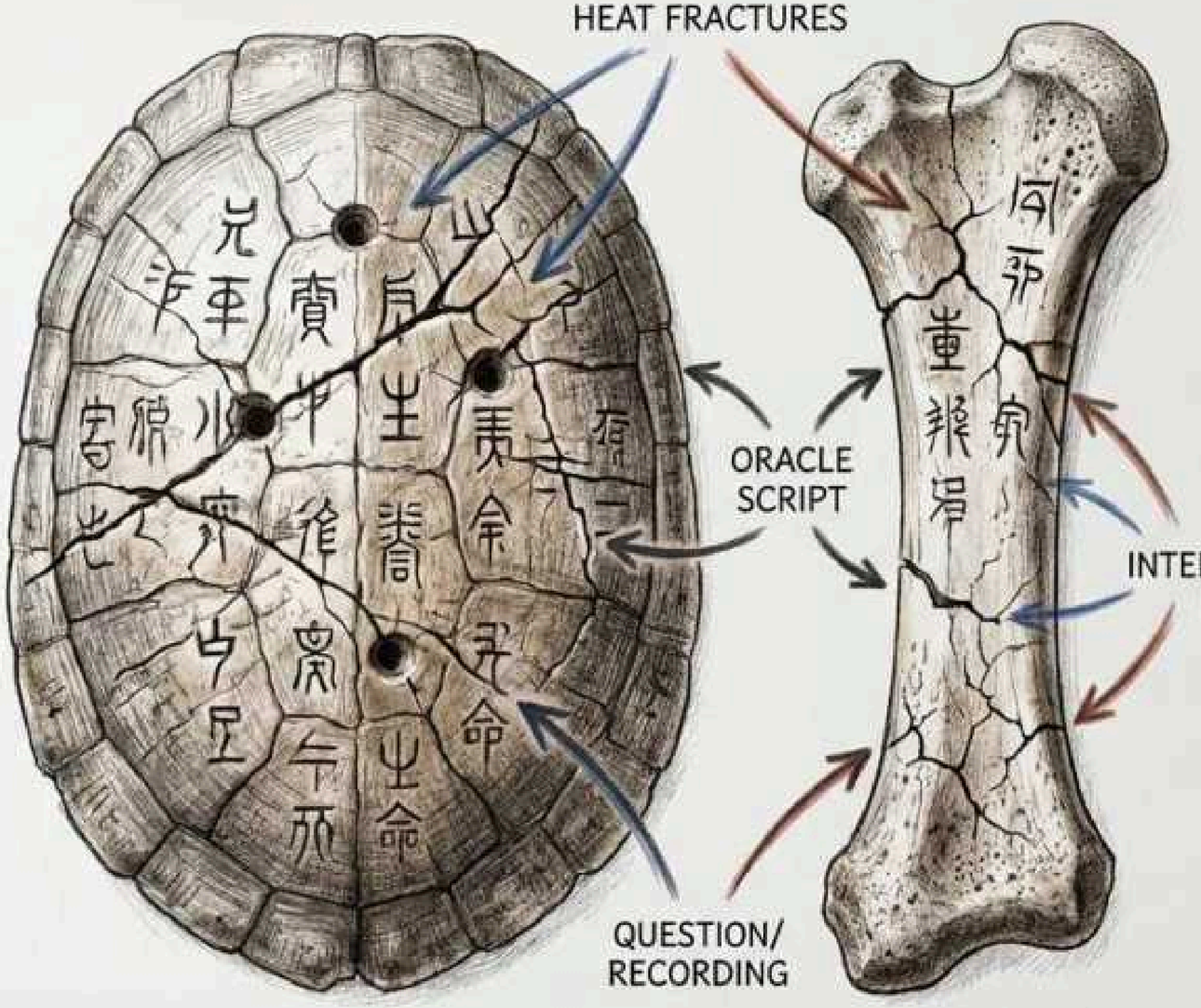
¶ 1.2

The Shang Dynasty:

1600–1046 BCE

First Confirmed State:

Proven via modern archaeology.



Origins of Writing:

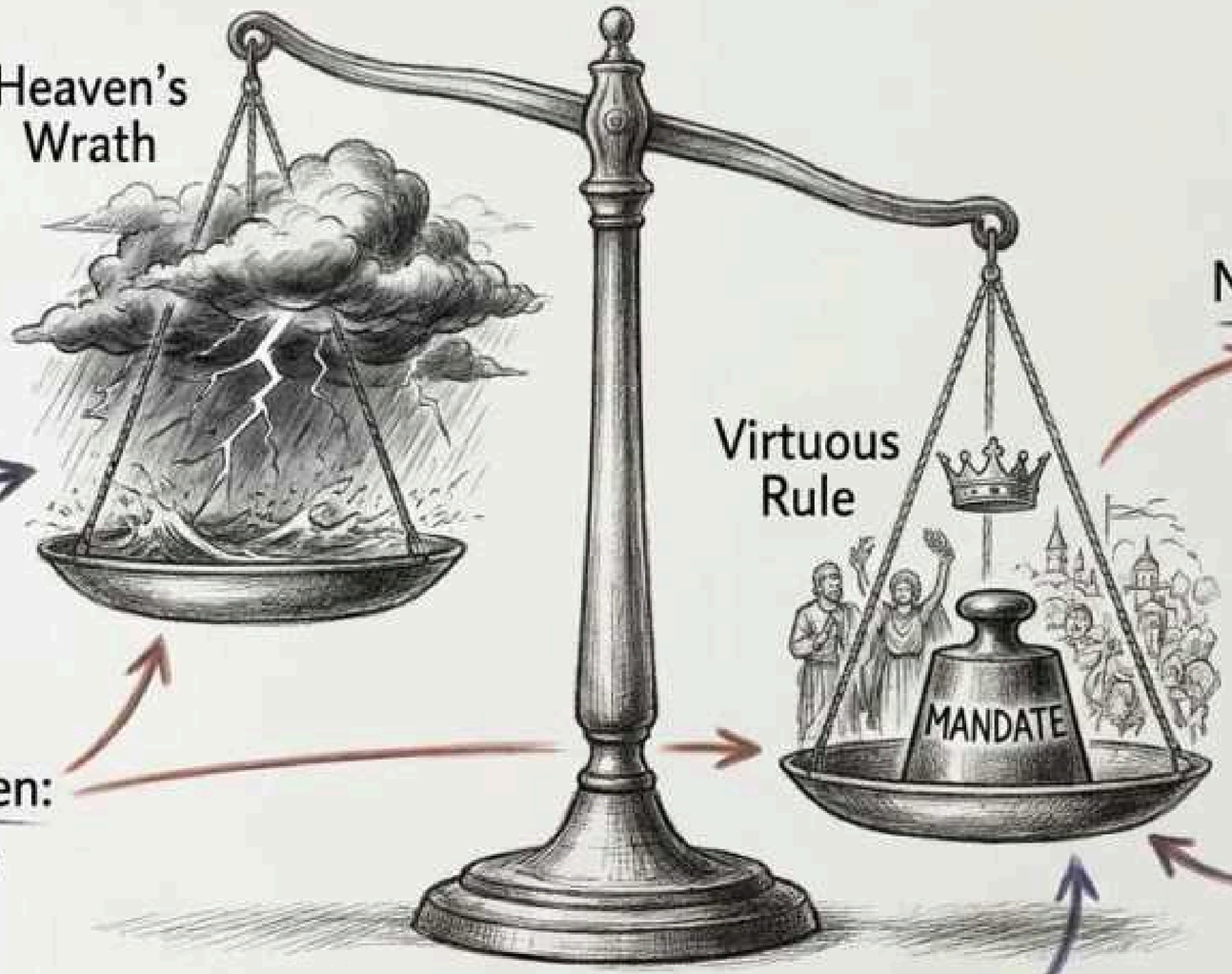
Priests carved questions to ancestors, applied heat, and interpreted the cracks.

Direct Ancestors:

These inscriptions evolved into modern Chinese characters.

Divination: (Question × Bone) + Heat → $\frac{\text{Crack}}{\text{Answer}}$

¶ 1.3



The Zhou Overthrow:

1046 BCE (Defeating the Shang).

The Mandate of Heaven:

Heaven grants rule to the virtuous and revokes it from the wicked.

Natural Disasters as Data:

Floods and famines are read as empirical proof of a lost mandate.

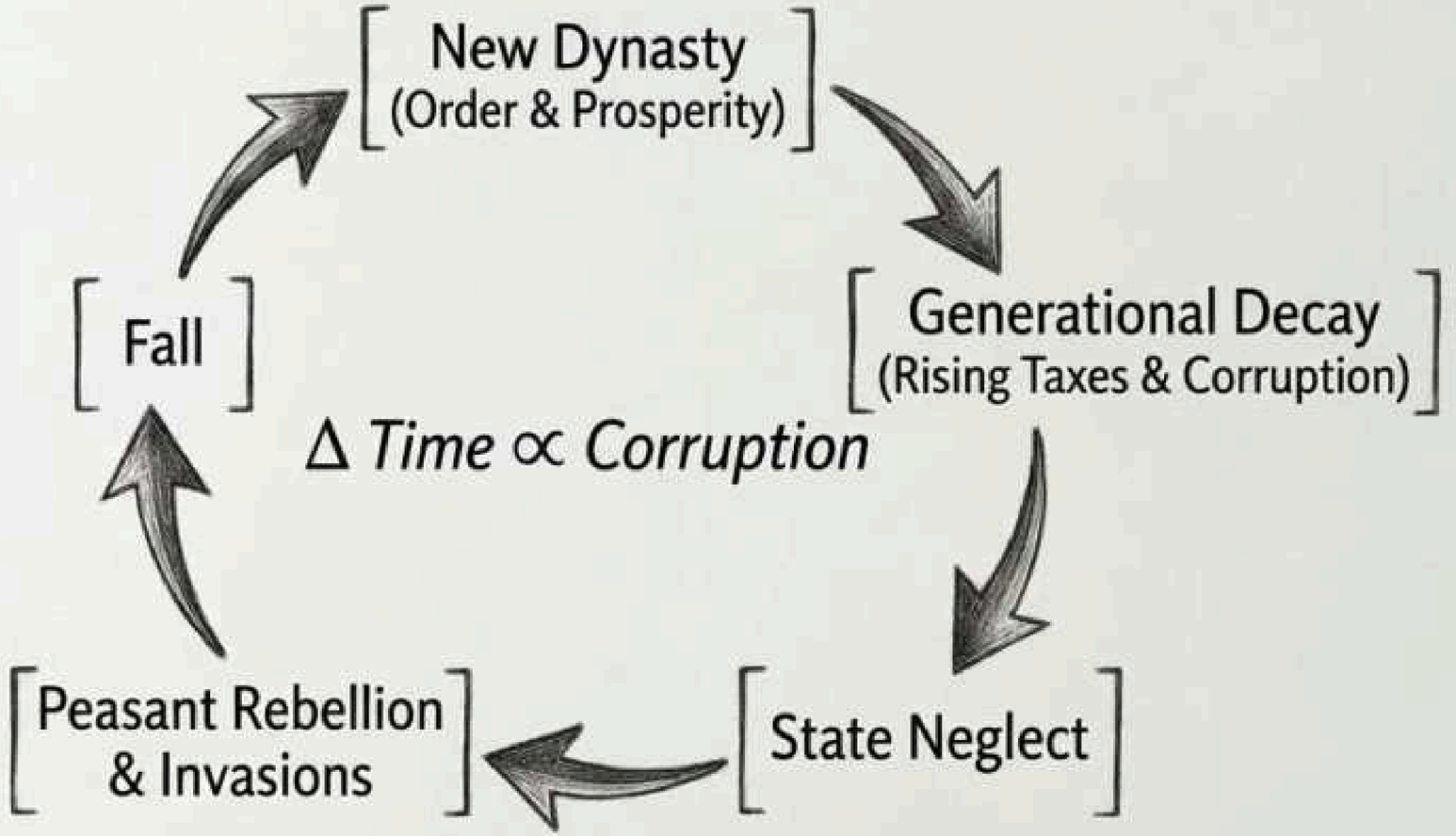
Provides the explanatory framework for 3,000 years of dynastic rise and fall.

$$\text{Right to Rule} = f(\text{Virtue})$$

$$\text{If Virtue} < \text{Wickedness, then Mandate} \rightarrow \text{Null}$$

The Dynastic Cycle

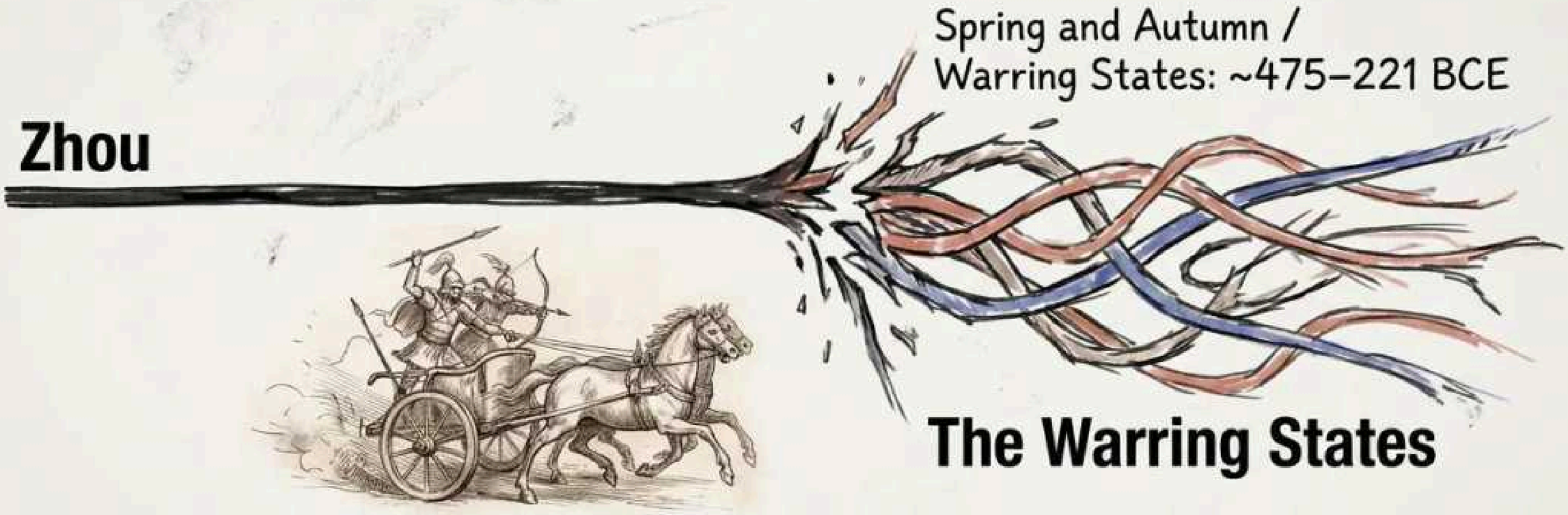
¶ 1.4



The historical simplification capturing how Chinese writers understood their own past.

¶ 1.5

Political Chaos ∝ Philosophical Brilliance



Zhou power weakens; China splits into rival, warring states.

Hundred Schools of Thought: Wandering philosophers travel from court to court, offering competing strategies to restore order.

Master's Whiteboard

¶ 1.6

Ruler / Subject

Father / Son



Fatrnd / Son

Husband / Wife

Elder Brother / Younger Brother

Friend / Friend

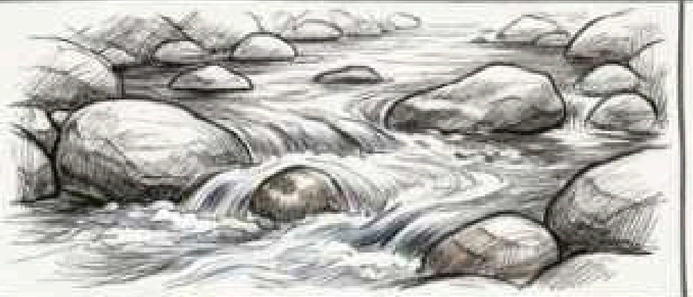
$$\text{Harmony} = \sum_{i=1}^{5} (Role_i)$$

Confucius: 551–479 BCE

The Junzi: The "gentleman of virtue" who leads society by moral example, entirely rejecting brute force.

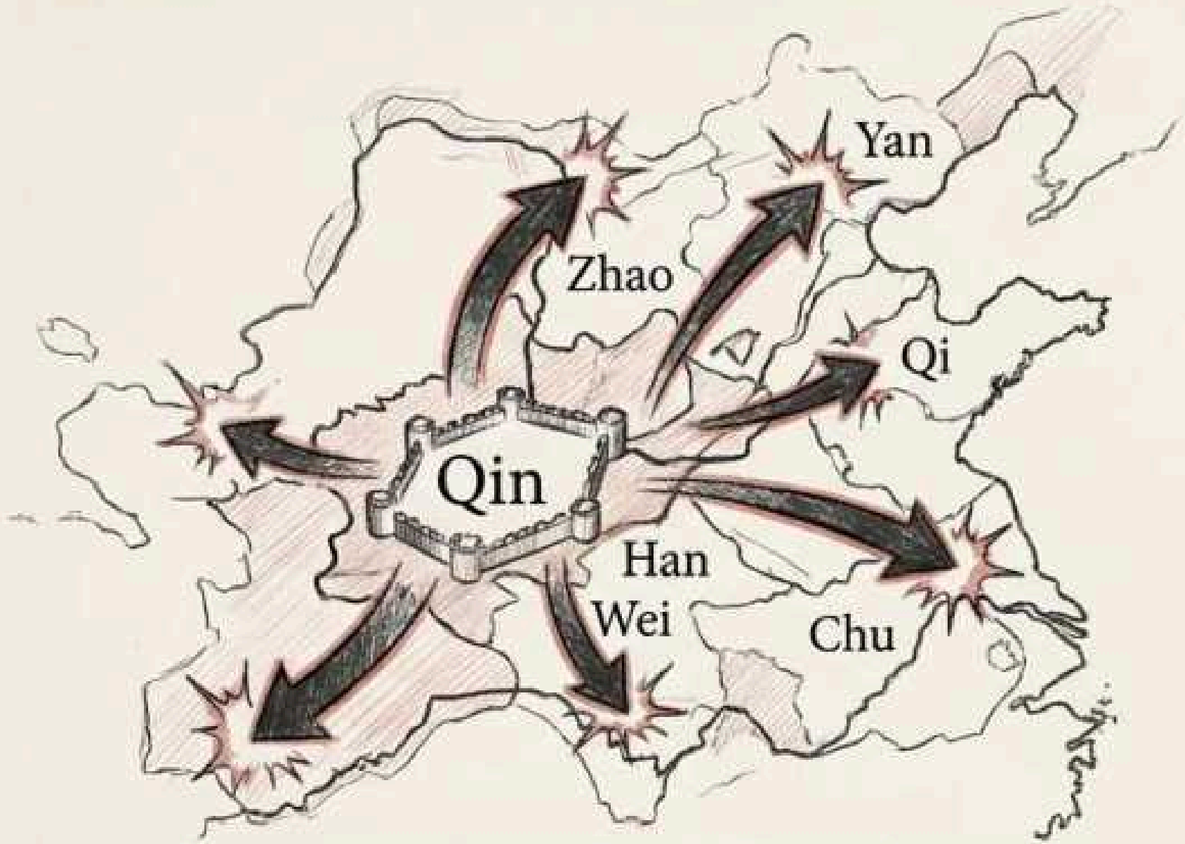
Competing Schools of Thought

¶ 1.7

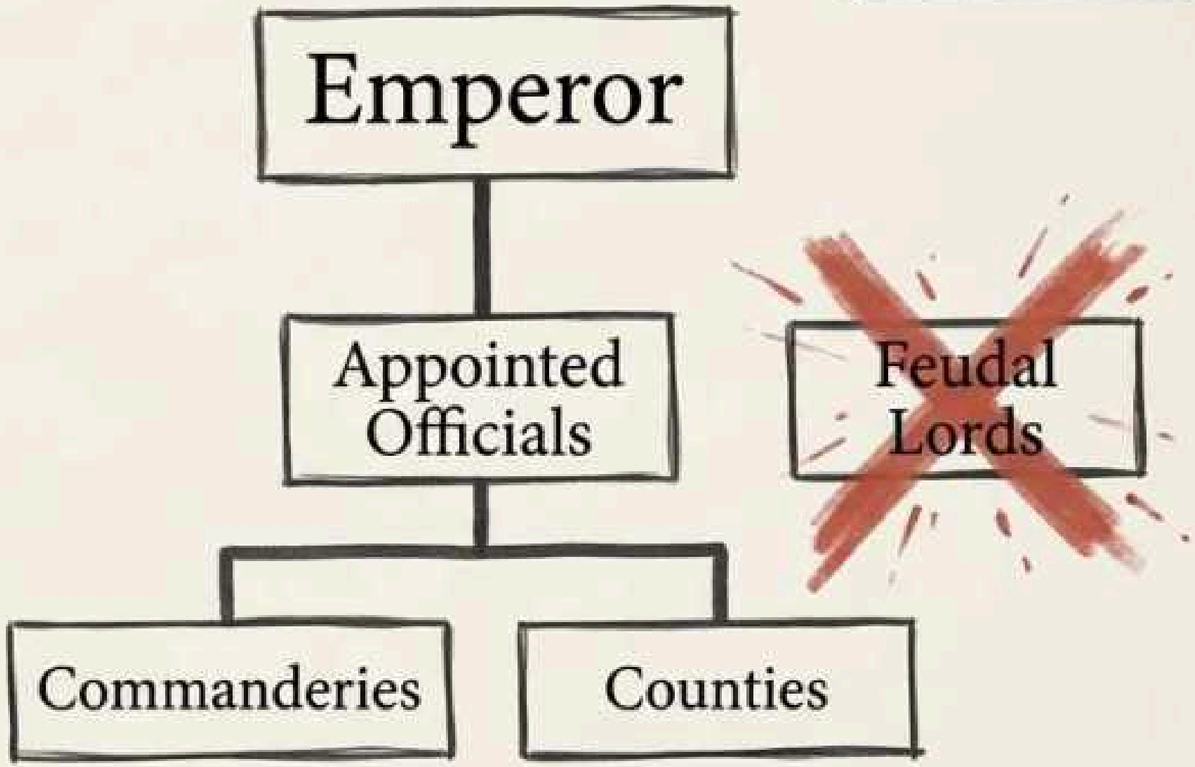
	Key Thinkers	Core Metaphor	Method of Order
Daoism	Laozi, Zhuangzi		Action - Striving
Legalism	Han Feizi, Lord Shang		Strict Laws × × Harsh Punishments
Mohism	Mozi		Universal Love ÷ Frugality

Unification: 221 BCE

¶ 1.8

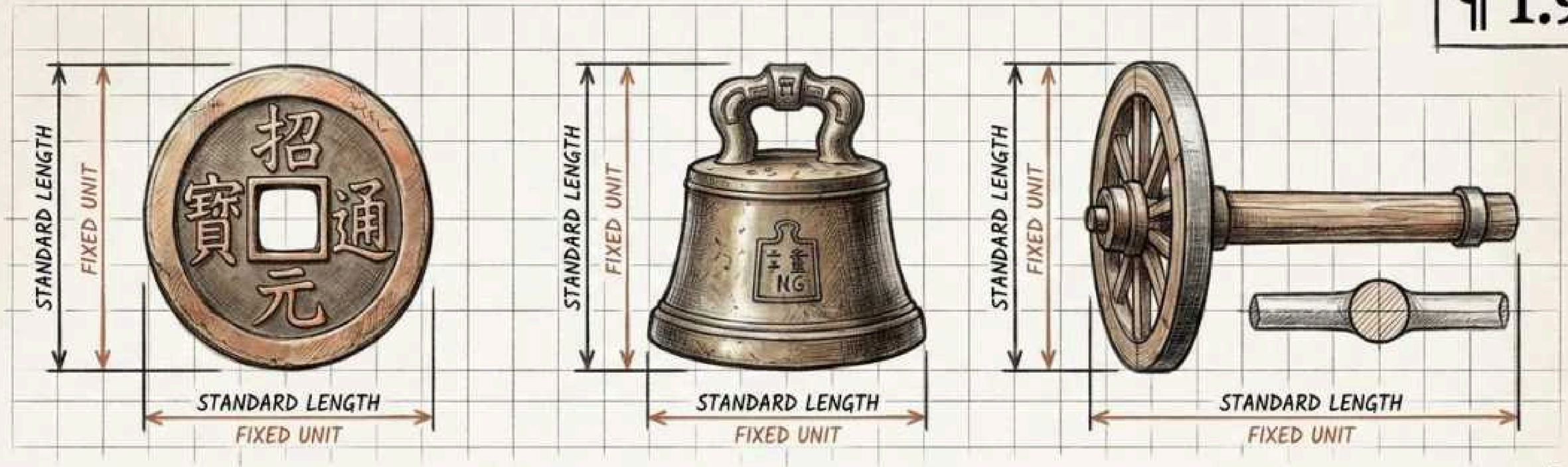


First Emperor: Qin Shi Huangdi (origin of the name "China"). The most efficient war machine of its age.



Replaced hereditary feudalism with a centrally governed bureaucracy.

$$\text{Qin Shi Huangdi} = (\text{Legalism} \times \text{Efficiency})^{\{\text{Empire}\}}$$



Unity = **Constant** (Weights, Measures, Axles, Writing)

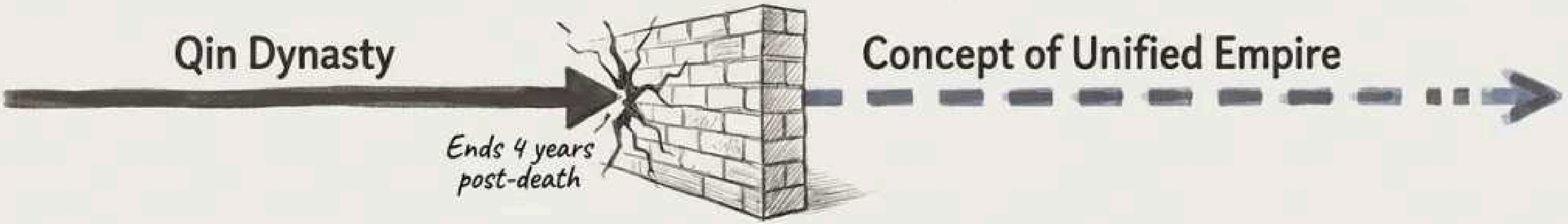
Standardization of Everything: People speaking different dialects could now read the same texts.

Infrastructure: Linked northern walls against nomads (ancestor of the Great Wall).

Suppression: Burned dangerous books and executed critical scholars to enforce ideological purity.







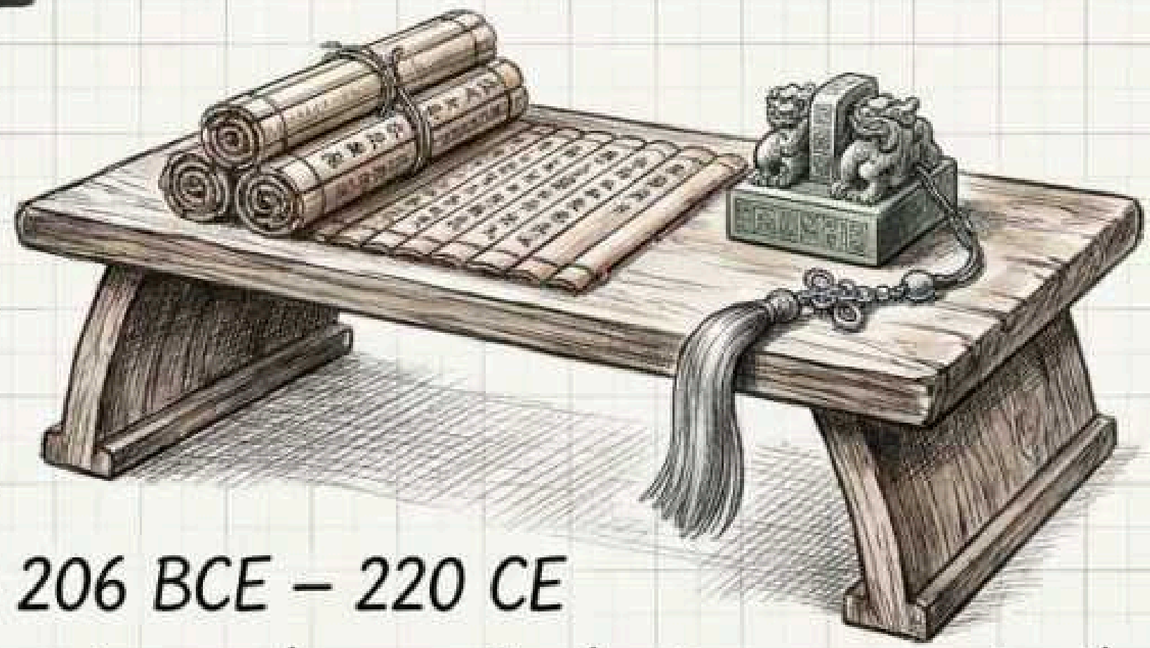
Dynasty Lifespan ≪ Imperial Concept

The Terracotta Army: Found in 1974 near Xi'an. Thousands of unique, life-sized clay guards for his enormous tomb.

The Legacy: The dynasty died fast, but the blueprint survived. Every subsequent dynasty would aim to rule all of China.

¶ 1.11

Han Empire = Qin Centralization + Confucian Values



The Han Dynasty: 206 BCE – 220 CE

Consolidated the empire and gave its lasting name to the Han people.

Emperor Wu (141–87 BCE): Made Confucianism the official state ideology.

Founded an imperial academy to train government officials in the classics.

¶ 1.12

Westward exports

Expansion: Into Central Asia, Korea, and Vietnam.



Rome

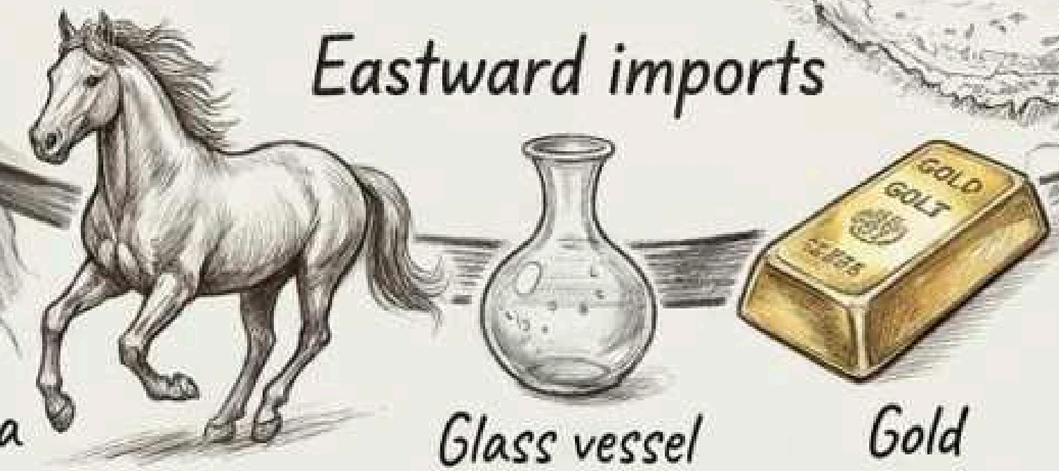
Westward exports

$\overrightarrow{\text{West}}$ (Silk, Paper) $\rightleftharpoons$ $\overrightarrow{\text{East}}$ (Horses, Glass)

China

Eastward imports

Zhang Qian: The envoy whose western travels opened the network.



Ferghana

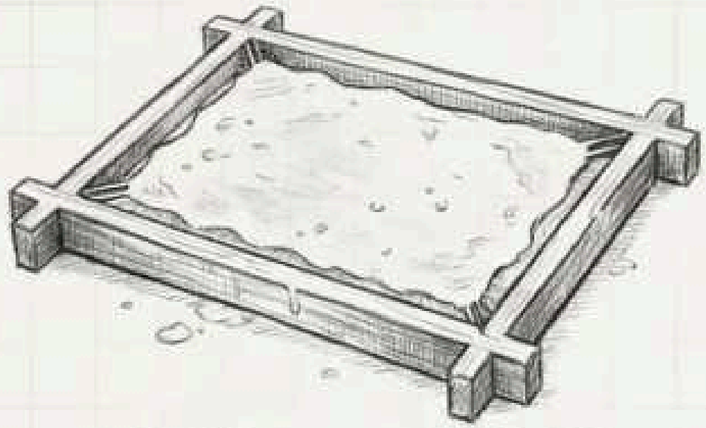
Glass vessel

Gold

The Silk Roads: Linking China with Central Asia, Persia, India, and Rome, trading goods, crops, and ideas.

Han Achievements

¶ 1.13

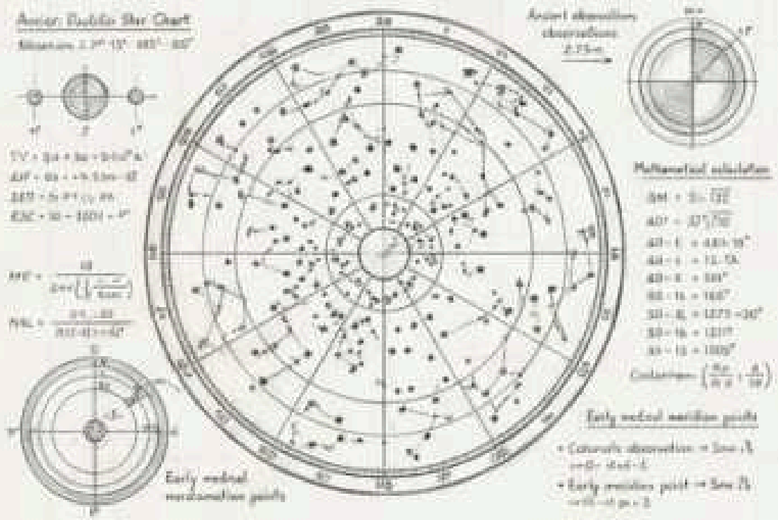


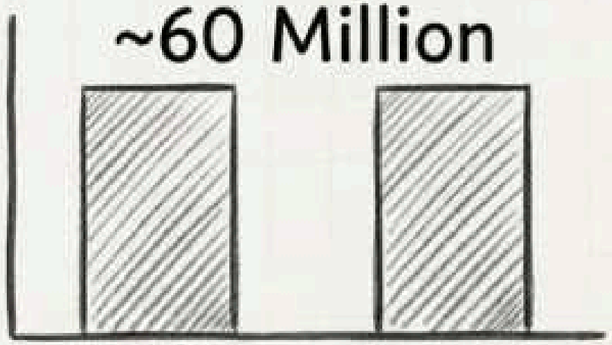
Cai Lun, ~105 CE



Sima Qian

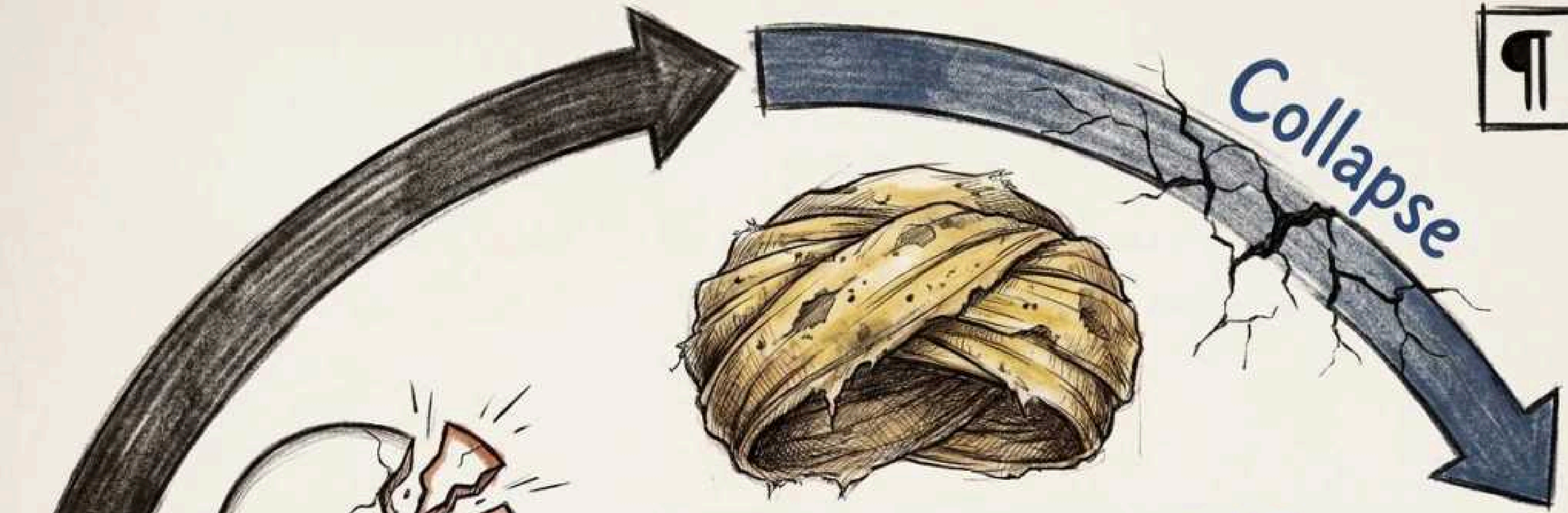
Records of the Grand Historian: The ultimate model for all later Chinese history writing.





Scale and population exactly matched the contemporary Roman Empire.

$$Innovation = History_{Sima\ Qian} + Tech_{Cai\ Lun} + Science$$



$$\text{Empire} - (\text{Landlords} + \text{Eunuchs}) = \text{Rebellion}_{184\ \text{CE}} \rightarrow 3\ \text{Kingdoms}$$

$$\text{Total ement}$$

Internal Rot: Powerful landlords and palace eunuchs severely weaken the court.

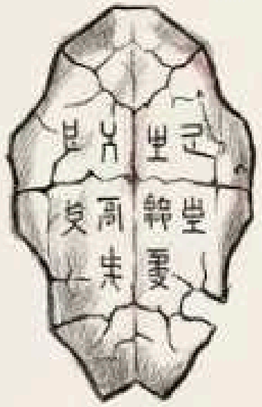
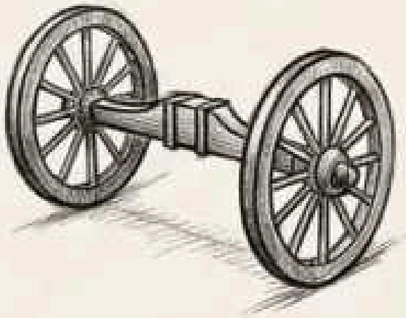
Yellow Turban Rebellion (184 CE): Massive uprising led by Daoist preachers.

Collapse (220 CE): The unified dynasty ends, splitting China into rival states.

(An era later romanticized in Romance of the Three Kingdoms).

Summary of Early Empires

¶ 1.15

Shang	Zhou	100 Schools	Qin	Han
				
First writing	Mandate of Heaven	Debates on order	Legalist unification	Lasting Confucian empire

$$\int_{\text{Shang}}^{\text{Han}} \text{Early China} = \text{Imperial Foundation}$$

Summary Arc: From river valley origins → First writing → Mandate of Heaven → Debates on order → Legalist unification → Lasting Confucian empire.

Looking Forward: The foundation is laid. Next, we will see Imperial China at its height.