

The Challenges of Imperial Rule

The governmental power in imperial China was vested in the emperor, who was considered the "Son of Heaven," chosen by God to rule China. For the Chinese, the emperor ruled the world and had power over *tian xia*, or "everything under the sun." As the Son of Heaven, the emperor presided over both religious and political affairs, and was considered the mediator between people and the forces of nature.

A bureaucratic government is characterized by a specialization of functions and a hierarchy of authority. In imperial China, the emperor was at the top of the hierarchy. To manage the vast territory effectively, however, emperors appointed official inspectors, tax collectors, and other administrators to travel through the country to carry out imperial rule. The emperor recognized the need for a government bureaucracy and attempted to select the group most qualified to act as bureaucrats.

A government in which power is bestowed on the basis of family relationships is called nepotistic. During the early portion of the Zhou Dynasty (1054-221 B.C.), for example, Chinese emperors extended their control over the country through the use of a nepotistic government. Zhou emperors put their relatives in charge of the provinces largely to ensure a loyal bureaucracy.

An aristocracy is a government in which power is vested in a small, privileged class. For example, in 771 B.C., the armies of powerful aristocrats invaded the Zhou capital and drove out the rulers. Officially, the Zhou still ruled China, but the ones with real power were the aristocrats who controlled the strongest provinces.

The system of meritocracy, in which the talented are chosen to help rule through a civil-service examination, was first conceived in China. The Sui and early Tang rulers used examinations to identify qualified candidates for public office. Initially only aristocrats could afford to study for these exams. Later, however, Tang and Song leaders recruited civil servants from other classes.

Name _____ Date _____ Core _____

Challenges of Imperial Rule Simulation Questions

1. How did it feel to be the _____? (Emperor, Chancellor, wealthy person, scholar, or relative)

2. What were the main arguments for the scholars being best suited to act as government officials?

For the wealthy?

For the relatives of the Emperor?

3. How did you feel about the Emperor's decision? Why?

4. Which group do you think should be eligible for government positions? Why?