

Ancient Chinese Inventions

Ancient China was an advanced society. Long ago, it had much more knowledge than other world civilizations at the time. Its people made a number of things hundreds of years before the people in Europe. Over time, Europeans took credit for many of these things. For example, the Chinese made the first magnetic compass. They made the first fishing reel. The next group to create a fishing reel did so 1,400 years later. Wheelbarrows, matches, and umbrellas all came from China.

The Western world did not even know about these things for a long time. Why? Few people went between Europe and China. It was a long trip. It was hard and dangerous. The Himalayas are the tallest mountain range on Earth. They stand between China and the rest of the continent. In 1274, an Italian named Marco Polo did go to China. He spent twenty-four years there. When he got home, he wrote a book. He told about all of the things he saw in China. But almost no one believed him!



Chinese Magnetic Compass

The Chinese had a complex written language. They made separate symbols for each word. It took a long time to learn how to read and write. Only men called scholars could read and write. These men are the reason that the Chinese have the longest recorded history in the world. Much is known about their civilization for thousands of years in the past. For example, we know that the Chinese made the first mechanical clock. They made a basic instrument to measure earthquakes. They invented block printing. They knew how to make porcelain—what we call *china*—hundreds of years before anyone else.

Silk fabric, paper, and gunpowder are probably the best known of the Chinese inventions. The Chinese had paper as early as 105 CE. They started using paper money 700 years later. At about the same time, they invented gunpowder. However, in more recent times, the Chinese have not made as many advances.

No one is sure why, but around 1433, China entered a time of **isolation**. A Ming emperor made a choice. He decided China should not interact with the rest of the world. He ordered that the records of Zheng He, their great sea captain, be burned. Seaports closed to all but Asian traders. Things stayed this way until 1853. At that time, a British steamboat entered the waters between China and Japan. The people who saw the “smoking dragon” were shocked. They saw that their isolation had left them behind. They felt they would be vulnerable to attack by steamships.

How did this happen? During the 420 years of Chinese isolation, the rest of the nations in the world had kept trading with each other. People would see something they liked in another country. Then, they would try to make something just like it. Sometimes what they made was better. When people share ideas, the rate of change and growth is fast. Thus, people in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East made many advances, while China stayed nearly the same.



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The Western world did not even know about these things for a long time. Why? Few people traveled between Europe and China. It was a long, hard, and dangerous trip. The Himalayas are the tallest mountain range on Earth. They stand between China and the rest of the continent. In 1274, an Italian named Marco Polo did go to China. He spent twenty-four years there. When he returned home, he wrote a book. He told about all of the amazing things he saw there. But almost no one in Europe believed him!



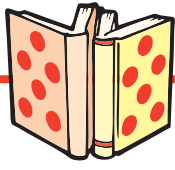
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Silk fabric, paper, and gunpowder are probably the best known of the Chinese inventions. The Chinese had paper as early as 105 CE. They started using the first paper money 700 years later. At about the same time, they invented gunpowder. However, in more recent times, the Chinese have not made as many advances.

No one is sure why, but around 1433, China entered a time of **isolation**. A Ming emperor decided China should not interact with the rest of the world. He ordered that all of the records of Zheng He, their great sea captain, be burned. Seaports closed to all but Asian traders. Things remained this way until 1853. At that time, a British steamboat entered the waters between China and Japan. The people were shocked by the “smoking dragon.” They saw that their isolation had left them behind militarily.

How did this happen? During the 420 years of Chinese isolation, the rest of the nations in the world had kept trading with each other. This led to the free exchange of knowledge. People would see something they liked in another country and try to duplicate it in their own. When people share ideas, the rate of innovation moves fast. Thus, people in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East made many advances, while China remained nearly the same.



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Ancient China was an advanced civilization. At one time, it was far ahead of other world civilizations in its knowledge. Its people created a number of things hundreds of years before the people in Europe did. Over time, Europeans have received the credit for many of these things. For example, the Chinese actually made the first magnetic compass. They made a fishing reel 1,400 years before anyone else. Wheelbarrows, matches, and umbrellas all came from China.

The Western world did not even know about these inventions for a long time. Why? Few people traveled between Europe and China. It was a long, hard, and dangerous trip. The Himalayas, the highest mountain range in the world, is a formidable obstacle that separates China from the rest of the continent. In 1274, an Italian named Marco Polo went to China. He spent twenty-four years there. When he returned home, he wrote a book about the amazing things he saw there. But almost no one in Europe believed him!



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The Chinese had a complex written language with separate symbols for each word. It took a long time to learn how to read and write, and only scholars did so. These scholars are the reason that the Chinese have the longest recorded history in the world. This means much is known about their civilization for thousands of years in the past. For example, we know that the Chinese created the first mechanical clock and also a basic seismometer to measure earthquakes. They invented block printing and made porcelain—what we call *china*—hundreds of years before anyone else knew how to produce it.

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No one is sure why, but around 1433, China entered a time of **isolation**. A Ming emperor decided China should not interact with the rest of the world and destroyed all the records of their great sea captain Zheng He. Seaports closed to all but Asian traders. Things remained this way until 1853. At that time, a British steamboat entered the waters between China and Japan. When the shocked people saw the “smoking dragon,” they realized that their isolation had left them vulnerable militarily.

How did this happen? During the 420 years of Chinese isolation, the rest of the nations in the world had continued to trade with each other. This led to the free exchange of knowledge, as it had for thousands of years. When people share ideas, the rate of innovation moves at a rapid pace. Thus, people in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East made discoveries, while China remained relatively unchanged.