“Describe the changes and continuities in China from 2000 BCE-220 CE.”

China was a significant civilization that cradled important dynasties from 2000 BC to 220 CE. For centuries China was divided among rival states as time went on this changed as these states of China unified into a much larger region. However, the underlining use of belief systems by politicians to maintain social order remained consistent throughout this entire period.

In the early Shang and Zhou dynasties, the region of China expanded from the Yellow Sea to the Yellow River. By the prime of the Han dynasty, China included modern day Vietnam, Korea, and the Tian Mountains, making it almost four times larger. From 2000 BCE to the middle of the third century China was divided among rival states. Hostilities among these states gave rise to the label “Warring States Period”. During this time powerful families competed and fought over land and resources. In the second half of the third century the Qin dynasty, China’s first empire, took over the other states. Because of the rise of empires and centralized government, China’s territorial region expanded dramatically. With the help of Confucian and Legalist beliefs, in the Qin and Han empires, China was able to expand its territorial region and transition from decentralized to a more centralized government.

In the Shang dynasty the kingship glorified the king as an intermediary between the people and the gods. Under the “Mandate of Heaven”, the Zhou dynasty would conquer the Shang using religious justification. New belief systems such as Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism began to emerge in China because they were answers to solve the problems of decentralization and fragmentation in the “Era of Warring States”. Even Buddhism from India would come to China during the Han dynasty in a time of war and chaos as an alternative to the suffering in that region. Throughout the time period of Qin and Han Confucianism and Legalism would remain the foundation of politicians to establish social order in China. Legalism was a harsh system of negative reinforcement used under the emperor Shi Huangdi to promote unification and order. Shi also incorporated some Confucianism and its sense of benevolent nature, social responsibility, and sacrifice. As more Chinese grew tired of the harsh Legalist ideology, it soon leads to the fall of the Qin after Shi’s death. As the Han dynasty emerged there was a greater emphasis on Confucian beliefs and less on Legalism. The Chinese consistently used religion and belief systems in politics because they all needed to create a sense of social order or justify their power.

China transformed from a fragmented Eastern region to a unified larger empire. However, what remained constant was its tendency to use religion or belief systems to maintain order or justify power. Empires in Europe, Southwest Asia, and South Asia would also advance using similar methods of mixing religion with politics.