In ancient times, the emperors of China sent expeditions to the remotest parts of the empire and beyond in search of the men who were reputed to be immortals, in the hope of learning the secret of their "elixirs of eternal life." Taoist alchemists were brought to court to prepare drugs by heating cinnabar (mercuric sulphide), arsenic and other minerals which were thought to be the essential ingredients of any formula for immortality. No one succeeded in this quest but the search did encourage ceaseless experimentation.

The Chinese alchemists were working with sulphur and saltpetre by the 1st century BC and during the course of their experiments many fires were started. By the 8th century AD, in the mid-Tang dynasty, the potentialities of these substances when combined with charcoal were realized as the Chinese discovered an explosive mixture which they still call huo yao ("fire medicine") which came to be known in the west as gunpowder.

When saltpetre (potassium nitrate), sulphur and charcoal are mixed into black powder and ignited, the three ingredients react violently and emit great heat. Originally the three constituents were used separately as medicines. Sulphur was used to treat skin diseases (as it still is) while saltpetre was used to dispel fevers, treat stomach ailments and to disperse internal accumulations of blood. As recently as the 16th century, gunpowder was still classified as a medicine because of its use in treating: "ringworm sores, insects, eczema and pestilence," hence the retention of the name "fire medicine."

Within a few years of its discovery gunpowder was put to use in warfare. In 1044 Zeng Gongliang wrote a military encyclopedia, the Wu Jing Zong Yao (Compendium of the Most Important Military Techniques) which included the oldest recorded formula for gunpowder. It also details the formulae for poison smoke-grenades and spiked pottery firebombs as well as gunpowder for cannon. By the 12th century the first guns were in use for the precision discharge of arrows. Bamboo was used to make the first gun barrels, packed with gunpowder and fired by a fuse. In 1332, the world's first bronze cannon was made, a
dance of natural saltpetre. In the 13th century, the secret reached Europe, where saltpetre for gunpowder was made by fermenting urine. This was done in pits where the saltpetre was scraped off the walls. Despite its late arrival on the scene, gunpowder had a greater effect on history in Europe than in China.
broad blunderbuss. This weapon is now on display in the Chinese History Museum in Beijing.

When gunpowder was introduced to the west it was mostly used in explosive bombs and mines. These things existed in China but there the main emphasis was on rockets and fire-weapons. More than thirty kinds of fire-arrow were developed between the invention of gunpowder and the 17th century. One of these, the “flying-bird” rocket was shaped like a crow. Its body was plaited from thin strips of bamboo and packed with gunpowder. Four pipes issued from the tail of the bird-rocket which had a range of 300 metres. It was an incendiary weapon that could be used to set an enemy’s camp on fire or to burn his ships.

The Chinese also invented the world’s first two-stage rocket, the “fire-dragon.” When the gunpowder in the four rockets of the dragon’s main stage was burnt up it ignited many small fire-arrows in its belly, causing them to shoot out of the fire dragon’s mouth. These rockets were used in naval warfare where they looked like “fire-dragons” coming across the water.

The principle of these ancient rockets was the same as that which drives the rockets of today. Ignition of the gunpowder created a high temperature and an enormous pressure of gas. When this gas was allowed to escape at the rear the reaction propelled the rocket forward at high speed.

During the 12th century gunpowder was first used in firecrackers and fireworks in the celebration of festivals. A particularly elaborate example was the box-lantern. This was a multilayered, many-sided firework about one metre high. Inside it were folded fire-resistant paper illustrations of folk-tales, characters from plays and flowers. When the box-lantern was hung in a high place and ignited it exploded layer by layer so that the story gradually unfolded in whirling spark trails amidst a sea of light.

Gunpowder and firearms, which were to have a tremendous impact on western history, came to Europe via trade routes and the westward campaigns of the Mongol armies, finally arriving in the 13th century.