

Zhou Dynasty



Figure 1: A bronze piece of cookware is from the ancient state of Jin from the Eastern Zhou dynasty (about 500–450 bc).

The Zhou (or Chou) dynasty ruled ancient China for some eight centuries. The beginning date of the Zhou has long been debated. Traditionally, it has been given as 1122 B.C. However, that date has been revised as scholars have uncovered more archaeological evidence. The most recent findings have placed the outright start of the dynasty at 1046 B.C. The dynasty ended in 256 B.C.

The Zhou coexisted with the Shang dynasty for many years. The Shang ruled from about 1600 to 1046 B.C. The Zhou lived just west of the Shang territory in what is now Shaanxi province. The two states went through times of peace and war. Eventually, one of the Zhou ruling houses conquered the Shang, probably in the mid-11th century B.C.

The Zhou political system relied on a network of alliances with local rulers, especially those based on extended family ties. It was somewhat similar to the feudal system of medieval Europe. The original Zhou capital was located near present-day Xi'an (in Shaanxi province). The Zhou later moved the capital to Luoyang (now in Henan province) to support the empire and its loyal local lords in the east. The stability of the Zhou ruling arrangement lasted for some 200 years. Eventually, however, it began to collapse. The 20 or more local lords grappled for more power. In the 8th century B.C., the political system began to weaken seriously. The emperor's power declined. That allowed various local chiefs to make themselves overlords.

The period before 771 B.C. is usually known as the Western Zhou dynasty, because the capital was in the west. The period from 770 B.C. is known as the Eastern Zhou dynasty, because the new capital was in the east. The Eastern Zhou itself is often subdivided into the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 B.C.) and the Warring States period (475–221 B.C.). In the Spring and Autumn period, China consisted of many small squabbling states. During the Warring States period, the small states joined together, forming several larger units. They struggled with one another for mastery. Finally, one of those small kingdoms, Qin, succeeded in conquering the rest of the states. It then established the Qin dynasty (221–207 B.C.). Modern China's name is derived from Qin.



Figure 2: Bronze, an alloy of copper and tin, was widely used in ancient China to make many objects. This ceremonial bronze jian (vessel) dates back to the Eastern Zhou dynasty (770–256 bc).



Figure 3: A bronze figure of a charioteer was created during the Warring States period of China's Eastern Zhou Dynasty.



Figure 4: An ancient Chinese silk cloth is embroidered in a dragon, phoenix, and tiger pattern. It dates to the 4th to 3rd century bc, during the Zhou dynasty.

The visual arts of the Zhou dynasty were diverse. The arts of the early Western Zhou were essentially a continuation of those of the Shang dynasty. That was especially true of works in bronze. During the Eastern Zhou period, unique local traditions became apparent. At that time decorations began to include pictorial subjects—for example, hunting scenes and chariots and horsemen.

As the empire was breaking up, arts and culture were flowering in the various individual states. The remains of many of their capitals during the Zhou period have been uncovered. They reveal great buildings with hard earth floors and walls. There were also two-story buildings and observation towers, and the philosopher Laozi mentioned a nine-story tower.

Only a few paintings on silk remain from the Zhou dynasty. However, written descriptions of paintings discuss their themes. Lacquerware including gold and silver inlay became finely developed. Jade ornaments and objects were used lavishly for burials and ritual purposes. Pottery expanded greatly in variety of shapes and finishes during the Warring States period.

During the Zhou dynasty, China underwent quite dramatic changes. People began using iron, ox-drawn plows, and crossbows. They took up horseback riding. Farmers produced larger crop yields after large-scale irrigation and water-control projects were instituted. The Zhou built new roads and canals. These changes improved the communication system of the dynasty. In turn, trade increased and towns expanded. In addition, the Zhou developed coinage and began to use chopsticks. They also created the Chinese writing system out of its primitive beginnings in the Shang period.

In philosophy, the schools of Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism developed during the Zhou dynasty. Literature flourished with Confucius, Mencius, Laozi, and other great Chinese philosophers. Later generations of Chinese have studied the Zhou dynasty for information on the origin of their civilization.

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