



Zhou and Qin Dynasty: China

By Dennis RM Campbell

From religion and philosophy to trading and gender roles, the Zhou and Qin dynasties were vastly different. But each left their mark on Chinese history.

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Background—from dynasty to empire

The tale of the Zhou and Qin dynasties begins after the fall of the Shang Dynasty. From about 1600 to 1050 BCE, the Shang only loosely controlled their territory. Each local region had its own rulers. In 1050, the Zhou took over the Shang. The Zhou controlled eastern China, from north of the Yellow River down to the Yangtze River. However, the Zhou had local leaders just like the Shang. This also made it easier for the Zhou to be conquered. The Zhou were taken over by the Qin Dynasty. The Qin conquered most of what is now China and created the first Chinese empire.

Formation—Heaven said we could

In 1046 BCE, the Zhou King Wu overthrew the Shang. He justified his actions through the Mandate of Heaven, or *tian*. Tian was really about being just, not heaven. A ruler lost the Mandate of Heaven if he became immoral or cruel.



Map of the Warring States Period of the Eastern Zhou. By SY, CC BY-SA 4.0.

The Zhou Dynasty ruled for over 700 years from 1046 to 226 BCE. However, the Zhou kings did not tightly govern their states. Over time, kings found it harder to control the states. By 771 BCE, most of the states had become independent. By 334 BCE, Zhou rulers had lost all power in China.

The Qin Dynasty conquered all the Zhou states. The Qin only ruled for a short, but important 15 years. King Zheng of Qin gave himself the higher title of Qin Shihuangdi, meaning “August Emperor”. He ruled over his empire with an iron fist. People tried to assassinate him three times. In the end, Qin Shihuangdi was killed after drinking a potion that he thought would bring him immortality. His son Qin Ershi took over for his father. When Qin Ershi died in 206 BCE, the Qin Dynasty ended.



Map of the Qin Empire. By SY, CC BY-SA 4.0.



Stone rubbing of Qin era depiction of one of the three assassination attempts against Qin Shihuangdi. The would-be assassin Jin Ke is on the left, being restrained by a physician. Qin Shihuangdi is center right fleeing the scene while holding a jade disc. The assassin's blade is stuck in the pillar in the center. Public domain.

Administration

Zhou kings ruled over a kingdom of as many as 200 states. However, there was no central power for the states. These states were mostly run by family members of the Zhou king. This system of rule is called kinship. It was similar to the feudalism of Medieval Europe.

Kinship ties weakened over time. The states became independent. The Zhou ruler had less control over the growing states. Eventually, a state controlled by the Qin Dynasty overthrew the Zhou and conquered all of China.

The Qin ruled China differently than the Zhou. The Qin followed the system of legalism. Legalism was a strict practice that required people to follow the laws. Even breaking less important laws could be punished by death. Qin Shihuangdi even burned books that might inspire people to challenge his rule. The emperor also began a number of projects, including the Great Wall of China.



Drawing of Qin Shihuangdi by unknown artist (c. 1850 CE). Public domain.



The Great Wall of China at Jinshanling. By Severin.Stadler, CC BY-SA 3.0.

Religion and philosophy

At that time, Chinese religion worshipped many gods. Shang rulers worshipped a god named *ti*. The Zhou worshipped a god named *tian*, meaning “Heaven.” The Zhou claimed that Heaven granted them kingship. Eventually, various states began worshipping other gods. They wanted to challenge the Zhou’s power.

Several important thinkers came about in the Zhou era. Confucius (551-479 BCE) developed a philosophy called Confucianism. Laozi developed a belief system called Daoism. Sun Tzu wrote an important military book called *The Art of War*.

In 361 BCE, Lord Shang brought legalism to Qin. According to Shang, power came from the law and gave the ruler total power. The laws also had to be applied equally to all, no matter their social status. Shang was killed for his beliefs. However, legalism continued to define the Qin empire.



[Portrait of Confucius](#) by the Tang Dynasty artist Wu Daozi (685-758 CE). Public domain.

Trade—No merchants, please

Trade appeared during the Zhou Dynasty. The Zhou had a system of roads. This made it easier to transport goods and ideas. Trade made merchants rich. However, Confucianists and legalists disagreed with the merchants' business practices. They thought merchants could cause conflict in society, and many merchants were sent away during Qin rule. As a result, trade didn't grow much under Qin rule.

Women and society

The Zhou and Qin separated women and men, especially in work. Men farmed, and women spun cloth. Later, this separation became tied to Confucian values. One Chinese work tells of a woman who was in a fire. She chose to burn to death rather than break the moral code.



Example of a [spade coin](#) (as in money) dating to the Eastern Zhou period (650-200 BCE). By Davidhartill, CC BY-SA 3.0.

Decline and fall—A sinking (kin)ship

The Zhou system was bound to fall apart. Kinship ties to the king weakened and the states started separating. Eventually, these powerful states pushed out the Zhou rulers.

It's hard to say what caused the Qin to fall. Traditional Chinese historians say the fall was caused by an abusive ruler. Meanwhile, the people themselves turned their back on traditional values of kinship. Historians outside of China explain the fall with other social factors. For example, there were many peasant revolts against the king. Regardless of the cause, the Qin left a major mark on China for years to come. In fact the name "China" likely comes from "Qin"!



Photograph close up of the head of a terracotta archer from Qin Shihuangdi's tomb complex. By Charlie, CC BY-SA 4.0.



Photograph of one (small) section of the terracotta army (pit 1) buried along with Qin Shihuangdi at his tomb complex (Xi'an, China). By Maros M r a z (Maros), CC BY-SA 3.0.

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Stone rubbing of Qin era depiction of one of the three assassination attempts against Qin Shihuangdi. The would-be assassin Jin Ke is on the left, being restrained by a physician. Qin Shihuangdi is center right fleeing the scene while holding a jade disc. The assassin's blade is stuck in the pillar in the center. Public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Assassination_attempt_on_Qin_Shi_Huang.jpg

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Example of a spade coin (as in money) dating to the Eastern Zhou period (650-200 BCE). By Davidhartill, CC BY-SA 3.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Square_Shoulder_Spade.jpg

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