

# Zhou Dynasty

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*Western Zhou period: 1045–771 BCE; Eastern Zhou period 770–221 BCE*

**The Zhou dynasty covered two time periods: the Western Zhou and the Eastern Zhou. The former was characterized by the hegemonic rule of Zhou lineage over a number of tribute states. The Eastern Zhou period, when the Zhou family was forced eastward out of their western homeland, was characterized by the rise of former Zhou and non-Zhou states who competed for control and moral authority.**

**T**he Zhou dynasty covered two time periods: the Western Zhou period (1045–771 BCE) and the Eastern Zhou period (770–221 BCE). During the Western Zhou period the Zhou lineage ruled from the capital, Zongzhou, which was located near the lineage’s ancestral burial grounds (near modern-day Xi’an in Shaanxi Province). In 771 BCE the Zhou elite fled east to the city of Chengzhou (located near modern-day Luoyang in Henan Province). During the Eastern Zhou period former Zhou tribute states competed for power under the guise of upholding Zhou traditional moral authority. The Zhou royal descendants themselves were puppets of neighboring states.

## Origins

The original Zhou nation developed in the Wei River valley in Shaanxi. Shang dynasty (1766–1045 BCE) oracle-bone records dating from 1200–1000 BCE suggest that the

Shang considered the Zhou alternately as an enemy and as a tribute-paying subject. By the middle of the eleventh century BCE the Zhou had built a coalition of partners, including former Shang subjects in northern Henan, and destroyed Shang hegemony (influence). In texts compiled centuries later this power shift was attributed to the will of heaven and called the “Mandate of Heaven” (*tianming*). In Zhou bronze texts the term referred to the will of ancestral spirits, perhaps manifested as astral phenomena (in religious philosophy, occurrences held to be next in refinement above those in the tangible world). But by the Eastern Zhou period the power shift was mythologized as a heroic military conquest commanded by heaven and executed by King Wu (representing “martial” reckoning against immoral leaders), who was the son of King Wen, the founder of the Zhou nation (who represented “humane” treatment of inferiors and a system of utopian agrarian government). By the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) the Mandate of Heaven clearly signified shifts in a system of natural forces, much closer to the five phases system (*wuxing*) that was popular by the third century BCE. The Mandate of Heaven theory became a permanent part of political thought and was used by later Chinese reformers to frighten defiant rulers, as well as by those who took up arms against the government to justify their rebellion.

After the shift of influence from the Shang in the east to the Zhou in the west, Zhou rulers spent the next two centuries consolidating their power by military coercion and trade. They concentrated on control over resources that were essential to their economic system of gift giving and award—a system inherited from the Shang and





**A bronze vessel from the Zhou dynasty. The Zhou were noted for the sophistication of their bronze-casting technique and design, and often rewarded their subjects with gifts of sacrificial vessels. PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.**

intimately tied to the spread of the worship of Zhou ancestral spirits. Cowries (a kind of seashell), jade, and bronze—all being valued in Shang religion and all requiring trade ties with distant regions—continued to be important to the Zhou. Although the Zhou initially worshiped Shang spirits, by the middle of the tenth century BCE their own Zhou ancestors had clearly become national icons. Nation building became a form of ancestor worship as the Zhou rewarded subjects with sacrificial vessels, wines, ritual clothing, and agricultural land (for food production) to advance the Zhou ritual system. Recipients used these gifts to present mortuary feasts to ancestral spirits, often including the names of their Zhou benefactors and their ancestors in the inscribed prayers.

The sophistication of Zhou carved jades, bronze vessels, and musical instruments points to control over resources and production in regions beyond the Zhou homeland. At the height of Zhou influence, during the late tenth to the late ninth centuries BCE, the Zhou controlled a network that reached west into Gansu Province, northeast to Beijing, southwest into Sichuan Province, east into Shandong Province, and south into Hubei Province and beyond the Yangzi (Chang) River.

## Eastern Zhou

Scholars subdivide the Eastern Zhou period into the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE) and the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), the names for both periods deriving from chronicles collected that detail alliances and conflicts between former subject states of the Zhou. The entire Eastern Zhou era was characterized by larger states annexing smaller states such that by the third century BCE only a few large states remained. During the Spring and Autumn period the Zhou ruler was alternately a puppet of the states of Jin to the north, Zheng to the south, and Qi to the east, each of which took a turn as “hegemon protector” (*ba*). States on the fringes of the Zhou earlier realm rose to power and challenged the exclusionary protector system.

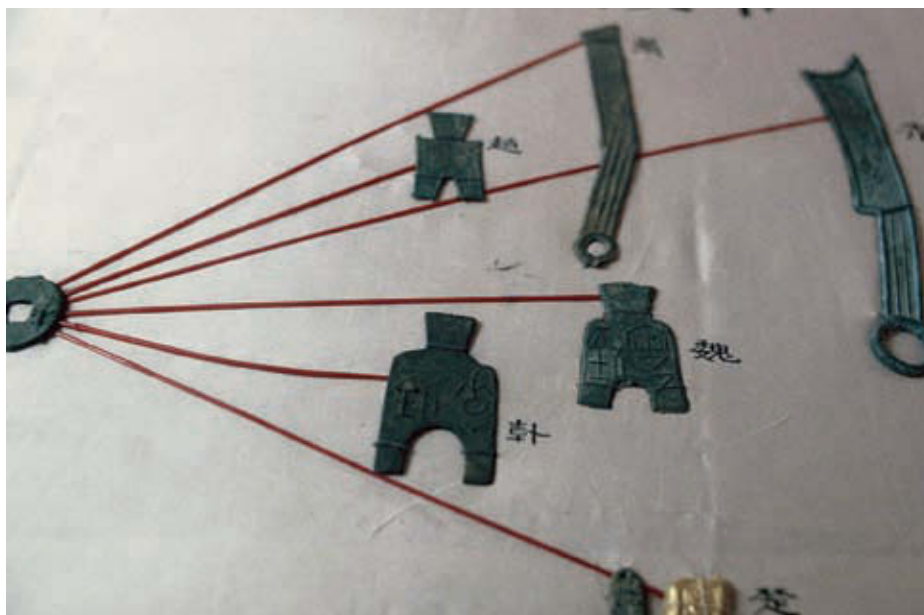
Powerful new players by the Warring States period included the states of Qin, located to the west in the old Zhou homeland; Yue, spreading north into the lower Huai River valley from the southeastern coastal region; Chu, spreading south and east out of the Han River valley in modern Hubei Province; and Yan, in the northeast near modern-day Beijing. In the meantime Jin (a powerful state that developed in southern Shanxi Province not far from the Zhou administrative city of Chengzhou) divided into territories run by the large lineage groups Wei, Zhao, and Han. The Han took over Zheng, but other states survived simply by allying strategically with larger groups. Examples include Lu, the birthplace of the philosopher Confucius (551–479 BCE), and nearby Song, the birthplace of the anti-Confucian thinker Mozi (470?–391? BCE).

The art of strategic alliances, known as the “Theory of Horizontal or Vertical Alliances,” was advanced by itinerant “guests” (*ke*), who were members of disenfranchised

artisan and elite families who had studied under masters of military, technical, and ritual arts. By the Warring States period literacy and text production, as well as occult or technical expertise, spread with the guest masters and their disciples from one site of patronage to another. The many new text types and ritual items discovered in Warring States tombs, especially those associated with the southern state of Chu, attest to a cross-fertilization of practices and ideas over great geographical distances. This cross-fertilization no doubt was perpetuated not only by the roving guests but also by the migrations of peoples, states, and armies. The guests took the cultural fabric once identified as Zhou and rewove it, introducing ideologies that better fit the economic and cultural realities of their far-flung patron rulers. They used tales about former Zhou-period rulers to cajole and warn cajole regional leaders. Founding kings Wen and Wu were cast as paragons of honesty and humility, and—most important to enhancing the uncertain position of these guest advisers—the wise minister Zhou Gong (regent for Wu’s son and cult founder of the state of Lu) was cast as vital to the foundation of a strong Zhou state. Zhou Gong assumed rule while the king was weak, gave speeches about morality, repressed remnant Shang rebels, established an administration, and politely retired when the king came of age.

## Drastic Social Changes

A comparison of the Warring States and early Western Zhou economies shows drastic social changes. The economic network that was expanded by the Zhou from the eleventh through the ninth centuries BCE collapsed under its own ideological weight (a collapse that continued through the Spring and Autumn period). The rigid link to Zhou kinship through mortuary ritual and a gift-giving system was not sustainable. In contrast, the major states during the Warring States period established their own monetary systems and individualized religious systems that incorporated both local practices and elements of the archaic but prestigious Zhou rhetoric. Lesser states participated in the expanded networks of the larger states. Markets were common in every city. The export of mass-produced trade goods and the import of exotic goods thrived. The network of interstate relationships was often multilateral, involving trade, warfare, marriage, and political agreements. Until the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE) conquered the entire region and attempted unification, early China was a complex social web of mingled social classes, competing philosophies, and people from different cultural backgrounds. Amid this cultural fluidity individual states promoted their own calendar systems, musical styles, artistic styles, script styles, and occult practices.



**Zhou dynasty “ax-head” coins used during a period of thriving interstate trade.** PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.



**Bronze bells, also called *bianzhong*, from the Zhou dynasty.**

PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.

The Warring States period was the end of the Bronze Age period (when human culture was characterized by the use of bronze, beginning between 4000 and 3000 CE and ending with the advent of the Iron Age) in Zhou culture. Philosophers and writers of this and later periods would use an increasingly idealized vision of Zhou ritual and government as a rhetorical foil against which to criticize the political chaos of their own periods.

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## Further Reading

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