

7.3 Life in the Chinese Dynasties

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LESSON OVERVIEW

Introduction

In this concept, you will learn about ancient Chinese accomplishments and the impact the dynasties had on life in China. You will also analyze how the dynasties unified China and spread its culture to other lands.



Essential Question

How did the Chinese dynasties affect life throughout East Asia?

Lesson Objectives

By the end of this lesson, you should be able to:

- Trace the important Chinese dynasties (Zhou dynasty, Qin dynasty, Han dynasty) and analyze impacts of these dynasties on life in East Asia.
- Analyze the societal structures in China during this period.

Key Vocabulary

Which terms do you already know?

- | | |
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| <input type="checkbox"/> bureaucracy | <input type="checkbox"/> Mandate of Heaven |
| <input type="checkbox"/> China | <input type="checkbox"/> Marco Polo |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Confucianism | <input type="checkbox"/> meritocracy |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Confucius | <input type="checkbox"/> Ming dynasty |
| <input type="checkbox"/> dynasty | <input type="checkbox"/> Qin |
| <input type="checkbox"/> emperor | <input type="checkbox"/> Qin dynasty |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Emperor Wudi | <input type="checkbox"/> Qin Shi Huang |
| <input type="checkbox"/> feudalism | <input type="checkbox"/> Di |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Forbidden City | <input type="checkbox"/> Roman Empire |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Great Wall of China | <input type="checkbox"/> Silk Road |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Han dynasty | <input type="checkbox"/> Song dynasty |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Huns | <input type="checkbox"/> Warring States period |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Laozi | <input type="checkbox"/> Xuan Zang |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Li Yuan | <input type="checkbox"/> Zheng He |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Liu Bang | <input type="checkbox"/> Zhou dynasty |
| <input type="checkbox"/> mandate | |

ENGAGE

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**Essential Question**

How did the Chinese dynasties affect life throughout East Asia?

EXPLORE

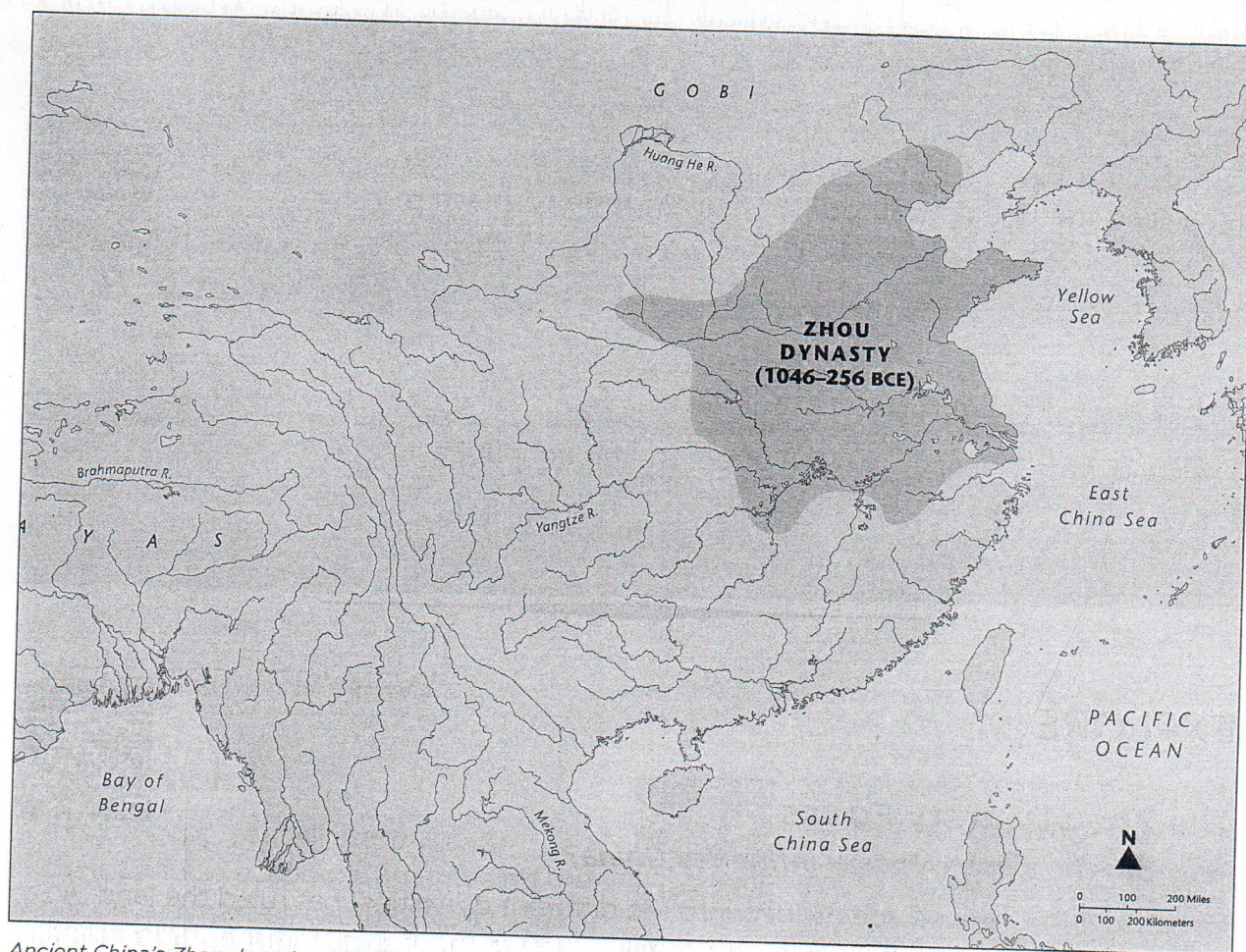
The Zhou Dynasty Forms*How did the Zhou dynasty influence China?*

The history of China can be divided into the different dynasties that ruled the land. A *dynasty* is a series of leaders from one family. Many of these dynasties had significant impacts on the life and culture of the Chinese people, as well as the surrounding region.

The Zhou dynasty (jō dynasty) is the longest-ruling dynasty in China's history. Around 1046 BCE, Zhou tribes from western China conquered the Shang dynasty, their neighbor to the east, and established their own ruling dynasty. The Zhou dynasty later gradually lost control over the kingdom, which eventually collapsed into warring states around 256 BCE.

Mandate of Heaven

The Mandate of Heaven is an idea held in China since the Zhou dynasty, which lasted from 1046 to 256 BCE. According to this way of thinking, the Zhou had been given the right to rule by Heaven. All of the dynasties following the Zhou adopted this concept, which was also supported by the philosopher and teacher Confucius. The Mandate differed slightly from the divine right of kings that would appear later in Europe. The Chinese people believed the Mandate was granted because of the virtue, or moral and ethical behavior, of the ruler, not because of his heredity. As a result, the right to rule did not have to remain with one family. The ancient Chinese believed dynasties would lose the Mandate of Heaven if the rulers did not behave virtuously.



Ancient China's Zhou dynasty united feudal states in ancient China.

Feudalism in China

How did the Zhou rulers maintain control over their empire?

To maintain order throughout their kingdom, the Zhou followed a feudal model. In this system, members of the nobility were given land in return for their loyalty and service to the emperor. The system of feudalism the Zhou established involved three classes of society: nobles, commoners, and slaves. Many nobles were feudal lords who were given control over a city, its soldiers, and the city's surrounding area. In return, the feudal lords promised to serve the Zhou emperor and provided the services of their armies if needed.

Commoners, or peasants, also lived in the feudal states. They farmed the land of their lord and also their own land. In return for their service, the lords gave them protection. Cities were growing, and the barter system was being replaced by money. All of these factors helped the development of a merchant class in feudal China.

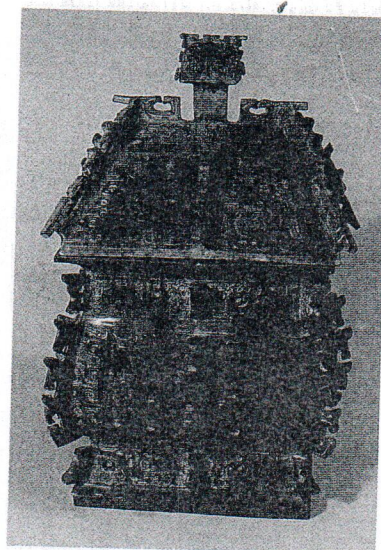


photo: Getty Images

A bronze cooking container from the Zhou dynasty.

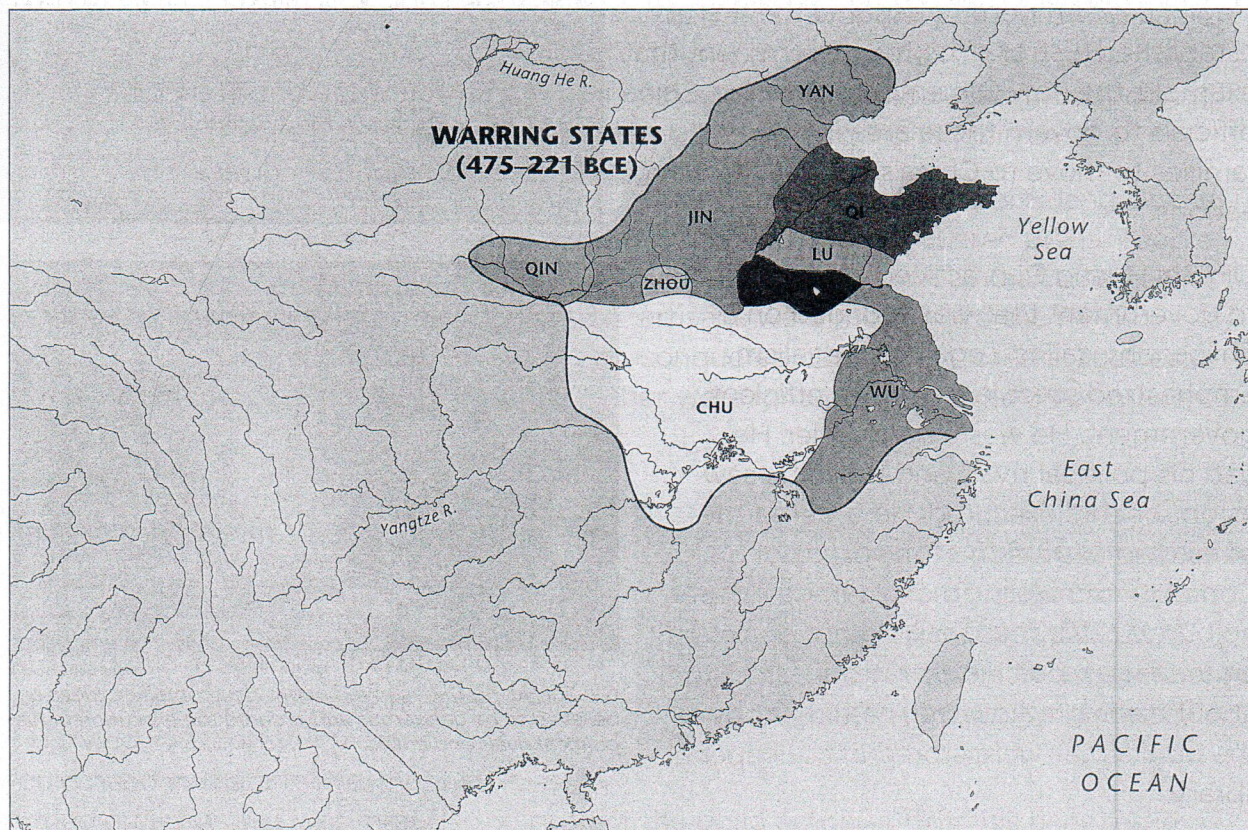
The size and power of these feudal states varied greatly and helped the emperors maintain control over the vast empire. However, many lords became powerful and independent of the central government. The independence of these states hindered the unity of the Zhou dynasty.

The Warring States

Why did the Zhou dynasty decline?

The feudal system granted lords the authority to rule outlying areas. This meant that the Zhou rulers did not have direct authority over their kingdom. The feudal lords grew richer and more powerful under this system. As the lords gained more strength, they began to ignore the wishes of the emperors and central government. Feudal lords began to fight with each other for control over China.

In addition to the internal fighting, China faced constant threats from the nomadic groups to the north. These groups would occasionally attack Chinese states in search of resources. These attacks also weakened the dynasty. In 771 BCE, the conflicts in China forced the Zhou to move their capital from Xi'an farther east to Luoyang to protect it from invasion.



This map shows the states involved in the struggle to control China during the Warring States period.

By 600 BCE, the Iron Age began in China and iron weapons became widely used. This change in technology was one of many factors in the decline of the Zhou dynasty because iron produced better weapons and made it easier for people to fight against the feudal lords. By the 700s BCE, the political situation in China had become chaotic as the feudal states continued to fight each other. Eventually, the strongest seven feudal states engaged in a power struggle that lasted from 475 to 221 BCE because the Zhou rulers could no longer hold their kingdom together. This time of fighting between these states is called the Warring States period. Eventually, the state of Qin defeated all other rivals and established China's first empire.

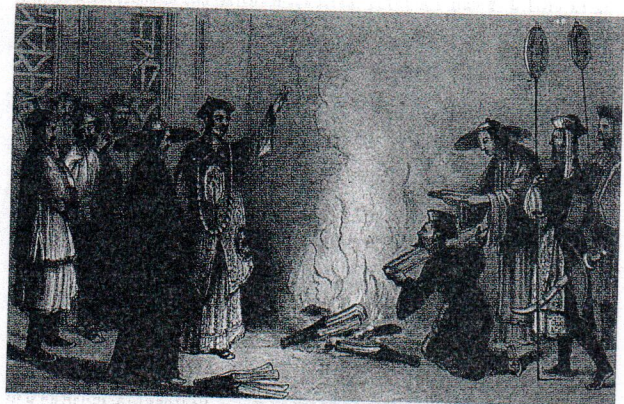
The First Chinese Empire

How did the Qin dynasty unify China?

During the Warring States period, the state of Qin (chǐn), in the northwestern part of China, developed into one of the strongest powers. It had a centralized government and a strong military. Under the leadership of Qin Shi Huang Di, the Qin armies slowly defeated the other rival states and united China under one rule.

Qin Shi Huang Di (which translates as "Qin First Sovereign Emperor" or "Qin First Magnificent Emperor") became the first emperor of the Qin dynasty. Soon, he established a strong central government that helped unify China under his control. For example, the new Qin emperor divided China into 36 districts and appointed local officials to govern these areas under his supervision. He also forced all of the powerful families to move to China's capital, Xianyang, where he could better control their actions.

Qin Shi Huang Di practiced an approach to government that was founded on a philosophy called Legalism. Legalism emphasized strict laws and an efficient government. He was a harsh ruler. He had his political rivals and those he saw as opponents executed. He ordered the arrest and execution of hundreds of Confucian scholars. To discourage dissent, he burned all books that did not deal with agriculture, medicine, or historical records about his reign. However, he did not burn the books that were stored in the imperial library.



Qin Shi Huang Di destroyed books that contained ideas he believed to be dangerous and ordered the execution of his political rivals and critics.

photo: Getty Images

By unifying China, Qin Shi Huang Di created China's first empire. Doing this gave the Chinese people a sense of national unity. Indeed, the name *China* comes from the name *Qin*.

Contributions of the Bronze Age

What technological developments occurred during the Shang and Zhou dynasties?



The Shang dynasty was one of the earliest ruling families in China.

Experts continue to debate the exact dates for the entire Shang period. However, the archaeological record suggests that the Shang dynasty ruled from approximately 1600 BCE to 1046 BCE.

Through artifacts found during this period, we know the Shang made and used pottery. They also created jade carvings that were quite advanced for such an early civilization. There is also evidence of one of the most important technological developments of the Shang dynasty—the ability to make tools and other items out of bronze. This bronze technology emerged during Shang rule, and so this era is called the Bronze Age of China. The people of the Shang period used bronze to make items such as weapons, chariot parts, vases, and other containers used in religious rituals and ceremonies. The early Chinese used clay molds to make their bronze pieces. This method allowed them to cover their metalwork with intricate designs and decorations. This type of bronze work was highly valued in Chinese culture and was a mainstay of the early economy.

The Zhou dynasty, which ruled from approximately 1046 BCE to 256 BCE, took control of China from the Shang dynasty. The Zhou continued the bronze and jade work the Chinese developed during the Shang dynasty, but developed several other important innovations, including the first coins in China. At the onset of the Iron Age in China around 600 BCE, the Zhou began using iron to make containers, weapons, and tools such as the horse collar and plow. The Zhou made many agricultural and civic improvements, including irrigation projects and new roads and canals.

The innovations that occurred during the Shang and Zhou dynasties helped China establish trade with other civilizations in Asia and northeast Africa. The improved agricultural technologies meant that the Chinese could trade excess food, as well as metalwork and jade carvings. The roads developed under the Zhou made travel easier and formed the beginnings of the Silk Road, which would play a major role in Chinese economic and cultural life.

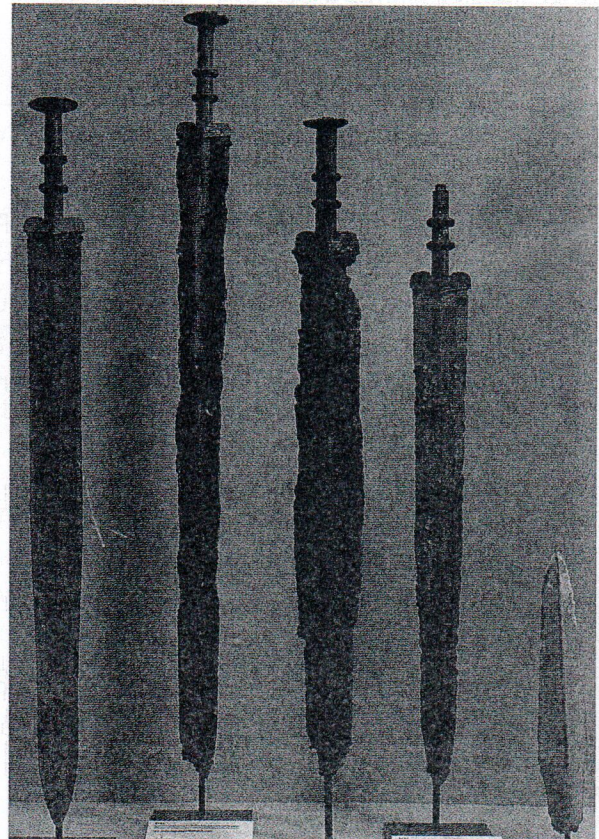


photo: Getty Images

The Shang people were some of the first to make tools out of bronze, similar to these ancient Chinese bronze swords.