

Eastern Zhou Dynasty (770 – 221 B.C.)

The Zhou dynasty had ruled over a large territory which expanded greatly in the centuries after its defeat of the Shang. In order to maintain effective control over their lands they established a system of fiefdom. Relatives or local lords were appointed as Zhou representatives for certain areas.

Their representatives started to gain more influence and in time many of them became as powerful as the Zhou Kings. The Zhou dynasty was also surrounded by enemy tribes including the Rong and the Di.

In 771BC the Zhou king was killed by an alliance of Rong tribesmen and Zhou vassals. The king's son was put on the throne, but the Zhou were still not safe. They fled their capital in the Wei River Valley and moved east to Luoyang. The Zhou never regained their strength. This was the beginning of a period where many individual states with separate rulers existed side-by-side in China. The move of the capital to Luoyang marks the beginning of the Eastern Zhou period.

The period saw the growth of a number of states and principalities. Warfare was a fact of life throughout the period as struggles between principalities mushroomed. Constant warfare meant that life in ancient China was revolutionised. The successful state was the one that could mobilise the largest army with the most effective weaponry and a workforce capable of building large defensive walls and producing foodstuffs and weapons for the army. Trade was promoted - coins were cast by different states and cities. Towns expanded into cities. Agriculture was transformed by the use of iron ploughs and tools from the sixth century onwards. Irrigation projects were launched to make more land profitable.

Faced with a rapidly changing society, rulers were keen to employ philosophers and advisers who could make sense of these new times. With this state sponsorship philosophy and literature flowered.

One of the most famous philosopher/advisers of the period was Confucius. He spent time as an advisor in the state of Lu. He then went on to become a renowned teacher. His philosophy espoused the values of the early years of the Zhou dynasty. Respect for elders and ancestors was very important. He also believed that practice of social decorum and ritual was the quickest path to ethical and moral growth.

The Eastern Zhou period is traditionally divided into two periods; the 'Spring and Autumn' period which lasted from about 770 B.C. to 475 B.C., and the 'Warring States' period which lasted from about 475 B.C. to 221 B.C. The titles of these periods originate from contemporary historical documents. The Warring States period saw the intensification of inter-state wars. Smaller and weaker states were swallowed up by stronger neighbours. Armies went from containing thousands of men to numbering tens of thousands.

The two major powers of the period were the Qin and the Chu. The Chu state was an important and powerful kingdom which controlled the Yangzi basin in the south. It expanded in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. after taking over the Wu and Yue states in the east and the Zeng state to the north. The Qin took over the lands in the west previously controlled by the Zhou. It also set out to conquer and absorb many non-Chinese tribes and states scattered within, west of and below the big loop of the Yellow River, also moving southwards and east into Hubei province. Due to its occupation of relatively remote western regions, Qin was regarded by other Chinese states as somewhat foreign and backward. Between 256 B.C. and 221 B.C. Qin succeeded in ousting all of its rivals. Qin Shi Huangdi fashioned his newly conquered territories into an empire and became the First Emperor of China.