

Early China
World History
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Recorded history in China begins with the Shang dynasty, in their capital, Anyang. It was during the Shang dynasty that bronze working became common. In addition to bronze, examples of the early Chinese writing system can be found on oracle bones, another type of artifact characteristic to the Shang dynasty. The Chinese script is one of the oldest and most widely used writing systems in the world. It has a history of five or six thousand years, and is used by about one fourth of the total population on earth. Chinese was originally developed as pictographic writing, using pictures for ideas or words. Ancient Chinese priests commonly used tortoise shells and cattle bones to answer questions about the future. They interpreted the cracks formed by holes punched in the bones. Oracle bones also served as a way for the priests to write down the history of the dynasty and the timeline of kings.

Ancestor worship was important to the Shang. It was thought that the success of crops and the health and well being of people were based on the happiness of dead ancestors. If the ancestors of a family were pleased, life for that family would be prosperous. If the spirits were not pleased however, great tragedies could occur.

The Shang dynasty was conquered by the people of Zhou, who came from farther up the Yellow River in the area of the city of Xi'an. Xi'an eventually became the capital of the Zhou. Zhou rulers maintained their power through use of a concept called the "Mandate of Heaven." Zhou kings maintained that the gods gave them the right to rule. This belief was problematic because many also believed that when disaster struck, the disaster was a reflection that the leader had displeased the gods and needed to be replaced. The loss of the Mandate of Heaven was often used as an excuse for other nobles to overthrow the leader. In 771 B.C.E the power of the Zhou rulers declined and the country divided into a number of independent states. During the Warring States period, seven major states contended for supreme control of the country, ending with the unification of China under the Qin in 221 B.C.E. Under the Zhou, most of the Chinese population lived under a system of feudalism. Feudalism exists when wealthy landowners give a portion of their land to others in exchange for loyalty and protection.

Much of what came to constitute China proper was unified for the first time in 221 BCE. In that year the western frontier state of Qin, the most aggressive of the Warring States, took over the last of its rival states (Qin is pronounced Ch'in, from which the English China probably derived).

Once the king of Qin consolidated his power, he took the title Shi Huangdi or First Emperor. To silence criticism of imperial rule, the kings banished, or put to death, many dissenting scholars, confiscating and burning their books. To fend off barbarian intrusion, the fortification walls built by various warring states were connected to make a 2,600 mile-long wall. What is commonly referred to as the Great Wall is actually four great walls rebuilt or extended during the Western Han, Sui, Jin, and Ming periods rather than a single, continuous wall.