

MEET CHINA MEET CHINA MEET CHINA MEET CHINA



Meet China Book Series (2)

Fei Sheng

# 中国的历史 CHINESE HISTORY



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# CHINESE HISTORY

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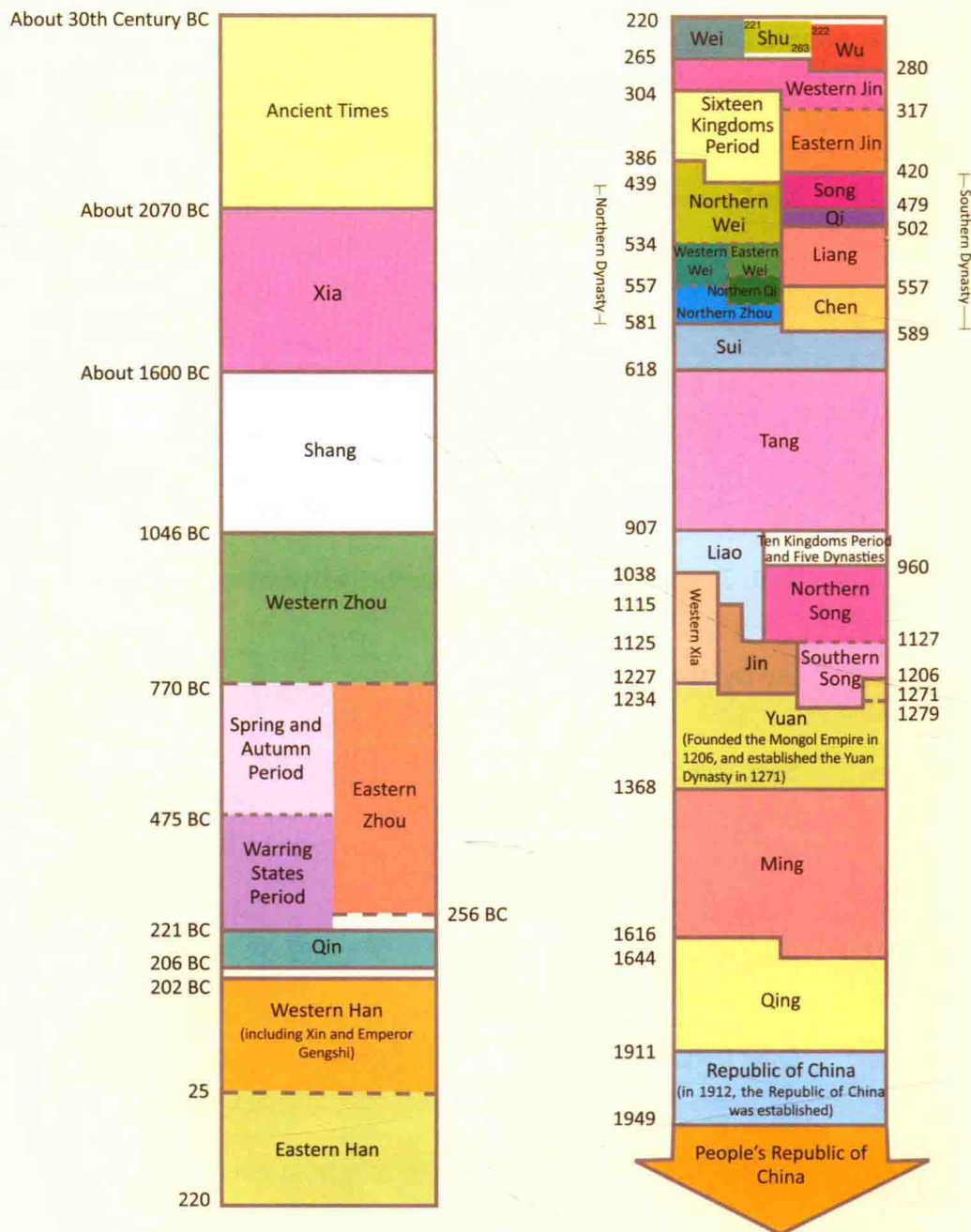
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# A Simple Chronology of Chinese History



# 1. The Ancient Times

Q1: Other than China, what ancient civilizations in the world do you know?

Q2: Why do the Chinese people often refer to themselves as the “descendants of Emperor Yan and the Yellow Emperor”?

## 远古时期



China is an important region of origins of ancient mankind. It is also one of the world's ancient civilizations. Like many other ancient countries, the earliest society founded in China was a primitive one. Following the birth of agriculture, people began to settle into communities. From then on, agriculture continued to play an important part in Chinese ancient civilization. With the large amount of archaeological findings collected, it has been proven that within the country, there were different origins of cultures, each bearing unique characteristics. Between four to five thousand years ago, different nation states, the embryonic form of a country, began to emerge within China's territories and political alliances were formed between these nation states. This gave rise to an early pattern that was common to the early period of China's ancient civilization. From the large amount of archaeological findings, historians are able to reconstruct what life was actually like during that historical period. There are also countless legends that have been passed down from that period till present day.



## Pan Gu created the universe

Almost all ancient civilizations have their own creation myths. For example, the Bible says God created all things, and Adam and Eve are the ancestors of human beings. The ancient Chinese believed that the world was once a gaseous mass and a hero by the name of Pan Gu cleft it open with a giant axe. The lighter gases rose and became the heaven, while the heavier gases sank and became earth. After the death of Pan Gu, his body was transformed into the sun, moon and stars; mountains, rivers and vegetation. Unlike the West, the Chinese understanding of history since the early ages rarely contains religious overtones.



## The sources of civilization

Dating back to six or seven thousand years ago, many developed farming settlements began appearing in regions around the Yangtze River and the Yellow River. Like little candlelights in the wasteland, these settlements gradually kindled the flame of Chinese civilization. Archaeological findings have shown that the Yangshao period of civilization in the Yellow River Basin was very developed and it could produce large volumes of fine painted pottery. Over at the northeastern region of Liao River, the Hongshan civilization had produced jade artefacts with fine artistic appeal.



Hongshan Cultural Heritage Sites, located at the Liao River Basin

Yangshao Cultural Heritage Sites, located around the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River

## The origins of the Chinese people

Legend has it that about 5,000 years ago, the Yellow Emperor of the Yellow River Basin had joint forces with Emperor Yan and defeated the Chiyou tribe in the south, after which the two emperors became the leaders of the different tribes in the Yellow River Basin region. With further integration of the tribes, the two tribes that belonged to the Yellow Emperor and Emperor Yan, respectively, merged into one and formed the major group of the Chinese race. These two emperors thus became the ancestors of the Chinese people, who refer to themselves as the “descendants of Emperor Yan and the Yellow Emperor.”



Statues of Emperor Yan and the Yellow Emperor, located in the Yellow River Scenic Area in Zhengzhou, Henan



The Hongshan Jade Dragon is one of the archaeological evidences of dragon worship of the Chinese people.



The “fish-with-a-human-face” ornamental pattern is typical of Yangshao culture.





## The alliance of nation states and the system of abdication

Upon undergoing early tribal mergers, China began to see the emergence of the primitive form of a country—nation states. These nation states formed alliances to consolidate their political powers and elected chiefs amongst them. It was during this period that the legend of the abdication of Yao, Shun and Yu came into being. Yao, Shun and Yu were kings of their respective nation states. Through the abdication of their sovereignty, they took turns to rule as chief of the alliance that they had formed. Through this system of abdication between Yao, Shun and Yu, we can see that during that time, power was a precarious entity and it constantly shifted between the different nation states.

In this story, Shun's filial conduct moved the hearts of the gods in heaven, hence, Yao selected Shun as his heir.



"Filial Conduct that Moved the Heart of Heaven" (Illustrated by: Wang Su, Qing Dynasty)

## Da Yu controlling the floods



Out of the trio—Yao, Shun and Yu—the story of Yu, the successor of Shun, is the most widely circulated. Similar to Western civilization, the history of China also documents the story of a great flood, and it occurred during the period of Shun's rule. Different from the story of Noah's Ark, Shun had chosen to deal with the flood. He appointed his subordinates Gun and Gun's son, Yu, to control the flood. Yu took a decade to dredge the rivers, and directed the water to the sea, finally quelling the flood. Yu was very dedicated to his task, so much so that during the period of his work, he had

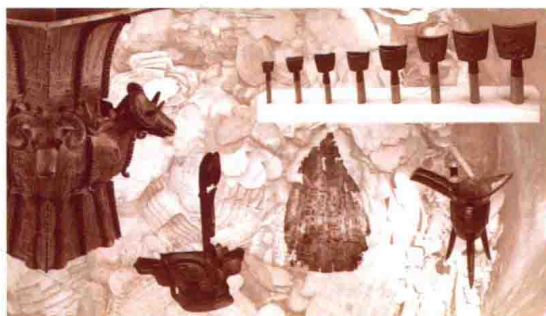
passed his house three times without going in, and he even missed the birth of his child. In the Chinese tradition, one's dedication to his ideals and career is greatly respected by the people. Hence, Yu is also known as "Da Yu" or the "Great Yu."

## 2. Xia Dynasty, Shang Dynasty and Western Zhou

Q1: You have probably heard of Chinese people who refer to China as a “country of ceremonies.” Do you know why?

Q2: The first era that humans made use of metal is known as the Bronze Age. What were the unique cultural phenomena of the Bronze Age of China?

### 夏朝、商朝、西周



Xia, Shang and Western Zhou covered the entire slavery period.

The Xia Dynasty (circa 2070 BC-1600 BC) ended the disputes between the various nation states and formed the first country in China's history, with a common ruler to rule over all the territory. The Xia king directly governed his own nation state and indirectly governed the vassal states and other nation states. This marked the beginning of China's dynastic politics. Around 1600 BC, the Xia Dynasty was annihilated by Shang, one of its nation states, and was replaced by the Shang Dynasty. The Shang Dynasty had a developed system of writing and a brilliant bronze culture that was known across the world. In about 1046 BC, the Shang Dynasty was overthrown and was replaced by Zhou, one of its vassal states, and thus began the Western Zhou Dynasty, which lasted until 770 BC. The family-country isomorphic management system and the rich, complex systems of rites and rituals of the Western Zhou Dynasty had a profound impact on China's posterity.

Xia, Shang and Western Zhou experienced a total of over 1,300 years of existence in China's history, creating a unique national style, value system and developmental path in Chinese civilization.



## From abdication of sovereign power to hereditary monarchy

Beginning from the time of Yu, the succession of sovereign power saw a drastic transformation. Instead of passing sovereign power to outsiders, he passed it to his eldest son, Qi, putting an end to the transfer of power by abdication, and starting the trend of hereditary succession of sovereign power. From this point onwards, the public affairs of the country had also become domestic affairs of the rulers. The first-born son would inherit the position of the head of the family, as well as the highest authority of his country. The concept of “guojia”(country), literally means “family-country” in Chinese, thus began to emerge in the history of China. In the West, the Christian church had emphasized that a country was created by God, and enlightened thinkers attributed the origin of a country to social contract, yet ancient China became a country of slavery derived directly from the political alliance of nation states. Around 2070 BC, Qi established the first dynasty in Chinese history—the Xia Dynasty.

Dating back for more than 3,500 years, the Erlitou Cultural Heritage Site, located in Yanshi, Henan, is equivalent to the period of the Xia and Shang Dynasties in Chinese history.



## The brilliant Bronze Age

The variety of bronze artefacts that originated from the Shang Dynasty was very rich, and they were closely related to the social life of that period. They ranged from daily instruments of life and labor to musical instruments and weapons. The square wine vessel with four sheep and the huge Simuwu square cauldron were examples of the mastery craftsmanship of the Shang's bronze work.



Square wine vessel with four sheep



Simuwu square cauldron



Vessel for eating



Vessels for drinking



Weapon



Water vessel



Musical instrument



In the 1980s, the Sanxingdui historical site was unearthed, and a large number of bronze works of art that reflected the master craftsmanship of bronze work of the same period were discovered.



A bronze mask with protruding eyes



A bronze rooster



A bronze sculpture of a human head

On these bronze artefacts were intricate designs and text inscriptions. During the earlier period, the texts consisted of only a few characters and were generally used to ascribe the owners or describe the functions and purposes of the objects. Later, in the Western Zhou Dynasty, the longest text contained as many as 497 characters. The inscribed characters are known as bronze inscription.



Maogong Cauldron



There are a total of 497 ancient Chinese characters inscribed inside Maogong Cauldron.



Bronze inscription Oracle bone inscription



Excavation site of the oracle bone script



Oracle bone script

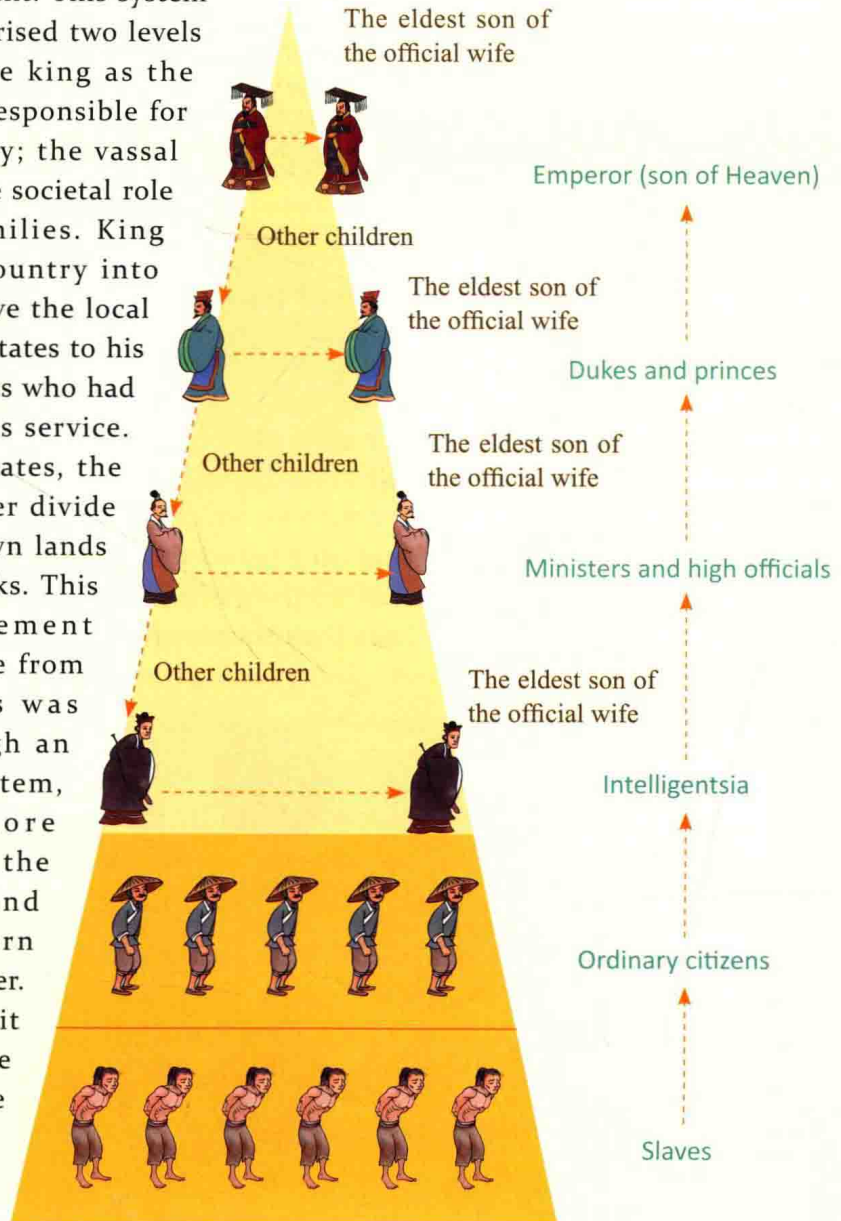
## Oracle and Chinese characters

In the late 19th century, the oracle bone script—character carved on tortoise shells and animal bones, which originated from the Shang Dynasty—was found. From then until now, 150,000 pieces of such shells and bones had been found, and more than 4,000 of the oracle bone scripts had been decoded. Compared with the Chinese bronze inscription, the oracle bone script was a more developed writing. It reflected a wider variety of character formation, and contained a much richer content, making it one of the world's most ancient writing systems. As the predecessor of Chinese characters, the ideographic characteristics of the oracle bone script can still be seen in today's Chinese characters.

## The enfeoffment system of Western Zhou

The Western Zhou Dynasty was established in the area that is today's Xi'an. In order to strengthen his power, King Zhou implemented large-scale, nationwide enfeoffment. This system of enfeoffment comprised two levels of significance—the king as the son of Heaven was responsible for building the country; the vassal states took on a more societal role in establishing families. King Zhou divided his country into vassal states, and gave the local governance of these states to his relatives and ministers who had rendered meritorious service. Within the vassal states, the vassals would further divide and allocate their own lands in accordance to ranks. This system of management that was inseparable from kinship relations was established through an elaborate ritual system, which was far more sophisticated than the systems of lords and dukedom in Western Europe 1,500 years later. On the other hand, it also foreshadowed the chaos that would take place years later.

The system of enfeoffment of the Western Zhou Dynasty was closely related to its hereditary system that the throne should go to the eldest son of the official wife.



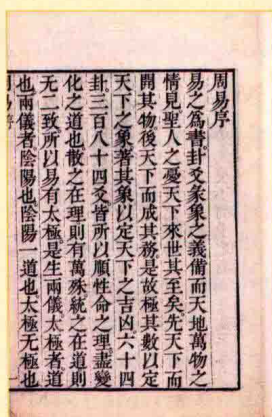


## The origins of the country of ceremonies

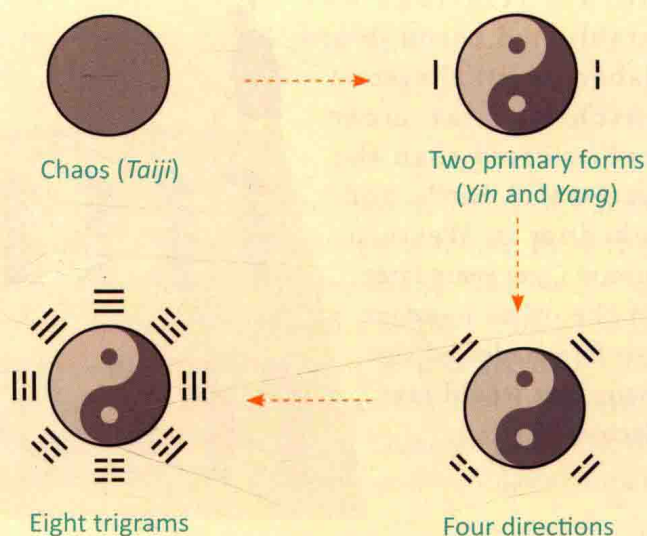
The Western Zhou Dynasty was equally well-developed in its bronze culture, but what differentiated it from the Shang Dynasty was the large number of musical instruments that were symbolic of ceremonies and ranks. The ceremonies of Zhou permeated all aspects of the aristocratic society, and the numerous specific requirements and details helped in regulating people's behavior. In a sense, these ceremonies functioned as laws. Through this system of ceremonies, Western Zhou's country-family isomorphic management system was consolidated. In the ceremonies of Zhou, rituals and music were often inseparable. Rituals carried out by the nobles were generally accompanied by "music." These rich and varied ceremonies of the Western Zhou had a profound impact on future generations, and became the source of the general perception of China as a "country of ceremonies."

## Book of Changes and dialectical thinking

*Book of Changes* was originally a book of divination, and appeared somewhere between the Shang and Zhou dynasties. Hence, it was also known as *Book of Changes of Zhou*. *Book of Changes* employs a system of elaborate symbols to explain the occurrence of phenomena. These symbols evolved from two opposing symbols "yin yao" (--) and "yang yao" (—) into hexagrams, which are used to resolve everything in the universe. We will see the yin and yang points of views running throughout *Book of Changes*, reflecting the dialectical thinking of the ancient Chinese. In fact, many Chinese philosophical thinkings have their sources in *Book of Changes*.



A block-printed edition of *Book of Changes* from the Qing Dynasty



### 3. Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period

Q1: Do you know when the “Axial Era of ancient civilizations” occurred?

Q2: Who were thinkers of the different ancient civilizations during this period?

#### 春秋战国



The period of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States (770-221 BC) is also known as the Eastern Zhou Dynasty. It was divided into two periods—the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BC) and the Warring States Period (475-221 BC). The Spring and Autumn Period not only witnessed the transition of the Chinese society, but it was also a rare period of prosperity in China's ideologies and culture. Many great thinkers who had a huge impact on future generations stemmed from this period, and their doctrines laid the foundation of Chinese philosophy. During the 550 years of this period, the various vassal states constantly waged wars against one another. At the same time, it was also a period of transitions and reflected the trends in social and historical development: the shift from a society of slavery to a feudal society; from hierarchical decentralization to absolute monarchy; from separatist regimes to reunification. From a global perspective, during the same time period, the ancient civilizations of India, Israel and Greece had all experienced ideological and cultural prosperity. Thus, historians referred to this period as the “Axial Age” of ancient civilizations.



## Merging and unity in troubled times

After the demise of Western Zhou, the King of Zhou moved the capital eastward to the region that is today's Luoyang. Gradually, the kingdom lost control of its vassal states, and China entered an era described as "the morality declined and traditional rituals were on the wane." The princes who were greater in strength began annexing the surrounding weaker principalities. In the early Spring and Autumn Period, there were more than 140 vassal states, and among them 14 stronger princes were engaged in a rivalry for dominance. After a long period of war, only seven of such stronger states remained, and in history, they were known as the "Seven Major Powers of the Warring States."

Seven Major Powers of the Warring States: Qi, Chu, Yan, Zhao, Han, Wei, Qin



Between 230 BC and 221 BC, Rome and the Carthage were engaged in fierce battles, and Hannibal was to rise to become a great military strategist; while in China, the most powerful state of Qin annexed the rest six states, and ended 500 years of political division, achieving reunification. The power of Qin is evident in the Terracotta Warriors and Horses that the Qin Dynasty had left behind in Xi'an.



## Privatization of land

During the Western Zhou Period, all the land was owned by the King of Zhou, and was managed by the state. The land was managed using the "nine-square" system, where a plot of land was divided into nine square sections, which resembled the shape of the Chinese character "井", meaning "well." The sections of land at the periphery were private property, with the public land in the middle. In addition to cultivating their private lands, farmers were also responsible for the cultivation of the public land that belonged to the aristocrats. Most importantly, the lands were not allowed to be traded or transferred.