

Eastern Zhou Dynasty (770 – 221BC)

The long period during which the Zhou nominally ruled China is divided into two parts: the Western Zhou, covering the years from the conquest in c. 1050BC to the move of the capital from Xi'an to Luoyang in 771BC, and the Eastern Zhou, during which China was subdivided into many small states from 770BC to the ascendancy of the Qin kingdom in 221BC.

The Eastern Zhou period is traditionally divided into two: the Spring and Autumn period (770 – 475BC) and the period of the Warring States (475 – 221BC). These names are taken from contemporary historical documents which describe the periods in question. After the conquest of Xi'an by the Quanrong, the Zhou established their capital at Luoyang. No longer did they control their territory as undisputed kings, but now ruled alongside a number of other equally or more powerful rulers.

In the centre and the north, the state of Jin was dominant, while the states of Yan and Qi occupied the present-day provinces of Hebei and Shandong respectively. Jin disintegrated in the fifth century BC, and three states, Han, Wei and Zhao, assumed its territory. In the west the Qin succeeded to the mantle of the Zhou, and in the south the state of Chu dominated the Yangtze basin. During the sixth and fifth centuries BC, Chu threatened and then swallowed up the small eastern states of Wu and Yue, as well as states such as Zeng on its northern boundary. Although for much of the period Chu was a successful and dominant power, in due course it fell in 223BC before the might of Qin, its rulers fleeing eastwards to Anhui province. The unification of China under the Qin brought to an end a period of co-existent kingdoms.

Despite its many conflicts, this period was a time of great economic expansion and development. Agricultural work may have increased greatly with the use of iron tools for ploughing. There are many textual references to the use of iron in the Eastern Zhou period, suggesting that by this time iron was being extensively employed. Cities developed rapidly in size and number as did trade between them. Economic expansion led to political struggles, the growth of armies and of courtly display. Less visible, but essential to the period, were the competing philosophical ideologies propounded by the philosophers Confucius (c.551 – 479BC), Mozi (fl.479 – 438BC), Zhuang Zhou (c. 399 – 295BC), Shang Yang (c. 390 – 338BC), Mencius (c.371 – 289BC), Xunzi (between 335 and 238BC) and Han Fei (c.280 – 233BC).