

Western Zhou Dynasty (1050 – 771BC)

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 Zhou were among a number of western peoples who were at different stages both allied to and enemies of the Shang. In about 1050BC the Zhou were strong enough to attack Shang centres and defeat them, assuming power over what was to them the known world. While the Zhou shared a number of traditions with the Shang, such as the use of Chinese language, oracle bone divination and bronze casting, their roots lay in western China outside the Shang orbit. They had, for example, relatively close links with peoples both on the northern periphery and in the southwest in Sichuan province. These links can be traced in the types of ceramics and bronzes they employed.

At the time of the conquest, the Zhou established a capital at (present-day) Xi'an, but they also maintained a stronghold and ritual centre further west, in the present-day counties of Fufeng and Qishan, now called the Zhouyuan. Control over central and northern China was maintained by assigning large territories to relatives of the kings, who ruled these as fiefs. The names of the kings and an outline of their exploits are known from the *Shiji (Records of the Historian)* by Sima Qian (completed c.90BC), and from mentions in inscriptions on bronze ritual vessels.

Under the first kings, Wu, Cheng and Kang, Zhou rule was consolidated; under King Zhao and King Mu the kingdom was threatened by the growing powers of the centre and east coast and various battles are recorded. King Zhao is said to have been killed on one such campaign. The later part of the Western Zhou period seems to have been a time during which the whole ritual and political system was reorganised. In the face of pressure from peoples in the west, the Zhou seem to have withdrawn in to the Shaanxi area, leaving other parts of the country to develop their own traditions.