

Foundations of Chinese Intellectual History

Ready Reference

Dynastic Chronology

Xia [Legendary] ~2100-1600 BCE		
Shang ~1600-1046		
Zhou 1046-221	Western Zhou 1046-771	
	Eastern Zhou 771-221	Spring and Autumn 771-453
		Warring States 453-221 Yan, Zhao, Wei Qi, Han, Chu Qin
Qin 221-206		
Western (Former) Han 202-9		
Xin 9 BCE-25CE		
Eastern (Later) Han 25-220		

Culture Heroes from Antiquity (3d –2d millennia BCE)

Legendary exemplars of high character and wisdom; variously responsible for transmitting fire, methods of farming, medicine, the calendar, the written language, and so forth to humankind. Channeled the dictates of Heaven.

Huangdi (Yellow Emperor)	} Three of the “Five Emperors”
Yao	
Shun	

Yu (Subdued the Flood, founded the (legendary) Xia dynasty)

Duke of Zhou: historical figure from 11th c BCE. A paragon of virtue: Consolidated Zhou rule, expanded feudal system, expounded Mandate of Heaven in legitimizing establishment of Zhou dynasty.

The “Five Classics”

These five works—containing materials from as early as the Western Zhou period—became foundational for Chinese culture during the Han period, when Confucianism was adopted as the official ideology of the state. They later became part of the official examination system for public office and were perennially studied and quoted throughout the next two millennia.

CLASSIC OF CHANGES (*Yijing*): A Western-Zhou-era divination text

CLASSIC OF POETRY (*Shijing*): a collection of 305 poems dating from the 10th to the 7th centuries BCE. Sometimes containing thinly veiled political criticisms.

CLASSIC OF DOCUMENTS (*Shujing*): historical documents—speeches, reports, counsels—purporting to have been authored by Western Zhou officials.

CLASSIC OF RITES (*Liji*, *Lijing*): a compendium of social forms and ceremonials dating from Zhou to perhaps early Han times, compiled as late as the second century BCE. Together with the *Zhouli* (“Rites of Zhou”) and the *Yili* (“Book of Rites”), these works purport to offer models of proper decorum and social order.

SPRING AND AUTUMN ANNALS (*Chunqiu*): A historical record of Confucius’ home state of Lu from 722 to 481 BCE, thus serving as the eponym for the era. Traditionally, Confucius himself is alleged to have edited at least parts of the work (although there is no evidence in the text itself that he did so) and in doing so subtly introduced judgements as to the behavior of its principals. The work’s most important commentaries, the *Zuozhuan* (see below) and the *Gongyang zhuan*, are often regarded as even more important literary sources for the period.

The “Four Books”

Some thirteen-hundred years later (!), in the late twelfth century, the great Neo-Confucian scholar Zhu Xi selected these works, also from the Zhou period, as the epitome of Confucian learning. Thereafter, they too became part of the official curriculum required for the examinations for public office.

GREAT LEARNING (*Daxue*): Allegedly compiled by Zengzi, a disciple of Confucius, the work is a commentary on a short chapter in the *Liji*

DOCTRINE OF THE MEAN (*Zhongyong*): A commentary, attributed to a grandson of Confucius, on another chapter in the *Liji*.

ANALECTS (*Lunyu*): Collected sayings and conversations of Confucius

MENCIUS (*Mengzi*): Collected sayings and conversations of Mencius

The Teachers

Most prominent among the “Hundred Schools” of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods were the following thinkers and teachers, whose writings (and/or writings attributed to them) survive to this day:

The Confucians

CONFUCIUS (KONGZI, “Master Kong”), 551-479 *Lunyu (Analects)*

MENCIUS (MENGZI), 372-289 *Mengzi (Mencius)*

XUNZI, c.300-237 *Xunzi*

The Daoists

LAOZI, 6TH C.? *Daodejing*

ZHUANGZI, 4TH C.? *Zhuangzi*

The Legalists

HAN FEIZI, d.233 *Hanfeizi*

The Moists

MOZI, 470-391 (?) *Mozi*

Other Important Sources

In addition to the works listed above, the texts shown here played an important role in the creation and codification of Chinese history and world view. If you go on to explore early Chinese history on your own, you will encounter these works (or at least their names!) over and over again.

Histories

HISTORICAL RECORDS (*Shiji*) Written by Sima Qian, a Han-dynasty official, and completed in the early 1st century BCE, the *Shiji* is a monumental history of China from the time of the legendary Yellow Emperor to the reign of Emperor Wu (141-87 BCE). Sima Qian read and quoted liberally from many historical works later lost, making the *Shiji* an invaluable source for much of what we know about early Chinese history.

THE COMMENTARY OF ZUO (*Zuozhuan*) Appended as a commentary to the *Spring and Autumn Annals* since at least Han times, some scholars consider that it was originally a separate history of the state of Lu. At ten times the length of the *Annals*, it is a far more interesting, if imperfectly reliable, historical text than its “source.” Centuries of commentarial tradition have labored to define a consistent Confucian ethical vision uniting the two texts, although the *Zuo* itself reflects much of the moral and historical complexity of actual events. Treats the period 722 to 468, but the earliest forms of the work probably date from the 4th c BCE.

DISCOURSES OF THE STATES (*Guoyu*) A collection of 240 speeches attributed to rulers and state officials from the 10th to the 5th centuries BCE. The *Guoyu* was probably compiled beginning in the 5th century BCE.

INTRIGUES OF THE WARRING STATES (*Zhan Guo Ce*) Accounts of the struggles among various contending states of the late-Zhou period, from which the name of the era was later taken. The work is of uncertain provenance but was probably redacted into its earliest complete form in the 1st century BCE.

BAMBOO ANNALS (*Zhushu Jinian*) Around the year 280 CE, grave robbers plundering the tomb of the Wei king Xiang (d. 296 BCE) unearthed this historical chronicle covering the history of China from the Yellow Emperor to 299 BCE, with a focus on the state of Wei. Both this work and the one below draw liberally on historical records lost during the Qin era and offer insight into the composition of extant texts such as the *Zuo zhuan*.

STRING OF YEARS (*Xinian*) Only recently (late 20th century) unearthed, this text covers six-hundred fifty years of Zhou history, from its founding in the 11th century to about 400 BCE, with a focus on the state of Chu and its relations with Jin. Its composition probably dates from the early 4th century BCE.

Philosophical Collections

SPRINGS AND AUTUMNS OF MR. LU (*Lüshi Chunqiu*) Dating from around 239 BCE, the *Lüshi Chunqiu* was compiled to provide guidance to the future Qin emperor but became more influential during the Han period. This syncretic work loosely summarizes the teachings of various schools of thought from the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, with a pronounced Legalist bent.

THE MASTER OF HUAINAN (*Huainanzi*) Presented to the Han court in 139 BCE by Liu An, the king of Huainan and the work's sponsor, the *Huainanzi* is a compendium of contemporary knowledge, decidedly Daoist in outlook, intended as a guide for the Han emperor Wu.

LUXURIANT GEMS OF THE SPRING AND AUTUMN ANNALS (*Chunqiu Fanlu*) Traditionally attributed to Dong Zhongshu (195?–105?), an official at the Han court, the work may well have been composed as late as the sixth century of the Common Era, anthologizing writings associated with Dong and other Confucian scholars of the Han period. The *Fanlu* treats a wealth of topics, from kingship and government to ethical principles to *yin-yang* and Five Phases theory, seen through the lens of the “subtle language” allegedly employed by Confucius (sic) in compiling the *Chunqiu*.

Pronunciation Tips

The Pinyin system of Chinese romanization is for the most part very straightforward, and as a rough approximation you can simply pronounce the words as you might in English. However, the Pinyin equivalents of some Chinese syllables use Roman letters in nonstandard (in English) ways. Again, as a *rough* guide to pronunciation, you can use the following equivalents:

C pronounce like *ts*
Ch pronounce like *ch*
E pronounce like *uh*
Q pronounce like *ch*
Si pronounce like *suh*
Shi pronounce like *sure*
X pronounce like *sh*
Z pronounce like *ts*
Zh pronounce like *j*
Zhi pronounce like *jur*
Zi pronounce like *zuh*

In the Pinyin system, the four tones of Mandarin Chinese are indicated by the use of diacritics (ā, á, ǎ, à), but they are frequently omitted when transliterating names and titles and are not used here.

Further Reading

Sources of Chinese Tradition, Volume 1: From Earliest Times to 1600. Compiled by Wm Theodore deBary and Irene Bloom. Second Edition (New York, 1999). A broad compendium of translations of major texts, with excellent introductions and commentary.