

~2070 BC — 221 BC

CHINESE HISTORY PART

I

The Making of a United China

*From the founding of China's first dynasty to the conquest of six warring kingdoms —
nearly two millennia in the making.*

The Cradle of Civilization

The Yellow River Valley

Long before the first dynasty, the fertile plains of the Yellow River — the Huang He — gave rise to the earliest foundations of Chinese civilization.

Settled communities along its banks mastered flood control, cultivated reverence for the dead, and forged a cultural identity that would endure for millennia.

Three foundational principles defined all that followed:

Three Pillars

THE RIVER

The Huang He deposited fertile soil along its plains, yet also unleashed catastrophic floods that demanded capable and legitimate leadership.

THE ANCESTORS

Reverence for deceased forebears structured political authority, religious observance, and social obligation — a framework that persisted across every subsequent dynasty.

THE MANDATE

The principle that Heaven bestows — and may withdraw — the right to govern provided both the justification for power and the grounds for its removal.

The Xia Dynasty (~2070–1600 BC)

DYNASTY 1

Yu the Great — The Founder

Yu devoted thirteen years to engineering an unprecedented network of channels and dikes to contain the Yellow River's floods. His success earned him legendary reverence and the authority to establish China's first dynasty.

King Jie — The Collapse

The last Xia ruler was notorious for cruelty and misrule. His conduct alienated both his subjects and the nobility, forfeiting the divine sanction that had sustained his line.

Heaven's Mandate, First Lost

Tang of Shang led a successful uprising — establishing a principle that would echo through every subsequent dynasty: legitimate authority flows from virtuous governance, and may be withdrawn by Heaven from those who fail to uphold it.

The Shang Dynasty (~1600–1046 BC)

DYNASTY 2

Governing the Yellow River valley for approximately five centuries, the Shang elevated bronze-working, writing, and religion to new heights of sophistication.

Shang kings served as high priests — intermediaries between the living and the supreme deity Di. Ancestor veneration was not merely religious observance; it was the foundation of political authority.

~500

years of continuous rule
over the Yellow River valley

Oracle Bones

The earliest known corpus of Chinese writing — ritual questions inscribed on animal bone and turtle shell, their answers divined through heat-induced fractures. An irreplaceable record of Shang cosmology and statecraft.

Bronze Mastery

The Shang achieved unparalleled mastery in bronze casting, producing ritual vessels, weapons, and jade carvings of extraordinary refinement — material expressions of divine and royal authority.

The Fall (~1046 BC)

The final Shang king, Di Xin, was notorious for cruelty and dissolution. His conduct forfeited the dynastic mandate, and Zhou forces overthrew him at the Battle of Muye, bringing the dynasty to its end.

The Zhou Dynasty (~1046–256 BC)

DYNASTY 3

800

YEARS
of Zhou rule

China's
longest
dynasty

Mandate of Heaven

King Wu formalized the doctrine that rulers govern by divine sanction — and may be legitimately removed when that sanction is lost. The concept established the ideological framework for every subsequent dynastic transition.

Hundred Schools of Thought

As Zhou power declined, competing philosophical traditions flourished: Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism among them — intellectual legacies whose influence on Chinese civilization has endured to the present day.

Iron Age

The gradual substitution of iron for bronze yielded superior agricultural implements and weaponry, fundamentally altering both agrarian productivity and the character of military conflict.

Fragmentation

As the Zhou court's authority steadily eroded, seven competing states emerged from the resulting power vacuum — ushering in more than two centuries of interstate warfare that would reshape China entirely.

THE FRACTURE

The Warring States Period (475–221 BC)

Seven States. One Throne. No Peace.

QIN

ZHAO

CHU

QI

WEI

HAN

YAN

The Rise of Qin — Four Kings, One Vision

1 King Huiwen

338–311 BC

The first Qin ruler to assume the title 'King' rather than 'Duke.' He had the reformer Shang Yang executed by dismemberment — yet retained his Legalist administrative system in full. Military campaigns extended Qin's reach into Wei, Zhao, Chu, Ba, and Shu.

2 King Wu

311–307 BC

Renowned for exceptional physical strength, he met an ignominious end attempting to lift a Zhou ceremonial cauldron in a display of power. The exertion proved fatal. His reign lasted barely four years.

3 King Zhaoxiang

307–251 BC

At the Battle of Changping (260 BC), General Bai Qi encircled and eliminated an estimated 400,000 Zhao soldiers — the most consequential engagement of the Warring States period. He subsequently seized the Chu capital and extinguished the Eastern Zhou in 256 BC.

4 King Zhuangxiang

250–247 BC

Formerly held as a diplomatic hostage in Zhao, his ascent to the throne was orchestrated by the merchant Lu Buwei through sustained court intrigue. He died after barely three years in power, leaving the kingdom to his young heir, Ying Zheng.

Ying Zheng — The Man Who Would Unite China

A Childhood in Exile

His father, Ying Yiren, had been dispatched to Zhao as a diplomatic hostage. The merchant Lu Buwei orchestrated his return to Qin through a calculated campaign of bribery and court maneuvering. Upon ascending the throne, Ying Yiren appointed Lu Buwei Chancellor of State.

During his years in Zhao, the young Ying Zheng endured humiliation at the hands of Zhao nobles. The memory of that indignity would prove a significant force in the campaigns ahead.

When his father died after barely three years on the throne, Ying Zheng inherited the kingdom. He was thirteen years old.

SINGULAR PURPOSE

Resolved to end centuries of interstate fragmentation, Ying Zheng pursued unification with unwavering determination.

PERSONAL RECKONING

His childhood humiliation in Zhao became a deeply held grievance — making the siege of Handan as much an act of reckoning as of strategy.

STRATEGIC DOCTRINE

He applied 'ally distant, attack near' — targeting rivals in order of weakness, neutralizing each state fully before advancing to the next.

The Conquests Begin — Han & Zhao

① HAN — The Opening Move

Han was the most vulnerable of the six states — the natural first objective.

Qin's disciplined forces took the Han capital, Xinzheng, with little resistance.

Crucially, the annexation of Han secured a direct strategic corridor into Zhao — and toward Ying Zheng's most personal reckoning.

The first of six had fallen.

② ZHAO — The Personal Reckoning

Zhao held singular significance for Ying Zheng: it was in Handan that he had endured his childhood humiliation. He returned at the head of an army.

His strategy was deliberate and remorseless: sever all supply lines and reduce the city through famine.

After months of siege, starvation eroded Zhao's capacity and will to resist. Handan capitulated.

With Zhao eliminated, the remaining path to unification lay open.

The Conquests Continue — Wei, Yan & Chu

③ WEI — The Flood

The Wei capital of Daliang was protected by formidable fortifications that proved impervious to direct assault.

General Wang Ben conceived an audacious solution: divert the nearby waterways to inundate the city.

As the floodwaters rose, resistance became untenable. Wei capitulated.

④ YAN — The Retreat

Yan's forces, severely weakened, fell back to the Liaodong Peninsula in the north. Ying Zheng elected not to pursue them immediately, conserving resources for the greater challenge that remained.

Yan's fate was merely deferred.

⑤ CHU — The Hardest Fight

General Li Xin advanced with 200,000 troops, only to be decisively routed by Chu's commander Xiang Yan, who commanded a force twice that size.

Qin regrouped. The veteran general Wang Jian returned at the head of 600,000 — the largest army Qin had ever committed to a single campaign — and systematically dismantled Chu's resistance.

The Final Act — Dai & Qi

⑥ DAI — The Last Remnants

Following Zhao's fall, Prince Jia and remnants of the Zhao court fled northward, establishing a successor state, Dai, in a final attempt to preserve their line.

With Yan already subdued, Qin moved to extinguish these remaining pockets of resistance. Dai was eliminated, and Qin forces swept through the Liaodong Peninsula, ending the last vestiges of the Yan state.

Only one state remained unconquered.

⑦ QI — The Quiet Surrender

Qi had long maintained a diplomatic and commercial relationship with Qin — one that Ying Zheng had deliberately cultivated as a strategic asset.

When Qin forces materialized on Qi's borders, the state offered no resistance. Qi's court had witnessed the systematic elimination of five neighboring states in rapid succession.

Qi submitted without resistance.

The Warring States period had come to its end.

2 2 1 B C

ONE EMPIRE

The Warring States Period Ends

From Yu the Great's mastery of the flood to seven kingdoms consumed by perpetual warfare, to one man's unrelenting campaign of conquest — China's first unification was not the product of inevitability. It was the achievement of will, strategy, and centuries of accumulated ambition.