

## Traditional/Mythic History of China

The figures in the first two groups below are mythic “culture-heroes” or historicized gods to whom many of the characteristic features of Chinese culture are attributed. The Three Dynasties are also mythic in the sense that they were later seen as symbolic of fundamental cultural values. The Shang and Zhou dynasties are both mythic and historic.

### The Three Sovereigns (*San huang*)

- Fuxi (“Subduer of Animals”), 29th century B.C.E.: invented hunting and fishing implements, animal sacrifice, and *Yijing* hexagram divination.
- Shennong (“Divine Farmer”), 28th century B.C.E.: invented agriculture.
- Huangdi (“Yellow Emperor”), 27th century B.C.E.: writing, silk, boats, and carts invented under his rule.

### The Three Sages (*San sheng*)

- Yao, 24th century B.C.E.: central government, calendar, rites, and music attributed to him; he passed over his own son to select Shun as his successor, based on merit.
- Shun, 23rd century B.C.E.: known for his filial devotion despite having cruel parents; also passed over his son to select Yu as his successor on basis of merit.
- Yu, 22nd century B.C.E.: controlled the flooding of the Yellow River; selected his son Qi as successor because people were attracted to him, thus founding the first dynasty (Xia).

### The Three Dynasties (*San dai*)

- Xia, 22nd–18th century B.C.E.  
Virtuous founder: Yu.  
Evil last king: Jie (according to later doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven).

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- Shang (Yin): 18th–12th century B.C.E. (traditional dates), or 14th–11th century B.C.E. (modern estimate).  
Last capital at Yin (Anyang), hence alternative name.  
Virtuous founder: Tang.  
Evil last king: Zhou.
- Zhou: 1122 (traditional) or 1045 (modern)–221 B.C.E.  
Western Zhou: capital at Changian (modern Xian).  
King Wen: imprisoned under King Zhou of Shang; wrote hexagram texts of *Yijing*.  
King Wu: son of King Wen; overthrew Shang.  
Duke of Zhou: King Wu's brother; regent for King Wu's son King Cheng.  
Eastern Zhou: capital at Luoyang.  
722–479 B.C.E.: “Spring and Autumn” period (Confucius 551–479 B.C.E.).  
479–221 B.C.E.: “Warring States” period.

## Major Documented Periods in Chinese History

Dynasty or period	Dates	Major developments in religion
Shang (Yin)	14th–11th century B.C.E.	Ritual: divination and sacrifice by Shang kings.
Western Zhou	1045–771 B.C.E.	Doctrine of Mandate of Heaven; beginnings of Five Classics.
Eastern Zhou “Spring and Autumn” period “Warring States” period	771–221 B.C.E. 722–479 B.C.E. 479–221 B.C.E.	Confucius (Classical Confucianism). Mencius, Xunzi (Classical Confucianism). “Laozi,” Zhuangzi (Classical Daoism).
Qin	221–207 B.C.E.	Legalism as government ideology.
Former Han	206 B.C.E.–9 C.E.	Confucianism becomes state orthodoxy.
Latter Han	23–220 C.E.	Beginnings of Daoist religion; Buddhism enters China.
Six Dynasties (disunity)	220–589	Daoism and Buddhism flourish; Confucianism declines.
Sui	589–618	New schools of Buddhism: Pure Land, Tiantai, Huayan, and Chan.
Tang	618–906	845: suppression of Buddhism. Precursors of Neo-Confucian revival (for example Han Yu).
Five Dynasties (disunity)	907–960	Daoism continues to develop.
Song Northern: 960–1127 Southern: 1127–1279	1127 1279	Confucian revival (Neo-Confucianism); Pure Land and Chan Buddhism flourish. Jurchen take over northern China. Mongols take over all of China.
Yüan (Mongol)	1279–1368	Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism becomes orthodox.
Ming	1368–1644	Wang Yang-ming's Neo-Confucianism.
Qing (Manchu)	1644–1911	Critical study ( <i>kaosheng</i> ) of ancient texts; Western learning enters China; Tibetan Buddhism supported by Manchu rulers.
Republic of China	1911–	Confucian bureaucratic and education systems dropped; traditional religions maintained. 1949: defeated by Communist revolution, driven to Taiwan, martial law until 1987.
People's Republic of China (Republic of China now in Taiwan)	1949–	Under Mao Zedong (d. 1976), Confucianism discredited; temples destroyed; atheism established as official doctrine. 1966–76: “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.” Under Deng Xiaoping (d. 1997) and Jiang Zemin: Confucianism regains some legitimacy; Daoism and Buddhism partially restored; beginnings of revival of popular religion.