

China

Ancient Chinese Beliefs



Introduction to Ancient China

Ancient Chinese Beliefs

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Flash activity (these activities are not editable)



Teacher notes included in the Notes page

For more instructions, see the *User Guide*.





Creation



Dragons have long been an important symbol of power and luck in China and the Chinese have identified themselves as descendants of the dragon.

Unlike the dragons of Western myths, Chinese dragons are known for their **benevolence**. They generally have serpent bodies, four legs and no wings.

Chinese dragons are largely associated with water and are believed to control the rain, rivers and seas.

There are many temples dedicated to the worship of Dragon Kings.



There were over 200 gods in the Ancient Chinese **pantheon**, but the number of spirits worshiped was over one thousand!

The Chinese worshiped both local and national gods. Each town had its own **Ch'eng-Huan**, the city god, who would protect the community.

Some gods were connected to nature, such as the sun, moon or rain. Others were gods of concepts, such as **Caishen**, the god of prosperity.

During the **Shang** dynasty, **Shangti**, the supreme god, was venerated as the god of law, order, justice and life.





The mandate of heaven

During the **Zhou** dynasty, Shangti was replaced by the concept of **tian** (heaven).

天

The right to rule was explained using the **mandate of heaven** (tianming), which stated that authority was granted to the ruler by tian. This authority was dependent on the virtue of the ruler.



If the ruler was thought to be unworthy, tian could revoke this mandate and a new dynasty would take power. Social and political unrest were signs that this would soon happen.

What might make a ruler unworthy?

The Ancient Chinese believed that life carried on after death. The soul would leave the body and enter the **spirit** world.

Families would perform ceremonies to honor the dead.

Grave goods were included in tombs for the dead to use in the afterlife, including weapons and ornaments. Bodies were covered in cloth and jade was placed on top to provide protection from evil spirits.



The wealthy would have more elaborate grave goods than an ordinary person.



As well as providing food and grave goods for use in the afterlife, it was common for servants to follow the very wealthy into death during the Shang and Zhou dynasties.

Servants were killed and buried in the same tomb so that they could serve and protect their lord in the afterlife. The evidence of bones has also suggested that in some cases these servants were still alive when the tombs were sealed!



Later dynasties used pottery figures instead of people.

Why do you think they stopped using real people and started using figures instead?

The Terracotta Army

In 1974, farmers discovered a large army of terracotta soldiers while digging a well in Xi'an. These soldiers were guarding the tomb of **Emperor Qin Shi Huangdi**.

The **Terracotta Army** was made up of 8000 soldiers, 130 chariots, 520 horses and 130 cavalry horses! The soldiers of Qin Shi Huangdi's **mausoleum** were intended to protect him in the afterlife.



Each individual soldier was unique and extremely detailed. They were all dressed according to official rank.



Many Ancient Chinese ideas about death centered on the relationship between the living and the dead.

After death, the soul of a person would ascend to the spirit world with the gods. They could influence the gods to bring about good or bad luck to those still living.

People had a duty to venerate and respect their **ancestors** by making offerings to them and holding ceremonies for them.



Observing ancestral rituals ensured their continued support. Failure to please the ancestors could lead to problems in the family, such as conflict, economic problems or illness.





Oracle bones were discovered at the end of the nineteenth century when Wang Yirong was prescribed ground up dragon bones for malaria. The bones he received were not ground up and had some of the earliest evidence of Chinese writing on them.

In 1908, **philologist** Luo Zhenyu discovered the origin of the bones was Anyang in Henan Province.



A farmer informed Luo Zhenyu that people found these bones when ploughing their land. They would scrape off the writing and sell them to apothecaries as dragon bones.

What do you think the Ancient Chinese used oracle bones for?





Oracle (or dragon) bones were used by the Shang dynasty to tell the future. This is known as **divination**.

The diviner carved questions onto the bones (typically cattle shoulders or turtle shells). A heated rod was inserted into pits within the bones, causing them to crack. The direction of the crack revealed the answer to the question.

The answer and date were then also carved onto the bone.



Apart from predictions about the future, what might scholars use oracle bones to discover?





Yin and yang is the idea that two opposites balance each other to form a harmonious whole.

The exact origins of yin and yang are unknown, although the evidence of oracle bones shows that it was at least as early as the Shang dynasty. The concept of yin and yang has influenced Chinese thought for thousands of years.

Some examples of yin and yang include:

- light and dark
- hot and cold
- night and day
- male and female.



What other examples can you think of?



During the **Eastern Zhou** period, a number of ideologies developed about how best to restore order within China.

Confucius (Kongfuzi) was born in 551 BC. He was a dedicated student and learned a variety of subjects. Confucius held minor government roles before becoming a teacher.

Confucius developed a set of teachings based on ethics and morality. Today, we call this **Confucianism**.

Although Confucius did not write down his teachings, his followers produced the **Analects** to convey his ideas.





Confucius's key teachings were:

- respect and show loyalty to your family (including ancestors)
- lead by example and inspire others
- act morally
- do your duty to others and behave humanely at all times.



Confucius's teachings were adopted as the basis of state ideology during the **Han** dynasty (206 BC–220 AD) and his legacy continues in China today. Confucius is considered the most influential Chinese teacher in history.

Why do you think this is?



Daoism is a Chinese philosophical and religious tradition connected to the natural world. It gains its name from **Dao** (“the Way”), which is the guiding force of everything.

Daoists believe that the universe is made up of opposites working together to create harmony (yin and yang). People should live in harmony with the Dao by doing what is natural and not interfere in nature or the lives of others.



Laozi, a **contemporary** of Confucius, is largely credited with the development of Daoism and with writing the text, the *Daodejing* (*The Way and its Power*).





Chinese **Legalism** is a political philosophy related to the belief that strict laws and suitable punishments control the people and prevent them from acting in self-interest.



Ying Zheng, the leader of the Qin state, used the Legalist concept of total war to seize power and unite China in 221 BC at the end of the **Warring States period** (475–221 BC).

When he became Emperor Qin Shi Huangdi, Legalism became the official state philosophy. Books that did not express Legalist views were burned.

Consider the advantages and disadvantages of each philosophy for both the people and rulers.

