

Legend of the Nine Tripod Cauldrons

According to legend the **Nine Tripod Cauldrons** were created following the foundation of the Xia Dynasty (c. 2200 BCE) by Yu the Great, using tribute metal presented by the governors of the Nine Provinces of ancient China. The Records of the Grand Historian

recount that once Yu the Great had finished taming the floods that once engulfed the land, he divided the territory into the Nine Provinces and collected bronze in tribute from each one. Thereafter he cast the metal into nine large tripod cauldrons. Legend says that each ding weighed around 30,000 catties equivalent to 7.5 tons.

At the time of the Shang Dynasty (1600-1046 BCE) tripod cauldrons came to symbolize the power and authority of the ruling royal family with strict regulations imposed as to their use. Members of the gentry scholarly *shì* class were permitted to use one or three cauldrons, *zhū hóu*, the rulers of vassal states seven, *dàifu* or ministers of state five whilst only the crown prince, and the emperor were permitted the use of nine. The use of the nine tripod cauldrons to offer ritual sacrifices to the ancestors from heaven and earth was a major ceremonial occasion so that by natural progression the ding came to symbolize national political power and later to be regarded as a National Treasure. Sources state that two years after the fall of the Zhou Dynasty at the hands of what would become the Qin Dynasty the nine tripod cauldrons were taken from the Zhou royal palace and moved westward to the Qin capital at Xianyang. However, by the time Qin Shi Huang had eliminated the other six Warring States to become the first emperor of China in 221 BCE, the whereabouts of the nine tripod cauldrons were unknown. Sima Qian records in his Records of the Grand Historian that they were lost in the Si River near Pencheng to where Qin Shi Huang later dispatched a thousand men to search for the cauldrons but to no avail.

After the overthrow of Zhou and the foundation of the new Qin Dynasty, the Nine Tripod Cauldrons disappeared. Theories as to their fate abound with no clear agreement amongst scholars. Amongst these theories are claims that the cauldrons were:

- lost in the Si River near Pencheng by King Zhaoxiang of Qin (r. 306-250 BCE) en route to the Qin Capital
- stolen by Quanrong nomads following the fall of Haojing in 771 BCE;
- melted down and recast into coins or weapons in the final years of the Zhou Dynasty.

According to historical records, both Qin Shi Huang and Emperor Wen of Han (r. 180-157 BCE) searched for the nine tripod cauldrons in the Si River but with no success.

Later emperors time and again recast the cauldrons, the most well known examples being Wu Zetian in 696 CE and the two recastings by Song Dynasty Huizong Emperor in 1105 CE.

In 2006, the National Museum of China in Beijing cast Nine Tripod Cauldrons which are now on permanent display as a tourist attraction.

Cultural influence

In all Chinese speaking societies, if someone commented on someone's words as *having the weight of nine tripod cauldrons*, this was a great compliment to the person. It meant that the person was very trustworthy and would never break their promises. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nine_Tripod_Cauldrons



QUESTIONS (write answers on another piece of paper)

1. Look up the 'Mandate of Heaven' in your textbook (p. 54) and compare that idea to what is said here about how the bronze cauldrons were used and viewed as symbols of power. a) How is having the kettles like the having the Mandate of Heaven? b) What efforts were made by different emperors to find these cauldrons? c) Why do you think later emperors recast them?
2. a) What does it say about strong/solid/heavy these cauldrons were, that there is the saying that the words of someone who is trustworthy have the weight of nine tripod cauldrons? b) Think of a saying used now that compares something good to something heavy, or someone who is trustworthy to something else that is viewed as solid. If you can't think of a saying people actually use, make one up. c) Just how heavy were these cauldrons?