



鼎 dǐng : a bronze tripod cauldron, originally thought to be used as a cooking vessel in ancient times.

In Chinese traditions, *the 9 cauldrons* (九鼎) were collectively the ultimate symbol for sovereignty over China, despite being lost ever since the end of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty (东周) sometime in 256 BC.

Origins

The most popular account had it that they were crafted by the legendary Great Yü (大禹) after he solved a great flood inundating the entire country.

The Great Yü had earlier divided the realms under heaven into the 9 provinces (九州) according to logical geographical boundaries. However, there is no consensus today as to the naming of the 9 provinces. See [九州 \(中国\)](#) for more details.

Each of the cauldron crafted or commissioned represented one of the province. The surfaces of the cauldrons were carved descriptions of the province, including the fauna and flora. Had these, or their details, survived till today, they would have been invaluable source of information to the world of China thousands of years ago.

Symbol of Sovereignty

After ascending to the throne, the Great Yü had the 9 Cauldrons displayed outside the palace gates to symbolise his Xia Dynasty's (夏) lordship over the world (as they knew it). **It naturally became associated with symbol of sovereignty, rulership and even testimony of Heaven's Mandate for the royal house.**

No other artefact in China ever had such a significance until the appearance of the Imperial Jade Seal crafted during the Qin Dynasty (秦). Even then, when that was lost, subsequent rulers commissioned their own imperial jade seals, *some even more than one each!* But no sovereign even had replicas of the 9 cauldrons.

The 9 Cauldrons made its way into numerous Chinese sayings, such as *the word of a ruler is worth the 9 Cauldrons* (meaning a ruler's word must be kept/reliable), or to *question the weight of the Cauldron* (to desire contesting for the throne).

Passed from dynasty to dynasty

After the despotic Jié (桀), last ruler of Xia Dynasty, was overthrown, the new King Tāng (汤) of (Yīn) Shang Dynasty (殷商) seized the 9 Cauldrons and moved them to his capital.

When the tyrannical Zhòu (纣), last ruler of Shang Dynasty, was overthrown by King Wǔ of Zhou Dynasty (周武王) had the 9 Cauldrons moved to the Zhou capital at Hào (镐), present day SW of Xi'an in Shaanxi province. Claims that each Cauldron took 90,000 men to move and 810,000 men were deployed was almost certainly a myth!

His successor, King Chéng (周成王), officially installed the 9 Cauldrons at JiáRǔ (郊郚), near present day Luoyang, the site of the future capital of the dynasty when it moved capital eastwards.

Contested Prize among the warlords

As the royal authority was in decline during the Eastern Zhou Dynasty, ambitious feudal lords seeking to take over the overlordship from Zhou began to covet the 9 Cauldrons to boost their own influence.

The earliest recorded account was an attempt by King Zhuāng of Chǔ (楚庄王) who asked the royal envoy from Zhou, by the name of Wáng SūnMǎn (王孙满), about the weight of the Cauldrons. Sensing the intentions of the Chǔ ruler, Wáng SūnMǎn replied the weight of the Cauldrons depends on the virtue of the possessor rather than the objects themselves, citing how the past rulers in the likes of Jié and Zhòu lost the Cauldrons through their vices, effectively rebutting King Zhuāng of Chǔ.

Another account tells of King Wǔ of Qín (秦武王) who participated in a Cauldron-lifting event in 307 BC. The young ambitious man overexerted himself in the failed attempt and died from the injuries suffered.

During the Warring States era, the major states such as Qín and Qí (齐) fought battles over the Cauldrons. King Huìwén of Qín (秦惠文王) was thwarted when the Zhou minister Yán Shuài (颜率) convinced the State of Qí to intervene militarily, in exchange for the Cauldrons.

When King Xuān of Qí (齐宣王) tried to claim it, Yán Shuài shrewdly questioned the transportation route, leading the Qí ruler realise all possible routes would require traversing through other states whose rulers were no less eager to grab the Cauldrons. Thus, the matter was dropped.

Final Fate of the 9 Cauldrons

It was not until 256 BC when the State of Qín conquered the last of the Zhou territories that the Cauldrons were moved once more, this time, to Xianyang, capital of Qín.

During the transportation, depending on the accounts, either 1 or 9 of the Cauldrons fell into the River Sǐ (泗水). Henceforth, there were legends of the Cauldrons being visible in the river but no attempt to recover or locate it ever succeeded.

Half a century later, the Qin Dynasty was overthrown when Liu Bang marched into Xianyang, but there was no mention of the Cauldrons.

The fate of the Cauldrons remained a mystery even today, though its significance was never forgotten. Countless rulers tried to locate it but no one ever succeeded.



Giant modern Ding at Huangdi Temple, Xinzheng China. The Nine sacred Ding are widely believed to be even larger than this. One legend has it that it took 3,000 soldiers to lift each of the sacred Ding.