

ENGINEERING AND STRUCTURES

Many of the structures of ancient China were built of wood, which has rotted away over thousands of years. Small ceramic models of houses, watchtowers, granaries, and other structures left in tombs provide a wealth of information.

Tombs

In Xi'an, the burial mound of Shihuangdi had laid untouched for more than 2,000 years. The historian Sima Qian describes the splendor buried inside the tomb in the *Shiji* (*Book of Records*), "With quicksilver [**mercury**] the various waterways of the empire, the Yangtze and Yellow Rivers, and even the great ocean itself were created and made to flow and circulate mechanically. With shining pearls the heavenly constellations were depicted above ..." Archaeologists have tested the soil around the tomb and discovered high levels of mercury. These findings support Qian's description.

Great Wall of China

In 221 BCE, Emperor Shihuangdi ordered that existing walls be linked together in the north to protect his newly united kingdom. Some walls between states were torn down. It is estimated that 700,000 people worked on constructing the wall. In places the wall was made from rammed earth, while in others stone and wood were used. Towers and gates were built at intervals to allow passage through the wall. If a section of the wall came under attack, soldiers would light fires to alert others farther down the wall.

The Grand Canal

During the Sui dynasty, Emperor Yan wanted to connect China's waterways from north to south. He ordered the construction of a canal to transport rice from the south. The Grand Canal is still in use today and is the world's oldest canal.

The Great Wall of China winds 5,500 miles (8,850 km) across the Chinese countryside.

History Up Close

Small models of buildings were placed in tombs as mingqi. This three-story ceramic watchtower dates from the 1st to 3rd century CE. Two figures armed with crossbows appear on the second level. From their perch, they could spot approaching enemies from a distance. This tower may have been placed in a tomb to protect a deceased person in the afterlife. Real watchtowers and other Chinese structures were built using a system of interlocking **brackets** called *duogong*, such as this model shows. Some archaeologists believe that the curved design of the tiled roof was to repel evil spirits that traveled in straight lines. It also served a practical purpose by directing rain and snow away from the structure, and letting in lots of sunlight.



watchtower model

THE THREE WAYS

During the sixth century, a scholar named Li Shiqian wrote: “Buddhism is the sun, Daoism the moon, and Confucianism the five planets.” This explains how these belief systems, known as “The Three Ways,” all peacefully existed in China during the same period. Buddhism arrived in China during the Han dynasty, carried along the Silk Road from India. Confucianism and Daoism have their roots in China.

Buddhism

Buddhism started in the 5th century BCE. The goal of Buddhism is to achieve **enlightenment**. Followers believe in rebirth, and that this cycle can only reach completion after a person has lived a good, **moral** life. During the Tang era, Buddhism became especially popular in China, with many people becoming monks.

Daoism

Dao means “way.” Daoism was founded by Laozi, a scholar of the Zhou dynasty. Daoism promotes living a simple life, in balance and harmony with the natural world. A well-known symbol of Daoism is the yin and yang, in which positive and negative forces are balanced.

Confucianism

Confucianism is named after Confucius, a **philosopher** who taught about morals, family, and the importance of a strong government. During the Han dynasty, this was the dominant religion in ancient China. Confucian texts were used for the government exams and studied in most schools.

History Up Close

This small wooden shrine dates from the Song dynasty. It is only 7.5 inches (19 cm) tall, yet is remarkably detailed. Buddha sits cross-legged in the center. A **pagoda** is shown above his head. In Buddhism, a pagoda indicates the Lotus sutra, one of the key texts of the faith. The sutra states that everyone has the potential within themselves for enlightenment. Two **bodhisattvas**, individuals who have achieved enlightenment, appear on the top of each outer panel. One rides an elephant and the other sits on a lion. The shrine was carved from a single piece of wood and could be folded shut. Shrines such as this were carried by monks as they spread the Buddhist faith throughout China and the rest of Asia.

Buddhist shrine



Dig Deeper!

How might the positions of the figures in the shrine draw people to Buddhism? Research the significance of the Buddha and bodhisattvas. What other aspects of Buddhism can you identify in the carvings?

The Leshan Buddha is the largest carving of Buddha in the world. It stands 233 feet (71 m) tall.