

A. The Mandate of Heaven

Secondary Source: "China, The Land of the Yellow River," *The Human Record*, pp. 25-26. *China, A New History*, Fairbank 37-40

Primary Sources: *The Classic of History*, *The Human Record*, pp. 26-28

Visual Sources: Maps of early dynasties' states; Shang and Zhou oracle bones and ritual bronzes

Vocabulary: Yellow River, oracle bones, ritual bronzes, shamanism, Shang, Zhou, the Mandate of Heaven (tianming)

China: The Land of the Yellow River

The study of history has been one of China's most revered and continuous traditions for well over two thousand years. Already by the second century B.C.E. the Chinese confidently claimed a detailed history that reached back into the early third millennium. According to their vision of the past, Chinese civilization was sparked not by the actions of gods but by extraordinary men, beginning with the *Three Sovereigns*, who laid the basis of Chinese culture by bestowing such gifts as agriculture and fire. The last of the three was the *Yellow Emperor*, who established an organized state around 2700 B.C.E. Four other emperors succeeded in turn, each of whom ascended the throne by virtue of merit and genius rather than by birth. Known as the *Five Sage Emperors*, they crafted all of the basic elements of Chinese civilization. The last of these five predynastic geniuses was succeeded onto the throne by his son, thereby establishing China's first royal dynasty — the *Xia* family, which ruled from 2205 to 1766 B.C.E. After the collapse of the Xia Dynasty, the *Shang* Dynasty held power, until it gave way to the *Zhou* Dynasty.

Until the late 1920s we had no irrefutable evidence that either the Xia or Shang dynasties ever existed, and Western historians generally dismissed them as romantic legends. The work of archeologists over the past sixty years, however, has proved beyond any shadow of a doubt that the Shang Era was a historical reality. Dating it precisely, however, has proved to be a problem due to the ambiguity of the archeological record. Many scholars have dated its origins to the eighteenth century B.C.E.; other historians have placed it no earlier than around 1600 B.C.E. Locating Xia's time and place has proved to be even more difficult, but recent excavations strongly suggest that the Xia Dynasty also existed, probably as early as 2200 or 2100 B.C.E. The picture of earliest Chinese civilization remains cloudy and controversial at best, but recent archeological evidence suggests strongly that Xia, Shang, and Zhou were originally three coexisting centers of civilization in North China, and the Shang and Zhou successions were largely the shifting of dominance through warfare from one state and family of royal warlords to another. It appears that as early as the late third millennium B.C.E., northern China was home to many competing small states, each centered on a clan and its walled town. Warfare and alliances allowed some of these states to grow at their neighbors' expense and others to lose their independence. Apparently none of these families or their states ever totally dominated northern China until the victory of the Qin state in 221 B.C.E. (see Chapter 4), but certain families, namely Xia, Shang, and Zhou, successively claimed wide-sweeping royal hegemony. That noted, it is important to understand that the details of early Chinese history still largely elude us. Most of the stories related by Sima Qian and other classical Chinese historians about the predynastic Sage Emperors and China's first royal dynasties still seem to most modern historians to be more the stuff of legend than historical fact. But who knows what tomorrow's archeological discovery will bring?

Our knowledge of the Xia state and its age of predominance is sketchy at best. We know much more about the Shang, thanks to the work of archeologists who have unearthed magnificent bronze ceremonial vessels, two huge capital cities, and a primitive form of Chinese ideographic writing on what are known as *oracle bones*. Although scholars can read them, the oracle bones provide little detail about the social and political history of the Shang because they served only one purpose: magical divination of the future.

China's earliest extant literary and political documents date from the age of Zhou rule, and thus we know much more about the Zhou Dynasty than about the Xia and Shang. Even so, Zhou's date of origin remains a subject for debate. (All Chinese dates before 800 B.C.E. are quite imprecise.) The era of Zhou rule *seems* to have begun around 1100 when the Zhou conquered the Shang and established a royal dynasty that lasted eight hundred years or more. The Zhou Era is divided into two periods: Western and Eastern. The age of Western Zhou witnessed a fairly strong but decentralized monarchy that presided over fifty or more subordinate states. What this means is that the Zhou kings delegated authority to the rulers of these states in elaborate ceremonies that emphasized the king's primacy. As time went on, however, power tended to slip away from the Western Zhou kings into the hands of local lords. In 771 B.C.E. a group of rebellious northern nobles killed King Yu and overran the capital city, Xi'an, and the royal heir fled eastward to Luoyang. Here the Zhou continued to reside as kings until 256 B.C.E., but the kings of Eastern Zhou never enjoyed the power of their western forebearers. For five hundred years they reigned over, but did not rule, a kingdom where all real power resided in the smaller regional states and the families that controlled them.

The Mandate of Heaven



5 ▼ THE CLASSIC OF HISTORY

The *Shu Jing*, or *The Classic of History*, is the oldest complete work among what are known as the five Confucian Classics. (The introduction to source 24 in Chapter 4 contains a biography of Confucius, and note 6 of source 35 in Chapter 5 describes the Classics.) The five Classics were canonized as the basic elements of the Confucian educational system during the second century B.C.E., when the books were reconstructed by order of several emperors of the Han Dynasty (202 B.C.E.–220 C.E.). Although Han scholars probably refashioned elements of the *Shu Jing*, the work was already ancient in Confucius' day, and the book, as we have received it, is probably essentially the same text that Confucius (?551–479? B.C.E.) knew, studied, and accepted as an authentic record of Chinese civilization.

Despite its title, *The Classic of History* is not a work of historical interpretation or narration. Rather, it is a collection of documents spanning some seventeen hundred years of Chinese history and legend, from 2357 to 631 B.C.E. Many of the documents, however, are the spurious creations of much later periods and therefore reflect the attitudes of those subsequent eras.

The document that appears here was composed in the age of Zhou but purports to be the advice given by the faithful Yi Yin to King Tai Jia, second of the Shang kings. According to the story behind the document, when the first Shang king, Zheng Tang, died around 1753, his chief minister Yi Yin took it upon himself to instruct the new, young king in the ways and duties of kingship and the workings of the *Mandate of Heaven*.

The Mandate of Heaven was a political-social philosophy that served as the basic Chinese explanation for the success and failure of monarchs and states down to the end of the empire in 1912 C.E. Whenever a dynasty fell, the reason invariably offered by China's sages was that it had lost the moral right to rule, which is given by Heaven alone. In this context, Heaven did not mean a personal god but a cosmic, all-pervading power. The theory of the Mandate of Heaven was probably created by the Zhou and used to justify their overthrow of the Shang. The king, after all, was the father of his people, and paternal authority was the basic cement of Chinese society from earliest times. Rebellion against a father, therefore, needed extraordinary justification.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. What virtues and values does this document extol?
2. How does a monarch lose the Mandate of Heaven, and what are the consequences of this loss?
3. What evidence can you find to support the conclusion that Chinese political philosophers perceived the state as an extended family?
4. Would Yi Yin accept the notion that one must distinguish between a ruler's private morality and public policies?
5. What does the theory of the Mandate of Heaven suggest about the nature of Chinese society?
6. Modern politicians often promise "innovative answers to the challenges of tomorrow." What would Yi Yin think about such an approach to statecraft? What would Yi Yin think about modern politicians who attempt to appear youthful? What would he think of popular opinion polls?
7. Compare the Chinese vision of its ideal monarch with Egyptian and Mesopotamian views of kingship. Despite their obvious cultural differences, did each of these societies expect its king to perform essentially the same task? If so, what was that task?

In the twelfth month of the first year . . . Yi Yin sacrificed to the former king, and presented the heir-king reverently before the shrine of his grandfather. All the princes from the domain of the nobles and the royal domain were present;

all the officers also, each continuing to discharge his particular duties, were there to receive the orders of the chief minister. Yi Yin then clearly described the complete virtue of the Meritorious Ancestor¹ for the instruction of the young king.

¹Zheng Tang, founder of the Shang Dynasty.

He said, "Oh! of old the former kings of Xia cultivated earnestly their virtue, and then there were no calamities from Heaven. The spirits of the hills and rivers likewise were all in tranquility; and the birds and beasts, the fishes and tortoises, all enjoyed their existence according to their nature. But their descendant did not follow their example, and great Heaven sent down calamities, employing the agency of our ruler² who was in possession of its favoring appointment. The attack on Xia may be traced to the orgies in Ming Tiao.³ . . . Our king of Shang brilliantly displayed his sagely prowess; for oppression he substituted his generous gentleness; and the millions of the people gave him their hearts. Now your Majesty is entering on the inheritance of his virtue; — all depends on how you commence your reign. To set up love, it is for you to love your relations; to set up respect, it is for you to respect your elders. The commencement is in the family and the state. . . .

"Oh! the former king began with careful attention to the bonds that hold men together. He listened to expostulation, and did not seek to resist it; he conformed to the wisdom of the ancients; occupying the highest position, he displayed intelligence; occupying an inferior position, he displayed his loyalty; he allowed the good qualities of the men whom he employed and did not seek that they should have every talent. . . .

"He extensively sought out wise men, who

²Zheng Tang (see note 1).

should be helpful to you, his descendant and heir. He laid down the punishments for officers, and warned those who were in authority, saying, 'If you dare to have constant dancing in your palaces, and drunken singing in your chambers, — that is called the fashion of sorcerers; if you dare to set your hearts on wealth and women, and abandon yourselves to wandering about or to the chase, — that is called the fashion of extravagance; if you dare to despise sage words, to resist the loyal and upright, to put far from you the aged and virtuous, and to seek the company of . . . youths, — that is called the fashion of disorder. Now if a high noble or officer be addicted to one of these three fashions with their ten evil ways, his family will surely come to ruin; if the prince of a country be so addicted, his state will surely come to ruin. The minister who does not try to correct such vices in the sovereign shall be punished with branding.' . . .

"Oh! do you, who now succeed to the throne, revere these warnings in your person. Think of them! — sacred counsels of vast importance, admirable words forcibly set forth! The ways of Heaven are not invariable: — on the good-doer it sends down all blessings, and on the evil-doer it sends down all miseries. Do you but be virtuous, be it in small things or in large, and the myriad regions will have cause for rejoicing. If you not be virtuous, be it in large things or in small, it will bring the ruin of your ancestral temple."

³According to legend, Jie, the last Xia king, held notorious orgies at Ming Tiao.

STOP!

YOU DO NOT NEED TO READ ANY OF THE TWO PAGES BELOW.
THE SECTION ABOVE IS THE ONLY SECTION YOU NEED
TO READ TO ANSWER QUESTIONS 1-7.

The Rise of Central Authority

The deposits of Yangshao and then Longshan types of pottery in half a dozen or more areas on the North China plain and along the Yellow River and Lower Yangzi show the differentiation of local cultures. As contact grew among these Neolithic farming villages, networks of kinship and allied relationships created an opportunity for broader government from a central capital. Judging by what came later, it seems that family lineages, derived from large tribal clans, each set up their separate walled towns. The Shang oracle bones name about a thousand towns altogether. One lineage headed by a patriarch would establish relations by marriage with other lineages in other walled towns. Branch lineages could also be set up by migration to new town sites; and complex relations of subordination and superordination would ensue.

Toward the end of the third millennium BC the making of bronze from copper and tin deposits widely mined in North China coincided with the rise during the Xia and Shang dynasties of the first central government over a broad area. Bronze metallurgy was probably a natural further step in a technology that had developed techniques for shaping and firing Yangshao and Longshan pottery and then producing small copper objects such as knives. Whether the techniques of bronze metallurgy were indigenous or imported (or both), the central fact of bronze production was that only a strong authority could ensure the mining of ore. Judging by nineteenth-century examples, premodern mining required laborers, on hands and knees, to drag their heavy ore-sleds out through cramped and unventilated tunnels—work fit for slaves or prisoners. When it came to bronze casting by the piece-mold process, hundreds of skilled artisans would be needed to prepare and handle the molten metal. Making ritual vessels of bronze thus had several implications—first, that a royal authority was vitally concerned with rituals as an aspect of its power; and, second, that it was able to assign manpower to the onerous tasks of mining ores and refining metals.

We know that in both Xia and Shang the ruling family made use of elaborate and dramatic rituals to confirm their power to govern, especially the rituals of shamanism by which a priest (or shaman), often the ruler himself, would communicate with the spirits of the ancestors to secure their help and guidance. In this function the shaman would be helped by certain animals considered to have a totemic relation to the ancestors. On the Shang bronze ritual vessels these were represented by animal designs, especially by the bilateral animal masks (*taotie*, echoed

much later, for example, in Amerindian totem poles). By practicing a religious cult of the ancestors, local rulers legitimized their authority. Some became lords over groups of towns, and group vied with group as well as region with region, until a single ruling dynasty could emerge in a distinct area.

Once under way, the expanding authority of the state would encompass settlements still at a Neolithic stage of pre-Bronze Age culture. Bronze weapons would help, and in their conquests we know that the late Shang after about 1200 BC used the two-horse war chariot that had empowered conquerors in West Asia from about 1500 BC. No doubt its concept had come across Central Asia. The spears and arrows of foot soldiers accompanied the chariot. Three men manned it—a driver in the center, flanked by a swordsman (or halberdier) and a bowman. Bronze fittings made the chariot motile. Men from each cluster of families in a lineage seem to have formed a military unit. Thousands of soldiers are mentioned as having taken thousands of prisoners, hundreds of whom might be sacrificed. The king claimed that his primacy rested on his personal merit, but there is no doubt that military power helped him.

In addition to warfare, the Xia and Shang expanded their domain by building new towns. Towns were not unplanned growths caused by trade or by migration of individual families but were planned and created by local rulers. Typically a king might decree the building of a town in a new region where farmland was to be opened up, and a town populace would be selected and dispatched to do the job. In the *Classic of Poetry (Shijing)* is a description of a town-founding in terms not inappropriate for a barn-raising by American pioneers:

... left and right
 He drew the boundaries of big plots and little
 He opened up the ground, he counted the acres
 From west to east ...
 Then he summoned his Master of Work
 Then he summoned his Master of Lands
 And made them build houses.
 Dead straight was the plumb line
 The planks were lashed to hold the earth;
 They made the Hall of Ancestors very venerable
 They tilted in the earth with a rattling
 They pounded it with a dull thud ...
 They raised the outer gate
 The outer gate soared high.

They raised the inner gate
 The inner gate was very strong.
 They raised the great earth-mound
 Whence excursions of war might start ...

On balance, warfare and trade seem to have been no more important as factors in expansion than the overall superiority of the king's ritual and liturgical functions in his intercession with the ancestors and other forces of nature. Perhaps like the early Carolingian kings of France, the king's extensive travels suggest, as David Keightley observes, that he was head of a patrimonial state that was not yet fully bureaucratic, a state that was still more theocratic than secular in its institutional activity.