

## THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF CHINESE THOUGHT

### *General Issues*

**The origins of the Chinese state.** The birth of philosophical thought in China took place during a period when political and social structures that had been long established were subject to acute stress. Pre-philosophical China was a political entity that was characterized by the gradual development and spread of a single dominant cultural strain that brought a certain degree of social unity to a broad region, originally peopled by tribes of various very different cultures. It was the dissolution of social and political stability during the period after 800 BCE that led to the emergence of systematic reflective thinking about society, nature, and the supernatural about three centuries later.

During the second millennium BCE, one of the many local cultures of the prehistoric Chinese mainland, sometimes called the Shang Culture, began to absorb its neighbors into a type of loose polity that became the ancestor of what we now think of as China.\* Although this marks the Chinese state as a relatively late arrival compared to Mediterranean states such as Egypt and Babylonia, the growth of China during the second millennium was striking, and led to a marked span of unity and stability during the period c. 1000-800.

**Chinese culture and writing.** The Shang Culture became literate sometime during the period 1500-1250 by employing the system of ideographs that today we refer to as Chinese characters. Because characters differ from an alphabetic script in that they convey meaning without necessary reference to phonetics, the powerful tool of written language was diffused relatively easily among the various linguistic communities that occupied China at that time, enhancing early trends towards political coherence. This phenomenon may have contributed to the geographical enlargement of the socio-political reach of the Shang Culture, as the diffusion of literate culture reinforced military and diplomatic efforts to create an extended state.

The apparent linguistic homogeneity of the Shang political sphere, provided by the written rather than the spoken language, fostered a strong concept of cultural unity. The people of the Shang Culture – increasingly identifiable as “Chinese” culture – viewed the

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\* The term “Shang Culture” is meant loosely here. It points to the culture that produced the ruling line of the Shang Dynasty (c. 1500-1045, also known as the Yin Dynasty), but applies to that dynasty’s Neolithic (and possibly dynastic) predecessors as well.

expansion of the state not as an imperial process of conquest, but as a process of cultural diffusion and increasing inclusiveness towards the inevitable future of a universal state.

**Social structures.** Three features of the Shang Culture apart from literacy marked it as different from other cultures on the Chinese mainland: its agricultural economic base, its sharp class distinctions, and its kinship structures with their associated religious dimensions. These features continue to characterize the culture of China during the Classical period (usually dated 770-221 BCE) when the philosophical traditions developed. While there was clearly great diversity within Shang Culture and change over time, for the purposes of this course, we will introduce only a brief and highly schematic model of this pre-philosophical culture.

*Agriculture and walls.* The presence of the Shang Culture on the landscape of China made a radical impact on the land itself. The Shang represented the most developed of the agricultural peoples of China, which during the second millennium was probably more broadly settled by hunting and fishing cultures in the east and central regions and nomadic pastoral peoples to the north and west. Shang Culture developed on the North China Plain in the basin of the Yellow River, where rich soils deposited by winds blowing from the deserts in the west made the domestication of grains a profitable endeavor.

As the Shang people first settled these relatively vulnerable plains during neolithic (new stone age) times, they defended their presence by constructing walled enclosures of varying sizes and functions. The largest of these walls, which could reach twenty feet in height and forty feet in thickness, protected large settlements, within which other walls demarcated neighborhoods. The farming population generally lived within or near to walled settlements, with their fields spread over the areas beyond the walls. The political presence of the Shang people was less a matter of controlling vast tracts of territory than one of establishing a network of secure walled settlements in which its farming economy could thrive.

*Social classes.* The Shang Culture was distinguished from other contemporary cultures by the clear differentiation of social classes and extremely high concentration of wealth. Shang settlements generally segregated their populations by occupational groups, locating these groups in discrete neighborhoods. Farmers, who made up the vast majority of the population, generally were housed on either side of the outer walls and were the least advantaged group economically. Groups of artisans and traders lived near the market areas within the town.

Most of the resources of Shang society were under the control of a small set of powerful kinship groups which formed the Shang aristocracy. These clans maintained a monopoly on political power. Their precincts within Shang cities were opulent and separately walled. From among these clans, one emerged as supreme and supplied the larger polity of Shang culture with a central line of rulers, whose home settlement served as the administrative and religious capital of the emerging Shang state.

The stratified agricultural society of the wall-building Shang proved efficient in directing rich resources to its own enlargement. Through wars and cultural hegemony, the society impinged on its many neighbors and gradually incorporated them, though the process was not uniform, and tribes that joined the polity were able to preserve, to varying degrees, local cultural forms distinct from the metropolitan culture of the Shang.

*Kinship and religion.* The Shang Culture placed great stress on the importance of extended lineage structures, particularly among the elite. We have little information concerning the farming class, but it appears that lineage identity was also very important to artisan groups. Indeed, occupations seem to have generally been determined by lineage membership. Among the elite, lineage structures were large and complex. Trunk-line lineages of eldest sons dominated the larger clan. Branch lineages descending from younger sons could only establish social and religious autonomy by moving to new geographical locations.

Indeed, the entire idea of individual autonomy seems alien to what we know of the Shang Culture, within which individuals were tightly identified by membership to clan, and clans tightly identified by membership to social class or occupation. The subservience of individuals to larger power structures is symbolized at the most intimate level by the cultural norm of “filiality”: the belief that the worth of children is best measured by the degree to which they honor and serve their parents without disobedience.

The emblem of the centrality of lineage to the Shang is the cult of ancestor worship that lies at the center of Shang religious practice. The line between the living and the dead was a thin one. Ancestors continued to possess powers that could be exercised over the physical space in which the living dwelt, and they maintained close control over the lives of their descendants. Power distributions, which in Shang clans were strictly aligned according to seniority, extended to the world of the dead. Just as children were expected to serve and honor their parents and seniors in society, so adults served and honored their ancestors with daily rituals and offerings of substantial nourishment.

The etiquette of serving the ancestors – a series of actions which became necessarily elaborate to compensate for the rare and uncertain confirmation of adequacy provided by the dead – provided to Shang society a prominent ritualistic cast that continued to influence Chinese society in later eras.

**Summary.** If we trace Chinese society back to its earliest ancestral culture, we see in that culture a variety of features that are distinctive of the social environment in which philosophy emerged in China. These include: 1) the belief in the normative goal of creating a universal culture subsuming all pre-literate and non-agricultural peoples within the Chinese cultural sphere; 2) the associated notion that the Chinese cultural sphere is a natural socio-political unit; 3) the existence of a sharply stratified class society with power concentrated in walled urban nodes; 4) the dominance of lineage structures and family-centered personal values; 5) the centrality of ancestor worship and the suffusion of religious ritual throughout society.

### *General Pre-Philosophical Chronology*

The formative period of early Chinese philosophy is generally dated from about 500 BCE, when Confucius was in his prime, to 221 BCE, the year when the Classical era was brought to a close by a series of military conquests that established revolutionary new political structures throughout China. Thus the period which is the subject of this course comprises the latter half of the Classical era, which stretches from 770 to 221 (virtually all dates in this course are BCE dates; all dates should be assumed to be BCE unless otherwise specified).

The Classical age was in many ways an aberrant period in Chinese history. The events that had immediately preceded it had resulted in a fragmentation of the unified Chinese state – the descendant of the Shang Cultural sphere – that had been in place for several centuries previously.

During the entire Classical period, the Chinese mainland was a multi-state region. There was no single state of China. So directly did this challenge basic cultural assumptions, however, that the multi-state situation was never generally regarded as other than a temporary aberration and a problem to be solved. Just as there had been a Chinese state in the past, there would inevitably be one in the future.

Because the multi-state form of Classical China persisted for over five centuries, the conviction that this situation was a temporary departure from the norm came into increasing

tension with apparent reality. This disparity constitutes a key feature of the political background to the birth of philosophy in China.

Prior to the Classical era, the cultural sphere we retrospectively identify as Chinese had been characterized by long stretches of time during which the appearance of political stability had been provided by the existence of a single royal clan which provided a dynastic succession of ruling kings. The Classical Chinese understanding of the past identified three dynasties prior to the Classical age: the Xia, the Shang (or Yin), and the Zhou.

At present, the historicity of the Xia Dynasty is uncertain (it would have been a preliterate political entity, and if such a dynasty existed, it has left no written record proclaiming itself). The Shang royal clan ruled the polity embracing what we have termed Shang Culture from about 1500 to 1045. At that time, the Shang royal house was toppled by the dominant clan of a fringe member of the Shang polity, the tribe of the Zhou. The Zhou royal house succeeded to the political influence of the Shang, and ruled over an expanding state with considerable success until 771, at which time the Zhou capital was sacked by nomad invaders from the western regions and the Zhou king killed.

The Zhou Dynasty was not seen as having ended with the destruction of the capital. A son of the murdered king was removed eastwards to a secondary capital of the Zhou by the leaders of various powerful clans. Throughout the Classical period until 256, which is also called the Eastern Zhou period, the descendants of this royal refugee continued to occupy the Zhou throne and to serve as important symbols of Chinese political unity. However, these latter Zhou kings exercised no significant power, and their presence did little to limit the de facto sovereignty of the independent states of China that succeeded to power after the fall of the Western Zhou monarchy in 771.

Nevertheless, the withering of the Zhou monarchy was not completed in the transition from 771 to 770 BCE. During the initial centuries following the collapse of the Western Zhou, the Zhou royal house continued to provide some cultural focus. The rulers of most of the independent states derived legitimacy on the basis of ancient ties to the Zhou royal house, and this shared origin led them to preserve both rituals of subservience to the Zhou kings and forms of social practice linking their courts to the culture of the Western Zhou. During the fifth century BCE, however, major political dislocations and rapid technological changes fundamentally altered the direction of China's political culture and the linkage between the independent states and the Zhou past became superfluous.

Because of this, traditional accounts of Classical China have generally demarcated two distinct eras, each named after an historical text recounting the events of that time. The earlier

era is known as the “Spring and Autumn Period,” the latter as the “Warring States Period.” The dates used for these eras vary. In this course, we will date the Spring and Autumn Period as 770-453 (its narrower dates are 722-481) and the Warring States Period as 453-221 (traditionally, 403-221).

Thus, a chronological table of early China, for the purposes of this course, would look like this:

<b>Xia 夏 Dynasty (?)</b>	<b>c. 2000 - 1500</b>	
<b>Shang 商 Dynasty</b>	<b>c. 1500 - 1045</b>	
<b>Zhou 周 Dynasty</b>		
<b>Western Zhou</b>	<b>1045 - 771</b>	
<b>Eastern Zhou</b>	<b>770 - 256</b>	
<b>Spring-Autumn</b>	<b>770 - 453</b>	<b><i>“Classical</i></b>
<b>Warring States</b>	<b>453 - 221</b>	<b><i>China”</i></b>

In addition, historically minded writers during the Classical period, in search of the well-springs of the Chinese state, incorporated into the distant past certain mythical heroes or spirits who were recast in the mold of ancient kings or emperors. The most famous of these will appear in our philosophical texts, and include the successive legendary emperors Yao, Shun, and Yu (the last the supposed founder of the Xia), as well as the culture hero known as the Yellow Emperor, often portrayed as the first of the great semi-divine rulers of China. Before continuing with a description of the historical record of pre-philosophical China, we should pause to look at the legendary history which “predated” the dynastic era; although few now grant the historicity of these accounts, they were, in many ways, far more real to our Classical period thinkers than what we see as the true record of the Chinese past.

### ***Classical beliefs about legendary ideal rulers of the past***

People in Classical China were keenly aware of the history of their culture. The ethically charged story of the rise of the current royal house, the Zhou Dynasty, was a foundation of political legitimacy (the “right to rule”) for local power-holders in most parts of China, even though the Zhou kings had long since ceased to exercise effective power. Descriptions of the Zhou founders were the basis of many aspects of popular and philosophical models of the ideal ruler. People were also aware of some features of the Shang Dynasty, which had preceded the Zhou and which the Zhou founders had overthrown. There were vaguer cultural memories

of a still earlier dynasty, the Xia (modern historians are divided over the question of whether the Xia Dynasty really existed; if it did, it would have held power between about 1800 and 1500 BCE).

When telling the story of China before the Xia Dynasty – of the origin of Chinese culture – the Classical historians relied on a mixture of legend and myth. Few people today believe that the tales of these distant times, which focused on the deeds of almost super-human sage kings, have any basis in fact. Nevertheless, the tales were facts for our Classical thinkers, and since we will encounter the heroes of these tales, it's important to know the stories behind them.

There are three main figures to the “pre-dynastic” legendary period of Chinese culture. They are the sage kings Yao, Shun, and Yu. Although other mythical heroes later became very important to Chinese culture, such as the famous Yellow Emperor, for our purposes only Yao, Shun, and Yu are essential. All three seem originally to have been semi-divine heroes of important popular myths, who because of their association with some key aspect of cultural excellence were reinvented as ordinary mortals who ruled as kings.

*The Emperor Yao* 堯. Although Yao is said to have inherited the throne of China from his father, during the Classical period, history really begins with the Emperor Yao. Yao appears originally to have been the hero of a myth about astronomy. The great act of cultural creation for which he was deemed responsible was the determination of the movements of the sun and the creation of a calendar that matched the schedule of the human world with the rhythm of the natural seasons. In this way, Yao gets credit for three great achievements: 1) He adapted the “patterns” of the heavens to fashion a pattern for social activity; 2) He facilitated the rise of agriculture by giving farmers a reliable clock for planting and harvesting; 3) He invented government institutions to disseminate information about the schedule of society and supervise administration of social activity. In the view of Classical Chinese, these accomplishments amounted to the invention of civilized behavior, the promotion of economic prosperity, and the creation of bureaucratic government.

Yao is also celebrated for another great accomplishment, one which was somewhat controversial. Legend recounted that towards the end of his reign, Yao concluded that his own son was not virtuous enough to succeed to the office of king, and so commanded that a search be undertaken to find in his kingdom a man of virtue so exalted as to be worthy of the throne. The search produced the name of a common farmer named Shun, a man whose achievements were entirely confined to his private conduct. Despite the fact that he had previously held no public office, Yao designated this man his successor solely on the basis of his character.

Though it did not in the end actually lead to the end of hereditary dynasties, this legend served to undermine the hereditary right to rule in China, and promoted the idea that personal virtue rather than birth was the ultimate criterion for power.

***The Emperor Shun*** 舜. Shun appears originally to have been the hero of a moral legend about filiality: perfect dutifulness towards one's parents. The virtue that brought him to the attention of Yao was this: although Shun was the son of two limitlessly evil parents and the older brother of an evil second son, he never wavered in his unceasing devotion to them. Though his evil family hated him for his virtue and tried continually to kill him, Shun never allowed their actions to obscure his feelings of love for them or his blunt his efforts to act for their welfare. Colorful tales are told about this dysfunctional family. For example, Shun's parents devised a plan to kill him by asking him to repair the roof of their house, then, once he was at work, they removed the ladder he'd used and set fire to the house. On another occasion, they asked him to repair the family well and, once he was at work, sealed the well up. Shun escapes from all these misadventures. He preserves his life precisely because he regards it as his duty to save his parents from themselves – if he were to die, he would be unable to marry and produce children who would guarantee that later on his parents ghosts would be able to receive sacrificial nourishment through family worship. Apart from the disobedient act of declining to die as his parents wished, Shun continued to cater to their every wish. For this, he was made emperor.

According to the legend of Shun, as king his only achievements were to perpetuate and improve Yao's administrative inventions. He also acceded with Yao's vision of the kingship by passing over his own son in designating a successor, instead appointing his Minister of Public Works, Yu, to be the next emperor.

***The Emperor Yu*** 禹. Yu was originally the hero of an important myth concerning a great flood that occurred in China. The waters of all the major rivers swelled over their banks and the land was slowly sinking into sea. The legend tells us that Yu identified the problem as siltation of the river beds, and, using superhuman strength, personally dredged the rivers so they would again flow within their banks. (In fact, China's main flood problems have always been due to the rapid siltation of the Yellow River in the north, whose periodic flooding throughout history inundated millions of square miles.)

In the historicized version of this tale, the great flood occurred during the reign of Shun, and Yu was appointed as Minister of Public Works with the task of controlling the flood. So diligent was Yu in this work, that in the seventeen years that it took him to design and administer the massive water conservation project that relieved the flood, he never once



returned home to sleep in his own bed, though three times his travels took him past his own door. This display of virtuous altruism (a devotion to others over oneself) is what led Shun to designate him as the next emperor.

However, whether for good reasons or bad, Yu ended the tradition of non-hereditary succession to the kingship. He passed the throne on to his son, a succession that became the beginning of the Xia Dynasty.

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The three model sage kings, Yao, Shun, and Yu, were expressions of the political ideals of the philosophers who celebrated them and who elaborated on their “historical” achievements. Their sage actions made the distant past a model for the future. In actuality, of course, the exemplary tales of these legendary figures were designs for the future invented, or re-invented, by the thinkers of the Classical present.

*Classical interpretations of ideal rulers in the distant historical past*

After the era of the three sage kings, the chronology of the Chinese past begins to resemble history rather than legend. But the ideas that people of Classical times had about great men and events of the post-legendary era were not necessarily accurate, and sometimes resemble legend as much as the tales of Yao, Shun, and Yu. In particular, narratives about the founding of the Zhou must be seen as moral tales rather than as factual accounts. Though the events are clearly based on fact, the stories have more to contribute to our understanding of early Chinese ethics than early Chinese history.

The Classical thinkers did not make much use of the histories of the Xia and Shang Dynasties. For our purposes, these two long eras can be reduced to a single story, told twice. In the case of each dynasty, the main theme of the story is simply this: The ruling house was established by a sage, whose great work was perpetuated by a series of wise successors. Ultimately, however, there arose a king who was evil, lustful, and who fell under the influence of an alluring evil wife and a clever evil minister. The people suffered, and a virtuous hero arose from among them to overthrow the oppressive ruler and establish a new dynasty.

The outline of these historical fables makes it clear that three issues were key to their creation: First, women should have no role in government because the sexual attraction of women can sink government into debauchery. Second, the wise exercise of power by a legitimate ruler can be undermined by the wiles of evil ministers, so virtue rather than competence must be the chief criterion for holding high office. Third, although it is appropriate that kings should pass their thrones on to their sons, if a legitimate ruler lacks

ethical virtues to the extent that his governance becomes oppressive to his people, he loses legitimacy, and may be overthrown by an unrelated successor who possesses virtue appropriate to the royal office.

### *The Shang Dynasty*

The earliest period of Chinese history for which we have reliable records is the latter portion of the Shang Dynasty, beginning about 1250. The reason why this is so is that archaeologists have located what may be the last royal ceremonial center of the Shang state, the city of Yin, near the present day city of Anyang, and discovered there great stores of written texts, often called “oracle bones.” These texts, which record exclusively the divinistic communications from the Shang royal house to the spirit world, convey to us detailed portraits of certain aspects of Shang life such as war, the royal family, and religious practices.

Another important archaeological find concerning the Shang is a wide array of exquisitely cast bronze vessels employed in sacrificial ceremonies for the ancestors of the elite. The enormous amount of wealth and artistic refinement that is invested in these vessels (which are truly extraordinary in their beauty) represents an expression of the importance of religious clan life for the Shang elite.

We will not explore the Shang period in this course, but we will briefly examine certain aspects of the bone and bronze evidence that may have something to say to us about Shang views of life and of man. In particular, we will note the remarkable degree to which ritual activity and a highly stylized aesthetic marked the lives of the Shang elite, issues that will resonate with portraits of people and society that we will encounter in the writings of thinkers nearly a thousand years later.

It should be noted, however, that on the evidence of the oracle texts, the Shang “state” fell somewhat short of the tightly organized political entity that we usually think of “China” as being. From their shifting capital in east central China, the Shang seem to have coordinated a rather loose confederation of allied “tribes,” rather than administered a unified kingdom. While the Shang king was acknowledged as principal overlord of a wide range of groups and Shang culture set standards for the social lives of elites in all areas of this broad polity, stable political institutions do not seem to have distinguished the Shang from any preliterate predecessors whose role the Shang may have displaced.

### *The Founding of the Zhou Dynasty – The Political Reference Point*

All of the philosophers whom we shall read considered themselves men of Zhou: that is, members of the cultural and political sphere established and still nominally ruled by the Zhou kings. Although these men saw the Zhou as only the latest of a series of cultural eras, following the Xia and the Shang (and varying line-ups of legendary sages rulers), the traditional story of the founding of the Zhou Dynasty had enormous influence on the way that they conceived of rulers, society, and the supernatural world. Moreover, the coming of the Zhou seems to have constituted a social revolution of sorts, and shaped the structures of the society in which our philosophers lived. To understand early Chinese thought, it is imperative to know the story of the Zhou founding in some detail.

**The Zhou people.** The Zhou were a tribe which occupied lands north of the Yellow River early in the second millennium. Zhou tradition claimed that they were among the earliest peoples to practice agriculture. The Zhou were led by a ruler whose office was transferred to his eldest son after his death. At some point, probably during the mid-Shang period, the Zhou gave up agricultural pursuits and migrated West, beyond the bend of the Yellow River and into the valley of the Wei River. Towards the close of the Shang, the Zhou rulers acted as the westernmost allies of the Shang kings, protecting the Shang against incursions of nomad groups further west. Tradition maintains that at this time, the Zhou returned to agriculture.

**King Wen 文王** (*wang* 王 means “king”). About 1100, an outstanding leader inherited the throne of the Zhou people. He is known to history as King Wen (Wen Wang). According to traditional accounts, King Wen considered the culture of the Shang to be superior to that of his own semi-nomadic tribe, and he engineered a cultural transformation of his people so that by the end of his reign, their style of living had absorbed the patterns of the Shang (his posthumous title, King Wen, means “the patterned king” – we will examine the meaning of the term *wen* further in class).

The virtue of King Wen is said to have far outshone the abilities of the Shang king (whose name was, confusingly, Zhou – we will add a diacritic over it to distinguish him from the dynasty that displaced him: Zhòu). Both these men had unusually long reigns, King Wen died only in 1050, while Zhòu occupied the Shang throne from about 1095 until the fall of the Shang in 1045. During the later decades of this period, Zhòu’s behavior became increasingly arbitrary and violent, and many members of the Shang “confederacy” turned to King Wen as a desirable alternative. Traditional accounts say that Zhòu even had King Wen imprisoned out

of fear of his influence, but because of his limitless greed, he allowed King Wen to be freed in return for large bribes from other allied chieftains. The same accounts say that though King Wen could have easily led the allied tribes in an uprising, he refrained from doing so because of the virtuous awe in which he held the office of the Shang king.

**King Wu 武王 and the Zhou conquest.** The scruples of King Wen's son did not go so far. Five years after the death of King Wen, his successor, King Wu (whose name means "the martial king"), led a coalition of tribes and destroyed the armies of the Shang in a single morning (an absurd story that recently discovered inscriptions seem to confirm). Chòu was killed and the Shang Dynasty came to an end.

But the military conquest did not alone determine the shape of the future. King Wu and his closest followers faced daunting tasks. The Shang's control over China had been loose, and much of its power had accumulated through the great length of Shang overlordship. It was far from clear that the Zhou leaders could prevail upon the various peoples of the Shang state to accept them as replacements for the fallen dynasty. The Zhou tribe was, after all, only a fringe member of the Shang polity, located far from the political centers of the Shang and without any long tradition of cultural interaction.

King Wu and his followers addressed the problem of legitimizing the conquest and solidifying Zhou rule through two principal devices: a religious justification for the conquest known as the theory of the "Mandate of Heaven," and a new principle of political organization, known as "Zhou feudalism." Both of these devices have fundamental bearing on the shape of Chinese philosophy and we will discuss them repeatedly throughout the term. Here, we will look at them only briefly.

*The Mandate of Heaven (Tian ming 天命).* The Zhou people worshiped a supreme deity known as Tian; the name means "sky," and is generally translated in English as "Heaven." Tian possessed a number of anthropomorphic features. Tian was pictured as the supreme governor of all of China, and was believed to be both omnipotent and benevolent. It was Tian's role to ensure that China was well ruled to the benefit of all.

Soon after the conquest, the Zhou leaders began to employ their idea of Tian to rationalize their uprising and legitimize their succession to Shang overlordship. They claimed that as an all-powerful and benevolent god, interested in the welfare of China, Tian would not have allowed the conquest to happen unless it were just. Tian endowed the rulers of China

with a “mandate” (*ming*), the Zhou claimed. This mandate was awarded not to individuals, but to clans, and was granted on the basis of outstanding virtue. The Shang had once been Tian’s mandated ruling clan, but their virtue had decayed and now the Zhou had been selected to replace them. The conquest was Tian’s doing, and the Zhou leaders, as Tian’s agents, were now the legitimate rulers of China.

*Zhou “feudalism.”* While the mandate theory seems to have had good public relations value, the Zhou leaders needed more concrete measures to provide them with firm control over the broad geography of the Shang polity. Very shortly after the conquest, the Zhou devised a “feudal” political system that would provide them with greatly extended power.

Zhou feudalism is not closely related the feudalism of Europe’s Middle Ages, which is the basic reference point for that term – it would be more accurate not to use the term “feudalism” at all for the era of the early, or “Western” Zhou, but there is no easy alternative and we will keep “Zhou feudalism” as a term of convenience for that era. In the early, post-conquest Zhou, the allocation of estates (“fiefs”) by the Zhou rulers was first conceived as a sort of hereditary garrison command. Members of the ruling clan of the Zhou (the surname of the clan itself was Ji 姬, not Zhou) were awarded large holdings of land far from the Zhou capital city in the west, Zong-Zhou (near present day Xi’an). These clan members were given titles (we now translate these using traditional European terms, such as “duke,” and “marquis”) and large numbers of retainers. They were commissioned to rule their “fiefs” directly, on behalf of the Zhou, and to pass their titled prerogatives on to their eldest sons. In order to assure the allegiance of other major contributors to the conquest, leading members of certain non-Zhou clans were “adopted” as “uncles” and given fiefs in a similar way.

In this manner, the Zhou kings were able to extend a clan-based form of indirect rule, based on principle of hereditary feudalism, over virtually all regions of the Shang state.

**The Rebellion of 1043-1040 and the Duke of Zhou.** Two years after the conquest, King Wu died. The Zhou state was far from stable and its permanence was threatened by the fact that the late king’s eldest son was only a child. The likelihood that the Zhou achievements would come unraveled seemed great. But the events that followed not only saved the Zhou state, they strengthened it immeasurably.

Among the greatest contributors to the Zhou conquest had been the many brothers of King Wu (ancient China was a polygamous society, and it was not unusual for members of the elite to have dozens of brothers). By the time of his death, King Wu had already dispatched a

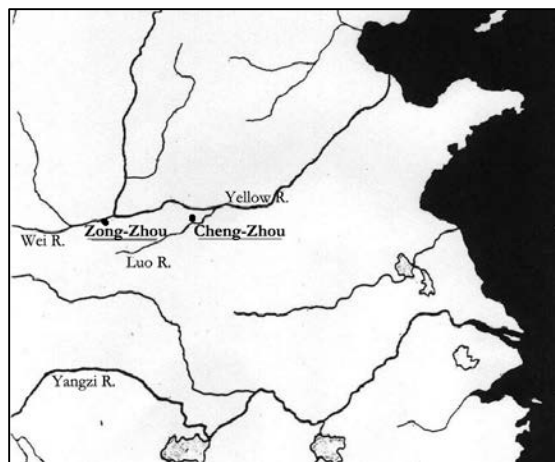
number of his brothers to rule fiefs in the unstable eastern reaches of the state. A few others, though awarded fiefs, remained in the capital region to assist in central administration.

One of these latter brothers, known to history as the Duke of Zhou (in Chinese, Zhou Gong 周公), took charge of the political situation at the capital following the death of King Wu. He announced that he would act as “regent,” or acting ruler, on behalf of the new king until the boy came of age. But when news of the duke’s act reached his brothers in the east, they suspected that it was his intention to seize the throne for himself. Accordingly, they launched a rebellion against the duke’s forces at the capital. In order to rally sufficient eastern manpower to their side, they raised their revolt in the name of the son of the last Shang ruler, who had been awarded what might be called a “courtesy fief” near the old Shang homelands.

The Duke of Zhou was able to put down the rebellion, but only after three years of hard fighting. In order to strengthen the control of the Zhou kings over their feudal subjects in the east so as to prevent future outbreaks, the Duke commissioned the construction of a second capital city, located in central China on the River Luo, a tributary of the Yellow River. This capital was named Cheng-Zhou, and centuries later it became the home of the Eastern Zhou kings.

But the reason why these events are occupying space in this reading is not because of their military significance. It is because four years after the suppression of the rebellion, the Duke of Zhou took a step that raised the stature of the Zhou throne far beyond that of the Shang and gave new weight to the theory of the Mandate of Heaven – he gave the throne back to the son of King Wu, who had by then come of age.

The duke’s resignation of power at a time when his control was at its strongest is an act without parallel in Chinese history and it must have shocked many of his contemporaries, who would have shared the view of the rebels that the duke’s regency was a sham. But the duke claimed that the Mandate of Tian was not subject to tampering; that the Zhou throne was not the possession of any man, but rather a divine charge. By backing these pieties up with an act of renunciation of such magnitude, the duke transformed the rule of the Zhou from an issue of power into an issue of shared responsibility. No propaganda could have approached the effect this had on the people of the new Zhou state; no military initiative could have rivaled the degree to which Zhou political control was thereby strengthened.



### *The Western Zhou: utopia and its collapse*

The philosophers of Classical China looked back upon the centuries following the duke's rule as a utopian era generated by the duke's virtue. And indeed the period from about 1000 to the late ninth century seems to have been marked by almost uninterrupted domestic peace and the gradual expansion of the Zhou state. During this period of the Western Zhou, strong kings ruled over a united network of hereditary fiefs under the beneficent gaze of Tian.

The strength of the state rested during this period principally on three pillars of political, religious, and social organization. These were the prestige of the Zhou throne; the integrating force of state religion, anchored by the king's protector-deity, Tian; and the system of clan-based hereditary succession to office or occupation, which became a pervasive feature of feudal society. (We will discuss these three pillars in more detail in class.)

As the Zhou state matured on the basis of these pillars, it developed an increasingly complex set of formal and informal institutions that came to govern virtually every aspect of the life of the Zhou elite. These institutions, which extended from the offices and ceremonies of court and of religious practice to the etiquette that governed weddings, funerals, banquets, and sporting matches, were known as “*li*” (禮), a term that we usually translate as “ritual.” Later thinkers viewed the proliferation of these stylized social forms during the Western Zhou as more than simply a distinguishing characteristic of the time: some saw these regularities as the actual basis of the success of the Western Zhou.

That success came to a close at the end of the ninth century as a series of domestic insurgencies by regional lords and significant raids by nomad tribes outside the Zhou state weakened the kingship. Instability within the royal family contributed to the disorders, and at least one of the kings of the Western Zhou was driven into exile by dissatisfied parties at the capital. The Classical accounts of these times attributed failures of state to the increasingly debauched character of the successive kings, suggesting that when, in 771, the ultimate collapse arrived, Tian's apparent limited withdrawal of the Mandate made sense in terms of the decadence of its chosen royal house.

### *The Eastern Zhou: Social Chaos and the Issue of Theodicy*

The circumstances of the fall of the Western Zhou led to dramatic changes in the political structure of China. The basic events are that in 771, the capital of Zong-Zhou was sacked by nomad invaders who killed the Zhou king. One of the sons of this king fled to the eastern capital of Cheng-Zhou, which had been founded by the Duke of Zhou, and revived the Zhou

court there. Within a year or two, the nomads had been driven from the Zong-Zhou region and peace was restored. Superficially, it would not appear that the transition should have had any fundamental impact. Yet from 770 on, the Zhou state is effectively no more than a shadow.

The key element of the transition is that the prince who fled east to continue the Zhou did so under the protection of a group of patrician fief-holders who became the chief ministers of the Eastern Zhou court. The early kings at Cheng-Zhou were effectively the puppets of this group of lords. From 770 on, the dukes and marquises who possessed hereditary fiefs became virtual sovereigns in their own territories, and by the end of the eighth century, the Zhou kingdom was in reality a collection of independent states. (In this, the Eastern Zhou balance of power actually seems more closely to resemble European feudalism than does the system of “Zhou feudalism” that prevailed in the western Zhou, which involved a strong royal center.)

**Warfare and social dislocation.** The leaders of these states, realizing that no anchor of stability existed to ensure the safety of their positions under the new regime, quickly began to compete for political power. The result was a period of domestic warfare among the feudal states that erupted within decades of the Western Zhou collapse and lasted over five centuries, gradually increasing in bitterness and bloodiness. During the first centuries of this era of disunity, the Spring and Autumn period, the warfare among the states was virtually constant. However, armies were relatively small and combat, directed by patricians fighting from chariots, was governed by ceremonial rules. After the mid-fifth century, wars became slightly less frequent but spectacularly destructive, with armies of close to a million men slaughtering tens of thousands in a single battle. Gradually, over 500 years, the multitude of feudal states was whittled down to a few dozen, then half a dozen, until finally, in 221, a single state, the state of Qin, reunified China under a revolutionary new regime.

The fluidity of this era of multi-state competition led to fundamental changes in Chinese society, most of them unintended and poorly understood at the time. Along with incessant warfare that proved an immense burden to the farming population, critical demands for skilled manpower, technological innovation, and economic growth in the competing states created unprecedented opportunities for social mobility and innovation. As the old pillars of the Western Zhou began to crumble, the institutions that had distinguished life in China and characterized its orderly nature began to disintegrate.



**The suspension of the Mandate.** As the Zhou kingship fell into decay and the prerogatives of the hereditary elite were undermined by new forces of social mobility, the status of the high deity Tian came into question. As an all-powerful and all-benevolent force, Tian had been a fitting fiction to anchor the religious life of the stable Western Zhou. The success of the early kings validated the Mandate theory, and Tian, as the king's god, served to guarantee the meaningfulness of life under the Zhou monarchy.

But from the time that the Zhou monarchy first comes unraveled we begin to find, in ancient textual and inscriptional sources, questions about the nature of Tian arise. If the dislocations that followed the ninth century were the products of random events, then the benevolence of Tian was no longer assured. If they were the products of a debasement in the virtue of the Zhou kings, which our historical sources suggests was the common view, then why did not Tian shift the Mandate to a new house and restore order? The issue of the justice of Tian, which in philosophical terms we call the issue of theodicy (*theo* = god; *dike* = justice), became an object for intellectual inquiry.

As the chaos of the Classical era was prolonged century after century and warfare grew increasingly devastating, Tian ceased to be seen as a satisfactory guarantor of the meaningfulness of social life. Its endless suspension of the Mandate for so many generations could not conceivably be explained on the basis of earlier historical precedents, and the pre-Classical view of the relationship between man and Tian – between man and the order of the universe – began to be questioned. This is the origin of philosophical thought in China.

When we explore the teachings of the earliest Chinese philosopher, Confucius, we will see that, in part at least, Confucius's intellectual enterprise was an attempt to find an alternative foundation for meaning and value to replace the religious concept of Tian-mandated order. Although Tian retains an apparently basic role in Confucius's formulations, this role is actually secondary and superfluous. In constructing a new foundation for meaning and value, Confucius looked to history rather than to religion. Viewing the institutions of the Western Zhou, rather than its ruling kings, as the true expression of Tian's Mandate, Confucius grounded China's first philosophy in the cardinal value of Zhou ritual, *li*, rather than the omnipotent benevolence of a supreme deity.

**The rise of the “gentleman” class.** Another major impetus for the rise of philosophy was connected to the changes in the structure of Zhou society that gradually emerged during the era of civil war. Among the profound social changes that mark this period, none is as important

as the diminishment in the security of aristocratic privilege and the rise of a new class of people who competed with the nobility for access to wealth, power, and prestige. This new class is sometimes called the class of “scholars,” and other times the class of “knights,” because many of its members sought to rise in society by means of learning or by means of skills in warfare. We will refer to it here as the class of “gentlemen,” which translates the Chinese term *shi* (士).

It is likely that there was no point in Chinese history when class divisions were so firm that no avenues for social advancement existed. But through the Shang and Zhou, the division between those who were highborn and commoners was seen as important and, to some degree, reflected a notion that ability and excellence were familial rather than individual attributes. The nobility was viewed as an innately better class of people than peasants and other lowborn people – though the firmness of this division was probably never as absolute as it tended to be in most premodern European cultures. Moreover, only members of the aristocracy were entitled to take part in the political life of the state. All significant offices of responsibility and reward were hereditary in nature. Moreover, warfare, which during the Western Zhou meant warfare against non-Chinese peoples rather than civil war, was very much an aristocratic sport. The Chinese were skilled at chariot war, archery, and swordsmanship, and all these types of war required considerable training. Although wars were fought with peasant conscripts serving as weakly armed supporting infantry (the bronze used in weapons of war was too expensive to supply to common troops), only noblemen were raised with the kind of leisure time and family training that could nurture expertise in chariot war.

The exaltation of the aristocracy was relatively easy to maintain during the stable era of the Western Zhou (that is, until the fall of the Western capital in 771). Under the strong rule of the central Zhou kings, there was no pressing threat to the political well being of those in power that would require them to look outside the nobility for people whose worth could add to their security. This began to change when the dynasty moved east and power began to be fragmented among the feudal lords. Under conditions of civil war and political intrigue, power-holders could not always afford to accept the fact that the son of the last chief-general of the state army had to inherit his father’s post, regardless of his abilities. The risks of aristocratic incompetence and the lure of the untapped talents of the lower class became increasingly apparent, and from the late eighth century on, we begin to note the appearance of low-born men of ability in roles of political significance.

Sometime during the sixth century, the Chinese discovered how to forge iron, and the proliferation of iron technology fundamentally changed the social conditions that had sustained class divisions in China. The iron plough greatly increased crop yields, leading to a

population explosion. The number of commoners rose to outstrip the aristocracy's ability to exercise control. Furthermore, iron technology led to a new generation of weapons, far cheaper and easier to make than the bronze weapons of earlier generations. Spears, pikes, battle axes, and knives could now be supplied to commoner infantry troops, and the role of aristocratic chariot warriors rapidly diminished. As populations grew, wars came increasingly to pit huge infantry armies of commoners against one another, in service of their kings. By the end of the Warring States period, million-man battles were being fought on the plains of eastern China. The political stakes had risen many-fold since the aristocratic heyday.

The conditions of this new Iron Age society fostered the rapid rise of talented commoners. These men of the gentlemen class were drawn both from very junior branches of aristocratic clans, which often fell from privilege but retained high social aspirations and traditions of education, and also from the lowest classes of society. Even a peasant youth, if he possessed martial skill and courage, or if he had the talent and initiative to study successfully with a private teacher such as a Confucian, could impress a power-holder in need of men of worth and secure a position of value at court or in an army.

Most of our philosophers were members of this new "middle" class. Confucius, for example, was born to parents who appear to have had some noble ancestors, but who were themselves insignificant subjects of the ruler of the state of Lu. Confucius's considerable contemporary reputation rested entirely on his achievements rather than on his birth, and he was also known for his willingness to accept men of any social backgrounds as his students. Mozi, the first great opponent of Confucianism, seems to have been a man from the lowest classes of society, as were most of his followers. Much of his opposition to Confucianism was due to his suspicion of the Confucian ritual syllabus, which celebrated many aspects of the aristocratic society of the Western Zhou. But Mozi and Confucius were united in their agreement that all people were born with similar capacities, and that social advancement should be open to any person (actually, any man) who could make good use of those capacities. Even thinkers who were, by birth, noble, such as the Legalist Han Feizi, agreed with these ideas.

The birth of philosophy in Classical China may legitimately be viewed as the expression of the new gentleman class, members of which used learning as a way to gain social leverage. By formulating the prescriptions that would rescue China from the chaos that aristocratic rule had brought, this commoner class was seizing the intellectual prerogative of the aristocracy to design the governance of China. Even further, many of these thinkers articulated a new vision of personal excellence that superseded the traditions of the aristocratic class, and instead

pictured perfection – sagehood – as a quality that could be attained by any person, regardless of birth. The path to this new “moral aristocracy,” each thinker proclaimed, was nothing more than his own Dao (道; a “Way” or teaching), which could recreate an ordinary peasant as a sage as great as the legendary emperors Yao and Shun – and it was no accident that in the stories of these greatest of all rulers, each rejects his own son as heir to his throne and passes the kingship instead to a man of low birth and high merit. For the early Chinese philosophers, anyone could achieve the goal of becoming “a sage within and king without.” In this, they were simply reflecting the new values of the age in which they lived.