

2.6 The Zhou Dynasty

The Western and Eastern Zhou Eras

Starting with the Zhou and continuing almost to the present day, Chinese history is best told through the dynastic cycle. This cycle describes the rise and fall of China's various ruling families based on what the Zhou called the Mandate of Heaven – a divine justification for leadership.

I. The Zhou Dynasty (1027 – 221 BC)

Fall of the Shang Dynasty

The final king of the Shang Dynasty was a cruel and corrupt ruler. Floods and famine made the king even more unpopular and eventually a massive rebellion was organized by the king of the Zhou state, **Wu Wang**. Some sources indicate that the Shang king was so hated that his own soldiers gave up without much of a fight, many of them defecting to Wu Wang's side. Fearing for his life, the Shang king retreated to his palace to commit suicide by burning it down.

With the support of the rebels and many of the previous king's military officers, Wu Wang became the new leader of China establishing a new line of rules known as the **Zhou Dynasty**. In an act of great mercy, Wu Wang chose not to wipe out the Shang clans entirely, choosing to allow some of the old royal family to retain some of their local influence. He still installed loyal officials to maintain control of these states, but the fact that he did not execute these potential rivals earned him the respect of China. Even still, Wu Wang knew that he had to legitimize his right to rule.

The Mandate of Heaven was introduced by Wu Wang and the early Zhou rulers as a way of legitimizing their rule. Heaven represented the gods and so the **Mandate of Heaven** was an order by the gods for an individual to rule. The Mandate of Heaven states that the success and prosperity of a virtuous ruler is only possible if the gods wanted that ruler to be in power. If the kingdom suffered because of natural disasters or peasant revolt, it was only because the gods no longer wanted the ruler to remain in power. In essence, Wu Wang argued that he had a right to rule because he took the Shangs' right to rule.

Trade and Technology

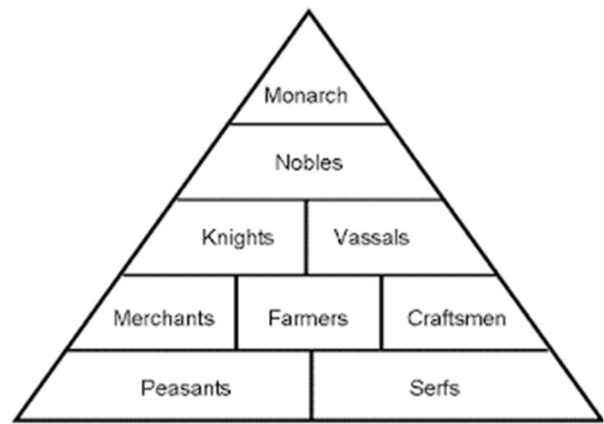
Although the Zhou did not make massive changes to the cultural identity of China, it did greatly expand trade. Zhou rulers ordered the construction of vast networks of roads and canals, all designed to facilitate trade between regions. This infrastructure also made the transport of food easier for those farms that were established further away from major urban centers. Coinage (image below) was also first established in China during the Zhou Dynasty, which encouraged even more trade and stimulated the economy.



Improved technology allowed the Zhou to develop the first blast furnaces, capable of casting extraordinarily strong and malleable iron tools and weapons. The quality of iron produced by Zhou blacksmiths was far superior to all of the iron produced the Middle East and Europe until at least the Middle Ages. Iron tools greatly improved agricultural production, while iron weapons made war even deadlier.

The Western Zhou Era (1027 – 771 BC)

The Zhou dynasty is split into two eras – the Western and Eastern Zhou Eras – so named because of the general location of the capital in these time periods. The **Western Zhou Era** was a period of growth and prosperity for all of China as Zhou rulers expanded their borders and worked diligently to improve trade in their kingdom. The Zhou mostly preserved the government structure of the Shang in a system known as **feudalism**, in which lords or nobles are allowed to use the lands of the king in exchange for their loyalty and military service.



Unlike the Shang, Zhou kings made sure to maintain kinship ties with all of their lords in order to ensure loyalty. **Kinship ties** are familial connections through lineage and marriage. Initially these lords had no choice but to submit to the Zhou king who controlled vast amounts of wealth and a powerful army. Over time this began to change. Improvements to agriculture and increased trade allowed the towns to grow into cities that expanded the territorial holdings of the lords. Thanks to economic growth, local populations that once resented their new Zhou lords gradually accepted their rule which led to the lords depending less on the king. In time, lords began to compete with each other for control of farmland and access to natural resources.

The Eastern Zhou Era (771 – 221 BC)

Around 771 BC bands of nomads from the north and west sacked the Zhou capital. The Zhou king was murdered in this attack, but the royal family escaped to establish a new capital in Luoyang in the east – far from the threat of future invasions. The invasion and subsequent movement of the Zhou capital marks the beginning of the **Eastern Zhou Era**, an era characterized by chaos and civil war. This era is further divided into two periods.

The first half of the Eastern Zhou Era is the **Spring and Autumn Period**, which lasted from 722 to 476 BC and saw the various Zhou lords compete for territory. At first the competition for territory took place through court politics but it gradually grew to include assassination and battle. At the start of the period, around 100 lords were fighting for power. As states claimed victories their wealth and military power grew, making future conflicts larger in scale with higher stakes. By the end of the period in 476 BC only 40 states remained, each with access to massive armies armed with the finest iron weapons of China.



In 476 BC, the Spring and Autumn Period became the **Warring States Period** in which wars raged between lords who would stop at nothing to gain power. The **code of chivalry**, a code of honor and courtesy for warriors, that once acted as a means of reducing unnecessary violence in war was completely abandoned and battles were extremely deadly. The 40 states that existed at the start of the period were reduced to less than ten. In each of these states, bureaucrats and government officials gained influence at the expense of the traditional centers of power – specifically the aristocracy.

II. Warring States Philosophies

In the Warring States Period, government officials and bureaucrats gained increasing amounts of power, influence, and wealth. This inevitably led to the decline of aristocratic rule as many of the traditional functions of the aristocrats were taken over by the states. This forced aristocrats to find new ways of exerting their influence on the state – sometimes as their only means of earning an income. Many tried to assume the role of advisors to their local rulers, offering them counsel and philosophies.

Legalism

Growing reliance on the state led to the formation of **legalism**, a political philosophy that says that human nature is wicked and that the only way to make people behave in an orderly fashion is through strict laws and harsh punishments. Legalists believed that all aspects of life must be controlled, and that personal freedom must be sacrificed for the good of the state. The earliest advocates for legalism believed that the best way to restore social order and peace in China was through strict government oversight.



Confucianism

One of the aristocrats who sought power was Kongzi, known as **Confucius** (left) in Latin. He combined many elements of Chinese folk religion, most importantly ancestral veneration, with what he believed China was lacking the most: respect. His philosophy, which came to be known as **Confucianism**, focused on relationships and their expressions of respect. The most important relationships were called 'The Five Relationships.' These were (1) ruler & subject, (2) father & son, (3) husband & wife, (4) older brother & younger brother, and (5) friend & friend. Confucius believed that a code of proper conduct should govern each of these in different ways. For example, a ruler should practice kindness and virtuous living and his subjects should be loyal and law-abiding in return.

For Confucius, family was the foundation of society and the relationship of father and son was the most important. Children must practice **filial piety**, respect for their parents and ancestors, at all points in their life. This meant that all people must devote themselves to their parents in life and in death. An excerpt from *The Analects* – a book that recorded the teaching of Confucius – describes the necessity of filial piety:

[A disciple] asked about filial piety. The Master [Confucius] said: "Nowadays people think they are dutiful sons when they feed their parents. Yet they also feed their dogs and horses. Unless there is respect where is the difference?"

- The Analects 2.7

Confucius drew a parallel between the family and the state by essentially expanding family roles out to the state. According to his teaching, government exists to serve the people and rulers gain respect and authority by displaying fairness and integrity. Confucius believed in the basic goodness of human nature and sought to improve society by improving the humanity of individuals through relationships. Confucianism emphasized courtesy, precision, generosity, and justice. As an aristocrat from one of the smaller states, Confucius had a hard time finding support for his philosophy in his lifetime. Thanks to the efforts of one of his students, Confucianism was able to spread throughout China.

Daoism

A book called *Dao De Jing* (The Way of Virtue) contains the philosophical teachings of a mysterious man called **Laozi**. The philosophy focused on the belief of a universal controlling force known as *Dao*, or the path, hence it came to be known as **Daoism**. This philosophy grew in popularity in China sometime around 500 BC.

Daoism teaches that one must accept the world as it is and to avoid the useless struggles of life. To do so, one must put in minimal effort to complete a task. One proverb summarizes it well, "Rather than fight the current, a wise man allows the onrushing waters to pass around him." According to Daoism, the only living creatures to resist the Dao are humans. This passage from the Dao De Jing explains why mankind should submit to it:

The Dao never does anything, yet through it all things are done. If powerful men and women could center themselves in it the whole world would be transformed by itself in its natural rhythms.

People would be content with their simple, everyday lives, in harmony, and free of desire.

When there is no desire, all things are at peace.

- Dao De Jing, Passage 37



While one might expect Daoists to live like ancient hippies in the wilderness, most found ways to justify some effort in order to live humble but comfortable lives. These Daoists devoted themselves to the pursuit of science and they made significant contributions to the fields of alchemy, astronomy, and medicine.

Daoism, Confucianism, and Legalism aimed to create order and stability in a time of chaos and uncertainty. Though each approached the issues differently, they all impacted Chinese history in ways that can still be seen today. Eventually, these philosophies travelled out of China into neighboring regions.