

## THE ZHOU DYNASTY (1045-256 B.C.)

### I. The Western Zhou (1045-771 B.C.)

The Shang Dynasty came to an end in 1045 B.C. (there is some dispute about the precise date). It was brought down by an alliance of armies, led by the ruler of a people known as the Zhou, who established a new dynasty, locating their capital city in the far west, past the great bend of the Yellow River, in the valley of a tributary stream known as the Wei River.

The Zhou Dynasty was famous in later history for the great success and stability of its early centuries. However, in 771 B.C., the consequences of gradual government weakening and military pressure from external tribes resulted in successful attacks on the capital by nomadic peoples. The king was killed, and his heir, carried off to a secondary capital in the east, was unable to restore the strength of the ruling house. From that point on the character of the Zhou era changes dramatically. For this reason, the Chinese traditionally speak of the Zhou as two eras: the early, Western Zhou period of unity and peace, and the later Eastern Zhou period of fragmentation and war.

**The Zhou people.** The Zhou people were a tribe that 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. Like the Shang, 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, ultimately settling in 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. The rise of this people to a serious threat to the Shang is closely associated with the reigns of two Zhou kings: the pre-conquest King Wen, and his son King Wu, who conquered the Shang.

**King Wen.** About 1100, an outstanding leader inherited the throne of the Zhou people. He is known to history as King Wen. 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 last Shang king. Both these men had unusually long reigns, King Wen died only in 1050, while the last Shang king occupied the throne from about 1095 until the fall of the Shang in 1045. During the later decades of this period, the Shang king'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 the Shang king 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 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). The last Shang king was killed and his dynasty came to an end.

<i>Shang</i>	<i>c. 1700 – 1045 B.C.</i>	
<i>Zhou</i>	<i>1045 – 256 B.C.</i>	
<b><u>WESTERN ZHOU</u></b>	<b><u>1045 - 771 B.C.</u></b>	◀
<i>EASTERN ZHOU</i>	<i>771 – 256 B.C.</i>	
<i>Qin</i>	<i>221 – 208 B.C.</i>	
<i>Han</i>	<i>206 B.C. – A.D. 220</i>	
<i>"Six Dynasties"</i>	<i>220 – 589</i>	
<i>Sui</i>	<i>589 – 617</i>	
<i>Tang</i>	<i>618 – 907</i>	
<i>"Five Dynasties"</i>	<i>907 – 960</i>	
<i>Song</i>	<i>960 – 1279</i>	
<i>Yuan</i>	<i>1279 – 1368</i>	
<i>Ming</i>	<i>1368 – 1644</i>	
<i>Qing</i>	<i>1644 – 1911</i>	

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. How would the Zhou preserve its power?

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 cultural history. The "Mandate" theory became the single most influential idea throughout the traditional era about what how governments gain and lose the right to rule. Although the influence of Zhou feudalism was not as long term, many of the most enduring

forms of Chinese culture and thought developed as a consequence of its structure, as a consequence of both its successes and failures.

The Mandate of Heaven. 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,” 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 (which bears only a passing resemblance to European feudalism) 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 actually Ji; “Zhou” may have denoted their homeland) 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 system allowed the power of the royal house to be stretched far beyond anything the small group of Zhou royalty could themselves have managed, but it also created a structure of dispersed

power; local power lay most directly in the hands of hereditary clans that could potentially compete with the Zhou at a later time. Ultimately, this proved to be the decisive weakness of the Zhou kingship.

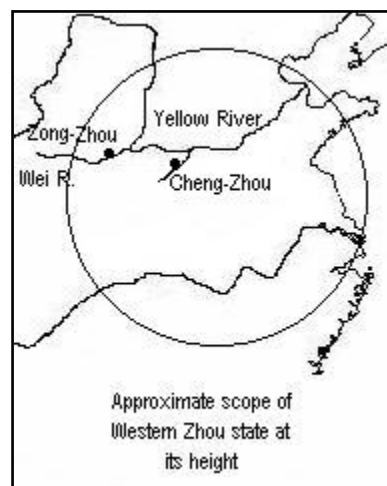
**The Rebellion of 1043-1040 and the Duke of Zhou.** Two years after the conquest, King Wu died. The Zhou state was far from stable and its permanence was threatened by the fact that the late king's eldest son was only a child. The likelihood that the Zhou achievements would come unraveled seemed great. 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 (in ancient China, where polygamous families were the norm among the elite, it was not unusual for patricians 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, 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 *Coursepack* 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. 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*," 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 Transition**

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.

### **The Birth of Literature and the *Book of Poetry***

The era of the Western Zhou is the first for which we have any documentary evidence that could justifiably be called "literary." A number of the great works of early Chinese literature can be dated back to the Western Zhou (although portions of all of them include later additions). One of these famous texts is a collection of speeches and letters by founding members of the royal house, men such as the Duke of Zhou. It is known in Chinese as the "Revered Texts," but is usually referred to in English as the *Book of History*. Compared to some other early texts, it is rather dry in content, but its value for understanding the political thought of the period is very high.

Another work often ascribed to this period is the *Yijing* or *Book of Changes*, a divination text that is often interpreted as incorporating important ethical and metaphysical wisdom from the early period.

But the most impressive literary text of the Western Zhou is the *Book of Poetry*, a collection of 305 lyrics that includes folk ballads, elite art poetry, and liturgical odes, celebrating the ancestors of the royal clans of the dynasty. The variety of topics is very broad. There are love lyrics, songs about peasant life and army duties, celebrations of political achievements, laments about political decay, and so forth. When read closely and with a general understanding of the political and social conditions of the time, the *Book of Poetry* can provide tremendous insight into early Zhou life.

The *Book of Poetry*'s greatness was recognized early, and by the sixth century B.C., young men of the elite class were expected to have learned it by heart, and to be able to chant appropriate snatches from it in discourse, to convey or underscore a point. This appropriation of the text led to a belief that it had been written not by ordinary people, but by sages, who embedded within it great wisdom, often in the form of indirect praise or satire of the great political figures of the age. These interpretations tended to deprive the collection of its cultural richness. Only in the past century has a new tradition of literary understanding led people in China and elsewhere to reexamine the poems to search for their original freshness.