

## 1.6 THE STORY OF THE DUKE OF ZHOU

Next to Confucius himself, the greatest hero of ancient China, as viewed through the perspective of the later Confucian tradition, was a man known as the Duke of Zhou, one of the founders of the Zhou Dynasty. The Duke of Zhou is celebrated for two reasons. The first concerns his formidable political achievements. The texts tell us that two years after the conquest of the Shang, the Zhou conqueror King Wu died, leaving only one very young son to succeed him. While it was the Shang custom to pass the throne from older to younger brother within one generation, the tradition of the Zhou people had been that their throne should pass only from father to son. Upon the death of King Wu, his younger brother, the Duke of Zhou, seized power, claiming that it was his intention to preside only as an emergency measure until his nephew came of age and could properly receive the Mandate of Heaven. A number of the other brothers believed instead that the Duke was seizing the throne in the manner of former Shang kings and they raised a rebellion. The Duke not only put down the rebellion, but followed this forceful confirmation of his claim to ultimate power by actually doing what he had promised all along – when his nephew, the future King Cheng, came of age, the Duke ceded to him full authority to rule and retired to an advisory role. This sacrifice of power on the Duke's part immeasurably enhanced the stature of the Zhou throne and the religious power of the concept of Heaven's mandate.

The second dimension of the Duke's fame is cultural. According to Confucius's successors, it was the Duke of Zhou who fashioned the elaborate political and ceremonial rituals of the Zhou Dynasty which became, as we shall see later on, central to the Confucian cult of the late Zhou. The primal text of Confucianism, the *Analects of Confucius*, quotes Confucius as exclaiming, "How I have declined! Long has it been since I have dreamed of the Duke of Zhou," and this was interpreted as confirming the notion that Confucius himself revered the Duke as the source of his Dao, or teaching. In this way, the Duke became a type of culture hero, an inventor of a way of life which was believed to possess in some form divine sanction.

For these two reasons, during the late Classical era, the Duke of Zhou stood as the single greatest pillar of the Chinese past – the most recent "founder" of Chinese culture. In this account of his life, which appears in the Han Dynasty text *Shiji*, written by the historian Sima Qian about 100 B.C., we can see many of the legends associated with the Duke woven together in a coherent chronicle of his life. One of the questions we will ask later in this course, when we examine inscriptional records of the early Zhou that have been recovered by archaeologists in recent years, is how the Duke of Zhou's role in history, as portrayed here, matches the contemporary accounts which we are now able to read.

## The Biography of the Duke of Zhou

### The Duke's Role in the Conquest

Dan, the Duke of Zhou, was the younger brother of King Wu. When their father King Wen was alive, Dan was a filial son, deeply humane; in this he was different from the other sons. When King Wu succeeded to the throne, Dan was his constant aide and was in charge of many government affairs.

In the ninth year of King Wu's reign, the Duke of Zhou accompanied the king in his eastern campaign to the Ford of Meng. In the eleventh year of the reign, when the king marched to Muye to attack the Shang king Zhòu, the Duke of Zhou was his chief aide and composed the "Oath at Mu." After the Shang had been defeated the Shang palace was entered, Zhòu being already dead. The Duke of Zhou stood holding a great battle axe, flanking the king along with his cousin, the Duke of Shao, who held a lesser battle axe. There they performed a blood rite at the altar of state and proclaimed the crimes of Zhòu to Heaven and to the people of the Shang. Then they released the Shang Prince Ji from prison and bestowed a patrimonial estate upon Lufu, the son of Zhòu, appointing King Wu's brothers Guanshu and Caishu to act as Lufu's aides and so perpetuate the sacrifices of the house of Shang.

Subsequently, the king bestowed patrimonial estates on all of his most meritorious officers and fellow clan members. The Duke of Zhou received a patrimonial estate at Qufu, the abandoned site of the city of the ancient ruler Shaohao. Thus he became the Duke of Lu. But the Duke of Zhou did not move to his estate, remaining instead to assist King Wu.



The Duke's fief, Lu, was in the far east, on the Shantung peninsula. Because of his ability in government, the Duke remained at the Zhou capital in the far west to help King Wu organize the new government, along with his cousin the Duke of Shao, and sent his son out to Lu to act as its first ruler. It is because the Duke remained in the capital districts of Zhou rather than traveling to his estate that he is known as the Duke of Zhou, rather than as a duke of Lu.

### The Duke's Attempt at Self-Sacrifice

The year after the conquest, before the empire had been fully pacified, King Wu fell gravely ill and his ministers were deeply fearful. The Grand Duke Wang and the Duke of Shao planned to make a solemn divination. But the Duke of Zhou said, "It is too soon to presume upon our former kings."

Thereupon, the Duke of Zhou took it upon himself to serve as hostage for the king's welfare. He had three earthen altars constructed and stood before them facing north, having capped them with ceremonial round jades and clasping a long ceremonial jade in his fist. He called upon his

great-grandfather, King Tai, his grandfather King Ji, and his father King Wen. The scribal liturgist read out his prayer.

“Your eldest descendant, the king Fa, has through his arduous labors been struck by illness. If it be the heavenly charge of you three kings to determine his fate, then take me, Dan, in place of him. I am skillful and able, with many talents, many arts. I am well able to serve the spirits. The king is not so talented nor so able as I; he is not skilled at serving the spirits. Moreover, he has been mandated by the court of the Lord on High to possess the four quarters, and thus he has the power to settle your descendants upon the lands below such that none in the four quarters will not act with respect, all in awe. Do not destroy the mandate that Heaven has sent down. You, our former kings, would then have none upon whom to rely for sustenance. I will now entrust my destiny through a charge to the great diviner’s tortoise. Should you grant my request, I shall carry with me these round jades and my long jade and await your decree. If you will not grant my request, I shall have these ceremonial jades removed.”

Having ordered the scribe to inform Kings Tai, Ji, and Wen of his wish to take the place of King Wu, the Duke of Zhou divined concerning the response of the three kings. The diviners all prognosticated that the cracks would be auspicious, and when the divination inscriptions were examined, this was indeed the case. The Duke of Zhou was pleased. He then opened the tube containing divination texts and those which he selected were also auspicious.

The Duke of Zhou went back to encourage King Wu. “My king, you shall encounter no harm from this. I have just received a command from the three kings, and you shall be allowed to continue your enterprise to the end. This shows that they are concerned for your royal person!”

Then the Duke of Zhou hid the text of his prayer in a coffer bound with metal bands, enjoining those who guarded it never to dare speak of it. The following day, King Wu recovered.

This entire episode is based on a text called “The Metal Banded Coffin,” which is included in the canonical *Book of Documents*. (Sima Qian attempted to refer to or include in his narrative all the texts collected in that work. His citations generally modify the language of the original, making its meaning more comprehensible.) Most scholars date “The Metal Banded Coffin” to the late Eastern Zhou, during a time when Confucians, whose home base was in Lu, the Duke of Zhou’s patrimonial state, were promoting a cult celebrating the Duke as a sage in the Confucian style.

### The Regency and the Rebellion

Later, when King Wu did die, his son King Cheng was only a child in swaddling clothes. The Duke of Zhou was fearful that when the empire heard that King Wu had died it would revolt. So the Duke of Zhou tread the steps to the throne and replaced King Cheng in the administration of

governmental affairs. Guanshu and the other younger brothers of the Duke spread word throughout the states saying that the Duke of Zhou planned criminal acts against King Cheng.

Thereupon, the Duke of Zhou addressed the Grand Duke Wang and Shi, the Duke of Shao. “The reason why I have assumed a regency rather than step away has been my fear of revolt in the empire. If this were to happen, I would have no way to explain it to our three former rulers, Kings Tai, Ji, and Wen. Those three kings were long careworn, laboring on behalf of the empire. Now, their labors have finally borne fruit. But King Wu has died too early, and King Cheng is but a child. It is on behalf of the Zhou that I have acted.”

The Duke of Zhou therefore determined to remain to minister to King Cheng and sent his own son, Bo Qin, to take up the title and duties of the patrimonial estate in Lu. The Duke of Zhou enjoined Bo Qin, saying, “I am the son of King Wen, the brother of King Wu, the uncle of King Cheng; my place in the empire is no lowly role. Yet each time I bathe, I am called away three times, wringing out my hair in haste; each time I dine, I rush off three times, spitting out my food in haste, in order to wait upon some gentleman. I do so because I am always fearful that I may otherwise fail to gain the service of a worthy man. When you reach Lu, take care that you do not behave arrogantly towards others on account of your estate.”

In the end, the brothers Guanshu and Caishu, together with Lufu, scion of the Shang house, did indeed rise in revolt, leading a force drawn from the Yi tribes of the Huai River valley. Arrogating the powers of King Cheng to himself, the Duke of Zhou raised an army and set off to fight in the east, composing the “Great Announcement.”

The “Great Announcement” refers to a text in the *Book of Documents*. In it the Duke of Zhou, speaking on behalf of King Cheng, rallies his troops to repel the revolt in the east. The text particularly stresses that the outcome has been carefully divined and will be favorable, and that the battle’s purpose will be to carry out the will of Heaven, who thus supports the royal armies. Many scholars date this text to the early Western Zhou period, and some believe that it is, indeed, the Duke’s original call to his troops.

Subsequently, the Duke sentenced Guanshu to execution, had Lufu killed, and banished Caishu. He gathered together the remaining people of the Shang and entrusted them to Kangshu, whom he endowed with a patrimonial estate in Wey. He endowed the Shang Prince Wei with a patrimonial estate in Sung, in order that the Shang sacrifices should be continued. He pacified the lands of the Yi tribes who lived in the valley of the Huai River, and in two years the lands of the east were settled. The patrimonial lords all came to the Zhou ancestral capital in the west to offer their submission.

Heaven sent down rich blessings. Tangshu harvested identical grains from fields sown differently, and presented them to King Cheng. The king ordered him to send them to the Duke of Zhou in the east, and composed the text “Presentation of Grain.” The Duke of Zhou received the

grain as mandated and, to celebrate the beauty of the mandate of the Son of Heaven he composed “Beautiful Grain.”

These passages illustrate very well the difficulty of relying on historical texts. Tangshu was the younger brother of King Cheng, who was himself, during the campaign in the east, still a callow pre-teen. What are we to make of this account of their solemn behavior? Other histories tell us that at some short time earlier, the two boys were playing together, and the young king, in imitation of the royal ritual ceremony, grabbed a fistful of grass and playfully presented it to his brother saying, “With this I bestow on you the patrimonial estate of Tang.” The court scribe standing nearby asked the king to name the date of the formal installation. “I was only joking!” said the boy. “The Son of Heaven’s words can never be said in jest,” replied the scribe. Hence the smaller boy became the lord of Tang. The two texts referred to in this section are lost chapters of the *Book of Documents*.

When the lands of the east had been fully brought under control, the Duke of Zhou returned and reported the outcome to King Cheng. Then he inscribed a poem and sent it to the king. He titled it “The Owl.” Thus King Cheng did not presume to speak harshly to the Duke.

“The Owl” appears in the *Book of Poetry*, and its association with the Duke of Zhou probably postdates its composition by many centuries. Its function (which is made clearer in the text of the “Metal Banded Coffin”) concerns suspicions that it was the Duke’s intention to usurp the throne after a time, rather than to fulfill his regency and install King Cheng, a notion which “slanderers” at the Zhou court were whispering in the young king’s ear while his uncle was off on the eastern campaign. The poem reads as follows:

Owl, oh owl,  
 You’ve taken my children,  
 Don’t shatter my home!  
 With love and with toil,  
 How I nurtured my young.

Before the dark rain,  
 Gathering mulberry brush,  
 I thatched windows and doors;  
 Yet villains now dare  
 To fling insults at me.

Fingers chafed rough  
 From the reeds have I picked,  
 From the straw have I plucked  
 My mouth is so sore,  
 Yet no dwelling have I.

My wings are all withered,  
 My tail worn away,  
 My home toppling down,  
 Wind tossed in the rain,  
 My call a pale cry.

This was taken to represent the Duke of Zhou's regret that the affections of the young king had been stolen from him, and now his patrimonial estate of Lu would be in danger as well. The phrase concerning "speaking harshly" to the Duke refers to the alienation between the two which had resulted from the King's suspicions.

### The Founding of the Capital at Cheng-Zhou and the Close of the Regency

In the seventh year of the reign of King Cheng, in the second month, on the day *yi-wei*, the king walked in a dawn procession from the city of Zhou to the royal precincts of Feng. He ordered the Grand Protector, the Duke of Shao, to precede him and go to survey the lands by the River Luo. A full three months later, the Duke of Zhou traveled to construct the earthworks marking the new city by the Luo, Cheng-Zhou. He divined the proper alignments, and when the omens were auspicious he had the walls of the state constructed.



When King Cheng grew to adulthood and was able to manage the affairs of state, the Duke of Zhou returned to him the reins of government, and King Cheng took his place upon the throne at court. The regency during which the Duke of Zhou ruled in place of King Cheng, facing south and wearing the royal robes as he assembled the patrician lords at dawn court, altogether lasted seven years. Then he returned the government to King Cheng and took up his position facing north as a subject minister, thoroughly manifesting an attitude of awe.

Earlier, when King Cheng was still a boy, he had fallen ill. The Duke of Zhou plucked a tick from his body and submerged it in the river, offering a prayer to the spirit of the river. "The king is a youth and as yet has no understanding; the one who has offended against the mandates of the spirits is I, Dan." He also stored a text of this prayer in the royal storehouse. King Cheng then recovered. When King Cheng came into his majority and assumed the throne, some slandered the Duke of Zhou, and the Duke fled south to the lands of Chu. Then King Cheng, inspecting the storehouse came across the record of the Duke's prayer. It brought tears to his eyes, and he ordered that the Duke of Zhou be brought back to the capital.

Early texts frequently record several versions of what is clearly a single folktale. This story of the Duke's prayer is surely an alternative of the "Metal Banded Coffin" story. Sima Qian, our historian, has valued completeness over reliability. Nevertheless, plausible arguments supporting the validity of the tradition that the Duke of Zhou was forced into exile have recently been offered, and it may be that this tale, in itself probably spurious, is the only place in which that piece of valid information was preserved.

## The Instructions of the Duke

When the Duke of Zhou returned, he was concerned that, King Cheng being in the prime of youth, the affairs of government might become dissolute or slack. Accordingly, he composed two texts, “You Many Gentlemen” and “Be Never Slack.”

These are both texts from the *Book of Documents*. The passages below are Sima Qian’s selections.

“Be Never Slack” said:

“Fathers and mothers work long and hard, but their children and grandchildren are often arrogant wastrels and forget them. Thus they bring down their families. Is it not important that children take care? It was thus that in the past, the Shang king Zhongzong solemnly attended to Heaven’s mandate with the utmost care, fashioning ordinances to rule the people, always fearfully alert lest he should dare to become self-indulgent. For this reason, Zhongzong enjoyed his throne for seventy-five years.

When the throne passed to Gaozong, who had toiled long away from the capital, joining together with the common people, he observed the three-year mourning period in perfect silence, living in a hut by his father’s grave. And when he did, at last, speak, his words were joyful, yet he did not dare become self-indulgent. He brought peace to the state of Shang, and none, whether great or small, had any complaint. For this reason, Gaozong enjoyed his throne for fifty-five years.

When it came to Zujia, he was at first unrighteous as king and was forced to dwell for long away from his throne, and so came to know the lot of the common people. He learned to succor the common people and never to disgrace those who were alone, without husbands or wives. For this reason, Zujia enjoyed his throne for thirty-three years.”

“You Many Gentlemen” said:

“From the reign of the Shang founder Tang to that of Di Yi, none did not perform the proper sacrifices and make their virtue bright; none was not a suitable match for Heaven. But then his son, the king Zhòu, was greatly dissolute and lax, he attended neither to Heaven, nor to the needs of the people. His people were all as under sentence of death. In the meantime, King Wen did not take the time even to eat a meal while the sun was in the sky, and so he enjoyed the throne of the Zhou people for fifty years.”

And the Duke cautioned King Cheng by means of these texts.

The significance of these passages is, in large part, that the legend of the Duke of Zhou, which in many respects seems to have crafted the portrait of the Duke specifically as a model for the dissolute rulers of the later Zhou, pictures the Duke recreating the history of the

Shang in order to edify the first long-term ruler of the Zhou. The “lessons” of history are manifold here.

### The Duke Creates the Zhou Political Code and Dies

With King Cheng on the throne in the royal precincts of Feng, the empire was at last at peace. But organization of the offices of the Zhou government was not yet determined. Thereupon, the Duke of Zhou wrote “The Offices of Zhou,” and offices and their duties were then properly distinguished. He wrote “The Establishment of Government” in order to aid the common people, and the common people were happy.

The Duke of Zhou was ill and on his deathbed in Feng. “I must be buried in Cheng-Zhou in order to make it clear that I will never depart from King Cheng.” But when the Duke of Zhou died, King Cheng, wishing to express his former desire to yield the throne, buried the duke in Bi alongside the tomb of King Wen. “This is to make it clear that I never presumed to treat the Duke of Zhou as a subject.”

The year of the Duke of Zhou’s death, before the autumn harvest, a fierce wind blew, rattling with thunder. All of the grain was bent low, and even great trees were uprooted. The state of Zhou was in terror. King Cheng and the officers of court dressed in ritual robes in order to open the metal banded coffer. Therein, the king discovered the prayers of the Duke of Zhou to substitute his own death for King Wu’s. The king and the two dukes attending him then questioned the scribe and minor officers of the temple. They said, “Yes, this truly happened. But the Duke of Zhou ordered us not to speak of it.” The king held the prayer text and wept. “There is no further need for divination,” he said. “Formerly, the Duke of Zhou served the royal house with assiduous effort, but I, young and foolish, understood nothing. It is that Heaven has now moved in its awesomeness to bring the virtue of the Duke of Zhou to light. I myself shall receive the spirit of the Duke, following the sacrificial rituals of the state.” Then the king went out to the suburbs. It began to rain and a reverse wind began to blow such that the grain was all blown upright again. The two attendant dukes ordered the people of the state to replant all the trees that had been toppled. In the end, there was a great harvest.

Thereupon King Cheng ordered that the dukes of Lu would have the right to perform the royal suburban sacrifice during which offerings were presented to King Wen, and that Lu would be permitted to employ the court rituals and music appropriate to the king’s court alone. All this was to celebrate the virtue of the Duke of Zhou.

(*Shiji* 33.1515-1523)

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. *The Duke of Zhou's story is comparable in political significance to popular tales about George Washington in America (honest enough to 'fess up to the cherry tree; strong enough to throw a silver dollar across the Potomac). How was the Duke seen as great and what lessons did his example convey?*
2. *What can we learn about the structure of the early Zhou state from this narrative?*
3. *What is the significance of the founding of the eastern capital after the revolt against the Duke?*
4. *What religious ideas and practices can we discern in this story?*

## Source

The story of the Duke of Zhou appears in a chapter of the *Shiji* that records the annals of the state of Lu, where the Duke's descendants ruled until the last era of the Zhou Dynasty: "Lu Zhou Gong shijia" (The Duke of Zhou's hereditary house of Lu).