

Main | Other Chinese Web Sites

Chinese Cultural Studies:

The Mandate of Heaven,

Selections from the Shu Jing (The Classic of History) (6th Cent. BCE)

from James Legge, trans, *The Sacred Books of China: The Texts of Confucianism*, in F. Max Mueller, ed., *The Sacred Books of the East*, 50 vols., (Oxford: Clarendon, 1879-1910), Vol 3. pp. 92-95, repr. in Alfred J. Andrea and James H. Overfield, *The Human Record: Sources of Global History*, Vol 1, 2d. ed., (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), pp. 25-27

[Andrea Introduction] The Shu Jing, or Classic of History, is the oldest complete work among what are known as the five Confucian classics.

The five classics were canonized as the basic elements of the Confucian educational system during the second century BCE., when the books were reconstructed by order of several emperors of the Han Dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE). Although Han scholars probably refashioned elements of the Shu Jing, the work was already ancient in Confucius's day, and the book, as we have received it, is probably essentially the same text that Confucius (551-479 BCE) knew, studied, and accepted as an authentic record of Chinese civilization.

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

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

The Mandate of Heaven was a political-social philosophy that served as the basic Chinese explanation for the success and failure of monarchs and states down to the end of the empire in 1912 CE. Whenever a dynasty fell, the reason invariably offered by China's sages was that it had lost the moral right to rule which is given by Heaven alone. In this context heaven did not mean a personal god but a cosmic

all-pervading power. Most historians today agree that the theory the Mandate of Heaven was an invention of the Zhou to justify their overthrow of the Shang. The king, after all, was the father of his people, and paternal authority was the basic cement of Chinese society from earliest times. Rebellion against a father, therefore, needed extraordinary justification.

In the twelfth month of the first year... Yi Yin sacrificed to the former king, and presented the heir-king reverently before the shrine of his grandfather.

All the princes from the domain of the nobles and the royal domain were present; all the officers also, each continuing to discharge his particular duties, were there to receive the orders of the chief minister. Yi Yin then clearly described the complete virtue of the Meritorious Ancestor for the instruction of the young king.

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

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

"He extensively sought out wise men, who should be helpful to you, his descendant and heir. He laid down the punishments for officers, and warned those who were in authority, saying, 'If you dare to have constant dancing in your palaces, and drunken singing in your chambers, -- that is called the fashion of sorcerers; if you dare to see your hearts on wealth and women, and abandon yourselves to wandering about or to the chase, -- that is called the fashion of extravagance; if you dare to despise sage words, to resist the loyal and upright, to put far from you the aged and virtuous, and to seek the

company of...youths, -- that is called the fashion of disorder. Now if a high noble or officer be addicted to one of these three fashions with their ten evil ways, his family will surely come to ruin; if the prince of a country be so addicted, his state will surely come to ruin. The minister who does not try to correct such vices in the sovereign shall be punished with branding.'...

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

#### [Andrea] QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

- 1.How does a monarch lose the Mandate of Heaven, and what are the consequences of this loss?
- 2.What evidence can you find here of the Chinese cult of reverence for the ancestors?
- 3.What evidence can you find to support the conclusion that classical Chinese political philosophy perceived the state as an extended family?
- 4.What sort of harmony does the monarch maintain?
- 5.Would Yi Yin accept the notion that there can be a distinction between ruler's private morality and public policies?
- 6.What does the theory of the Mandate of Heaven suggest about the nature of Chinese society?
- 7.American politicians often promise "innovative answers to the challenge of tomorrow." What would Yi Yin think about such an approach to statecraft? What would Yi Yin think about modern politicians who attempt to appear youthful? What would he think of popular opinion polls?