Section 3: The Zhou Dynasty

The Mandate of Heaven

The Zhou Dynasty overthrew the Shang Dynasty, and used the Mandate of Heaven as justification.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Describe the Zhou Dynasty’s justification for overthrowing the Shang Dynasty

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Points

- In 1046 BCE, the Shang Dynasty was overthrown at the Battle of Muye, and the Zhou Dynasty was established.
- The Zhou created the Mandate of Heaven: the idea that there could be only one legitimate ruler of China at a time, and that this ruler had the blessing of the gods. They used this Mandate to justify their overthrow of the Shang, and their subsequent rule.
- Some scholars think the earlier Xia Dynasty never existed—that it was invented by the Zhou to support their claim under the Mandate that there had always been only one ruler of China.

Key Terms

- **Battle of Muye**: The battle that resulted with the Zhou, a subject people living in the western part of the kingdom, overthrew the Shang Dynasty.
- **Mandate of Heaven**: The Chinese philosophical concept of the circumstances under which a ruler is allowed to rule. Good rulers were allowed to rule under the Mandate of Heaven, while despotic, unjust rulers had the Mandate
The Fall of the Shang

In 1046 BCE, the Zhou, a subject people living in the western part of the kingdom, overthrew the Shang Dynasty at the Battle of Muye. This was a battle between Shang and Zhou clans, over the Shang’s expansion. They largely had the support of the Chinese people: Di Xin (the final king of the Shang Dynasty) had become cruel, spent state money on drinking and gambling, and ignored the state. The Zhou established authority by forging alliances with regional nobles, and founded their new dynasty with its capital at Fenghao (near present-day Xi'an, in western China).

Map of Zhou Dynasty: This map shows the location of the ancient Zhou Dynasty.

The Mandate of Heaven

Under the Zhou Dynasty, China moved away from worship of Shangdi (“Celestial Lord”) in favor of worship of Tian (“heaven”), and they created the Mandate of Heaven. According to this idea, there could be only one legitimate ruler of China at a time, and this ruler reigned as the “Son of Heaven” with the approval of the gods. If a king ruled unfairly he could lose this approval, which would result in his downfall. Overthrow, natural disasters, and famine were taken as a sign that the ruler had lost the Mandate of Heaven.

The Mandate of Heaven did not require a ruler to be of noble birth, and had no time limitations. Instead, rulers were expected to be good and just in order to keep the Mandate. The Zhou claimed that their rule was justified by the Mandate of Heaven. In other words, the Zhou believed that the Shang kings had become immoral with their excessive drinking, luxuriant living, and cruelty, and so had lost their mandate. The gods’ blessing was given instead to the new ruler under the Zhou Dynasty, which would rule China for the next 800 years.

The need for the Zhou to create a history of a unified China is also why some scholars think the Xia Dynasty may have been an invention of the Zhou. The Zhou needed to erase the various small states of prehistoric China from history, and replace them with the monocratic Xia Dynasty in order for their Mandate of Heaven to seem valid (i.e., to support the claim that there always would be, and always had been, only one ruler of China).

The Zhou ruled until 256 BCE, when the state of Qin captured Chengzhou. However, the Mandate of Heaven philosophy carried on throughout ancient China.

Society Under the Zhou Dynasty

Under the initial period of the Zhou Dynasty (called the Western Zhou period), a number of innovations were made, rulers were legitimized under the Mandate of Heaven, a feudal system developed, and new forms of irrigation allowed the population to expand.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Describe the main accomplishments of the Western Zhou period

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Points

- The first period of Zhou rule, during which the Zhou held undisputed power over China, is known as the Western Zhou period.
- During the Western Zhou period, the focus of religion changed from the supreme god, Shangdi, to “Tian,” or heaven; advances were made in farming technology; and the feudal system was established.
- Under the feudal system, the monarchy would reward loyal nobles with large pieces of land.
- Over time, the king grew weaker, and the lords of the feudal system grew stronger, until finally, in 711 BCE, one lord joined forces with an invading group of barbarians and killed the king.

Key Terms

- **Western Zhou period**: The first period of Zhou rule, during which the Zhou held undisputed power over China (1046-771 BCE).
- **feudal system**: A social system based on personal ownership of resources and personal fealty between a suzerain (lord) and a vassal (subject). Defining characteristics include direct ownership of resources, personal loyalty, and a hierarchical social structure reinforced by religion.
• Duke of Zhou: A regent to the king who established the feudal system, and held a lot of power during the Western Zhou period.

The first period of Zhou rule, during which the Zhou held undisputed power over China, is known as the Western Zhou period. This period ended when the capital was moved eastward. A number of important innovations took place during this period: the Zhou moved away from worship of Shangdi, the supreme god under the Shang, in favor of Tian ("heaven"); they legitimized rulers, through the Mandate of Heaven (divine right to rule); they moved to a feudal system; developed Chinese philosophy; and made new advances in irrigation that allowed more intensive farming and made it possible for the lands of China to sustain larger populations.

China created a substantial amount of literature during the Zhou Dynasty. These include The Book of History and The Book of Diviners, which was used by fortune tellers. Books dedicated to songs and ceremonial rites were also created. While many of these writings have been destroyed over time, their lasting impression on history is evidence of the strength of Zhou culture.

Like other river valley civilizations of the time, the people under the Zhou Dynasty followed patriarchal roles. Men chose which children would be educated and whom their daughters were married. The household usually consisted of the head male, his wife, his sons and unmarried daughters.

The feudal system in China was structurally similar to ones that followed, such as pre-imperial Macedon, Europe, and Japan. At the beginning of the Zhou Dynasty's rule, the Duke of Zhou, a regent to the king, held a lot of power, and the king rewarded the loyalty of nobles and generals with large pieces of land. Delegating regional control in this way allowed the Zhou to maintain control over a massive land area. Under this feudal (fengjian) system, land could be passed down within families, or broken up further and granted to more people.

Most importantly, the peasants who farmed the land were controlled by the feudal system. Slavery had been common during the Shang Dynasty, but this decreased and finally disappeared under the Zhou Dynasty, as social status became more fluid and transitory.

When the Duke of Zhou stepped down, China was united and at peace, leading to years of prosperity. But this only lasted for about seventy-five years. Over time, the central power of the Zhou Dynasty slowly weakened, and the lords of the fiefs originally bestowed by the Zhou came to equal the kings in wealth and influence. They began to actively compete with them for power, and the fiefs gained independence as individual states.

Finally, in 711 BCE, one rebellious noble, the Marquess of Shen, joined forces with invading barbarians, the Quanrong, to defeat the King You. No one came to the king’s defense, and he was killed. The Zhou capital was sacked by the barbarians, and with this the Western Zhou period ended.

Art Under the Zhou Dynasty

Under the Zhou Dynasty, many art forms expanded and became more detailed, including bronze, bronze inscriptions, painting, and lacquerware.
LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Identify some of the art forms prevalent under the Zhou Dynasty

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Points

• Work in bronze, including inscriptions, continued and expanded in the Zhou Dynasty.
• Few paintings have survived from this period, but we know that they were representations of the real world.
• The production of lacquerware expanded during this period.

Key Terms

• Lacquer: A natural varnish, originating in China or Japan, and extracted from the sap of a sumac tree.

Bronze, Ceramics, and Jade

Chinese script cast onto bronzeware, such as bells and cauldrons, carried over from the Shang Dynasty into the Zhou; it showed continued changes in style over time, and by region. Under the Zhou, expansion of this form of writing continued, with the inclusion of patrons and ancestors.
Example of Bronze Inscription: This example of bronze inscription was cast on the Song ding, ca. 800 BCE. The text records the appointment of a man named Song (颂) as supervisor of the storehouses in Chengzhou, and is repeated on at least 3 tripod pots (鼎 ding), 5 tureens (簋 guǐ) and their lids, and 2 vases (壺 hú) and their lids.

Other improvements to bronze objects under the Eastern Zhou included greater attention to detail and aesthetics. The casting process itself was improved by a new technique, called the lost wax method of production.
Example of Western Zhou Bronze: A Chinese bronze “gui” ritual vessel on a pedestal, used as a container for grain. From the Western Zhou Dynasty, dated c. 1000 BC. The written inscription of 11 ancient Chinese characters on the bronze vessel states its use and ownership by Zhou royalty.

Ceramic and Jade art continued from the Shang Dynasty, and was improved and refined, especially during the Warring States Period.

Paintings

Very few paintings from the Zhou have survived, however written descriptions of the works have remained. Representations of the real world, in the form of paintings of figures, portraits, and historical scenes, were common during the time. This was a new development. Painting was also done on pottery, tomb walls, and on silk.
Example of Silk Painting: This example of silk painting shows a man riding a dragon, and has been dated to the 5th-3rd century BCE.

Lacquerware

Lacquerware was a technique through which objects were decoratively covered by a wood finish and cured to a hard, durable finish. The lacquer itself might also be inlaid or carved. The Zhou continued and developed lacquer work done in the Shang Dynasty. During the Eastern Zhou period, a large quantity of lacquerware began to be produced.
Example of Lacquerware: These are Chinese Western Han (202 BC – 9 CE) era lacquerwares and lacquer tray unearthed from the 2nd-century-BCE Han Tomb No.1 at Mawangdui, Changsha, China in 1972.

The Eastern Zhou Period

The Eastern Zhou period was divided into two halves. In the Spring and Autumn period, power became decentralized as nobles vied for power. In the Warring States period, strong states fought each other in large-scale war. During the period, there were substantial intellectual and military developments.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Explain the main political and military developments during the Eastern Zhou period

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Points

- During the first part of the Eastern Zhou period, called the Spring and Autumn period, the king became less powerful and the regional feudal became lords more so, until only seven consolidated powerful feudal states were left.
- During the second part of the period, called the Warring States period, strong states vied for power until the Qin conquered them all and created a unified dynasty.
- Developments during the period included increasing use of infantry, a trend toward bureaucracy and large-scale projects, the use of iron over bronze, and intellectual and philosophical developments.

Key Terms

- feudalism: A social system in which nobility hold lands from the King in exchange for military service, and peasants lived on the nobles’ land and provided services.
- decentralized: Moving away from a single point of administration to multiple locations, and usually giving them a degree of autonomy.
- infantry: Soldiers marching or fighting on foot.
Hegemony: Domination, influence, or authority over another, especially by one political group over a society or by one nation over others.

The End of the Western Zhou Period

The first period of Zhou rule, which lasted from 1046-771 BCE and was referred to as the Western Zhou period, was characterized mostly by unified, peaceful rule. The lords under feudalism gained increasing power, and ultimately the Zhou King You was assassinated, and the capital, Haojing, was sacked in 770 BCE. The capital was quickly moved east to Chengzhou, near modern-day Luoyang, and the Zhou abandoned the western regions. Thus, the assassination marked the end of the Western Zhou period and the beginning of the Eastern Zhou period.

The Spring and Autumn Period of Eastern Zhou

The first part of the Eastern Zhou period is known as the Spring and Autumn period, named after the Spring and Autumn Annals, a text that narrated events on a year-by-year basis, and marked the beginning of China’s deliberately recorded history. This period lasted from about 771-476 BCE. During this time, power became increasingly decentralized as regional feudal lords began to absorb smaller powers and vie for hegemony. The monarchy continued to lose power, and the people were nearly always at war.

The period from 685-591 BCE was called The Five Hegemons, and featured, in order, the Hegemony of Qi, Song, Jin, Qin, and Chu. By the end of 5th century BCE, the feudal system was consolidated into seven prominent and powerful states—Han, Wei, Zhao, Yue, Chu, Qi, and Qin—and China entered the Warring States period, when each state vied for complete control.

The Warring States Period

This period, in the second half of the Eastern Zhou, lasted from about 475-221 BCE, when China was united under the Qin Dynasty. The partition of the Jin state created seven major warring states. After a series of wars among these powerful states, King Zhao of Qin defeated King Nan of Zhou and conquered West Zhou in 256 BCE; his grandson, King Zhuangxiang of Qin, conquered East Zhou, bringing the Zhou Dynasty to an end.
A Map of the Warring States of China: This map shows the Warring States late in the period. Qin has expanded southwest, Chu north and Zhao northwest.

Developments During the Eastern Zhou

While the chariot remained in use, there was a shift during the period to infantry, possibly because of the invention of the crossbow. This meant that war became larger scale, as peasants were drafted to take the place of nobility as soldiers and needed complex logistical support. The aristocracy’s importance dwindled as the king’s became stronger, and strong central bureaucracies took hold. The Art of War, attributed to Sun Tzu, was written during this time; it remains a very influential book about strategy.

A sophisticated form of commercial arithmetic was in place during the period, as shown by a bundle of bamboo slips showing two digit decimal multiplication.
Bamboo Slips Showing Arithmetic: These bamboo slips show a sophisticated two digit decimal multiplication table.

A history of the Spring and Autumn Period, called the *Zuo Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals*, was published during this time.

Developments in iron work replaced bronze as the dominant metal used in warfare. Trade became increasingly important among states within China. Large-scale works, including the Dujiangyan Irrigation System and the Zhengguo Canal, were completed and increased agricultural production.
Iron Sword from the Warring States Period: This iron sword is an example of the metal work done during this period.

The Warring States Period

The Warring States period saw technological and philosophical development, and the emergence of the Qin Dynasty.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Demonstrate understanding of the main characteristics of the Warring States period

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Points

- The second part of the Eastern Zhou period is known as the Warring States period. During this time, the seven states remaining from the Spring and Autumn period intensely and unrelentingly battled each other for total power.
- It was during this period that the Iron Age spread in China, leading to stronger tools and weapons made from iron instead of bronze.
- This period also saw the further development of Confucianism (by Mencius), Daoism, Legalism, and Mohism.
- By this time, two key Chinese social characteristics had solidified: 1) the concept of the patrilineal family as the basic unit of society, and 2) the concept of natural social differentiation into classes.
- Iron replaced the use of bronze, sophisticated math came into use, and large-scale projects were undertaken.
- Ultimately, in 221 BCE, the Qin state emerged victorious and unified China once more under the Qin Dynasty.

Key Terms

- **crossbow**: A mechanised weapon, based on the bow and arrow, that fires bolts; it was invented during the Warring States period of the Zhou Dynasty, when its low cost and ease of use made it a preferable weapon to the chariot.

Over the course of the Spring and Autumn period, regional feudal lords consolidated and absorbed smaller powers; by 476 BCE, seven prominent states were left, all led by individual kings. The second part of the Eastern Zhou period is known as the Warring States period; during this time these few remaining states battled each other for total power.

Conflict Among the Seven States

The king by now was powerless, and the rulers of the seven independent states began to refer to themselves as kings as well. These major Chinese states were in constant competition. Since none of the states wanted any one rival to become too powerful, if one state became too strong, the others would join forces against it, so no state achieved dominance. This led to nearly 250 years of inconclusive warfare that became larger and larger in scale. It was also at this point that there first emerged the concept of a Chinese emperor who would rule over all the various kings, though the first Chinese emperors did not rule until China was unified under the later Qin Dynasty. The crossbow was invented, and its low cost and easy use (as compared to the expensive chariot) resulted in the increased conscription of peasants as expandable infantry.
Technological and Philosophical Development

The Iron Age had reached China by 600 CE, but it was during this period that the age spread and took root in China: by the time of the Warring States Period, China saw a widespread adoption of iron tools and weapons that were significantly stronger than their bronze counterparts.

This period also saw the further development of the philosophical movements that originated in the Hundred Schools of Thought of the Spring and Autumn period. Mencius further developed Confucian philosophy, expanding upon its doctrines and asserting the innate goodness of the individual and the importance of destiny. Daoism, Legalism, and Mohism became more developed. Archaic writing also gave way to a far more recognizable form of Chinese script.

Cultural, Economic, and Social Development

Two fundamental Chinese social characteristics had become apparent by this time: 1) the concept of the patrilineal family as the basic unit in society, with high importance placed on blood relations, and 2) the concept of natural social differentiation into classes, each regarded in terms of their contributions to society.

Large-scale projects, like the Dujiangyan Irrigation System and the Zhengguo Canal, were carried out. Sophisticated arithmetic was carried out, including two digit decimal multiplication.

The Zuo Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals was a literary achievement. In other literary works, sayings of philosophers of the period were recorded in the Analects and the Art of War.

The Rise of the Qin State and Resolution of the Warring States Period

Though the military rivalries and alliances in the Warring States period were complex and constantly in flux, over time the Qin state, under the leadership of King Zheng, emerged as the most powerful. The Qin were particularly strongly rooted in Legalist philosophy, which advocated the importance of the state at the expense of the individual. They were also known for being ruthless and ignoring etiquette and protocol of war in order to win at all costs. In particular, Shang Yang, adviser to Zheng, enacted laws to force subjects of the kingdom to act in ways that helped the state; he forced them to marry early, have many children, and produce certain quotas of food. Ultimately, in 221 BCE, the Qin state conquered the others and established the Qin Dynasty.

Chinese Philosophy

Confucianism, Daoism, Legalism, and Mohism all began during the Zhou Dynasty in the 6th century BCE, and had very strong influences on Chinese civilization.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Discuss Confucianism, Daoism, Legalism, and Mohism.
KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Points

• Confucius stressed tradition and believed that an individual should strive to be virtuous and respectful, and to fit into his or her place in society.
• Confucianism remained prevalent in China from the Han Dynasty in 202 BCE to the end of dynastic rule in 1911.
• Lao-tzu was the legendary founder of Daoism, recorded in the form of the book the *Tao Te Ching*.
• Daoism advocated that the individual should follow a mysterious force, called The Way (dao), of the universe, and that all things were one.
• Legalism held that humans were inherently bad and needed to be kept in line by a strong state. According to Legalism, the state was far more important than the individual.
• Legalists could be divided into three types: those concerned with the position of ruler, those concerned with laws, and those concerned with tactics to keep the state safe.
• Mohism emerged under the philosopher Mozi, and its most well-known concept was “impartial care.” Mohism also stated that all people should be equal in their material benefit, and in their protection from harm.

Key Terms

• **Five Classics**: The basis of civil examinations in imperial China and the Confucian canon. They consist of the Book of Odes, the Book of Documents, the Book of Changes, the Book of Rites, and the Spring and Autumn Annals.
• **Analects**: The document in which the students of Confucius recorded his teachings.
• **jen**: Human virtue, under Confucianism.
• **chi**: Life force or body energy, which supposedly circulates through the body along meridians.
• **Tao Te Ching**: The book which forms the basis of Daoist philosophy.

Confucianism

Confucius, who lived during the 6th century BCE, was one of the foremost Chinese philosophers. He looked back on the Western Zhou period, with its strong centralized state, as an ideal. He was pragmatic and sought to reform the existing government, encouraging a system of mutual duty between superiors and inferiors. Confucius stressed tradition and believed that an individual should strive to be virtuous and respectful, and to fit into his or her place in society. After his death in 479 BCE, his students wrote down his ethical and moral teachings in the *Lun-yü*, or *Analects*.
The Analects of Confucius: The ethical and moral teachings of Confucius were written down by his students in this document.

Being a good and virtuous human in every ordinary situation was the goal of Confucianism. This virtue was called “jen,” and humans were seen as perfectible and basically good creatures. Ceremonies and rituals based on the Five Classics, especially the I Ching, were strongly instituted. Some ethical concepts included Yi (the moral disposition to do good), Li (ritual norms for everyday life) and Zhi (the ability to see what is right in the behavior of others).

Confucianism remained prevalent in China from the Han Dynasty in 202 BCE to the end of dynastic rule in 1911. It was reformulated during the Tang Dynasty (618-907) as Neo-Confucianism, and became the basis of imperial exams.

Daoism

Another important philosopher in this period was Lao-tzu (also called Laozi), who founded Daoism (also called Taoism) during the same period as Confucianism. Lao-tzu is a legendary figure—it is uncertain if he actually existed. According to myth, Lao-tzu was born around 604 BCE as an old man. As he left his home to live a life of solitude, he was asked by the city gatekeeper to write down his thoughts. He did so in a book called Tao Te Ching, and was never seen again.
Daoism advocated that the individual should follow a mysterious force, called The Way (dao), of the universe and act in accordance with nature. Daoism stressed the oneness of all things, and was strictly individualistic, as opposed to Confucianism, which advocated acting as society expected.

Daoism as a religion arose over time, and involved the worship of gods and ancestors, the cultivation of "chi" energy, a system of morals, and the use of alchemy to achieve immortality. It is still practiced today.

**Legalism**

Although Confucianism and Daoism are the Chinese philosophies that have endured most to this day, even more important to this early period was a lesser-known philosophy called Legalism. This held that humans are inherently bad and need to be kept in line by a strong state. According to Legalism, the state was far more important than the individual. While Legalism held that laws should be clear and public and that everyone should be subject to them, it also contended that rulers had supreme power and must use stealth and secrecy to remain in power. Legalists also believed that society must strive to dominate other societies.

Legalists could be divided into three types. The first was concerned with shi, or the investment of the position of ruler with power (rather than the person) and the necessity of obtaining facts to rule well. The second was concerned with fa,
or laws, regulations, and standards. This meant all were equal under the ruler, and the state was run by law, not a ruler. The third was the concept of *shu*, or tactics to keep the state safe. Legalism was generally in competition with Confucianism, which advocated a just and reciprocal relationship between the state and its subjects.

![Depiction of Shang Yang](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/Book%3A_World_Civilizations_I_(Boundless)/Chapter_5%3A_Early_Chines...

**Mohism**

Mohism emerged around the same time as the other philosophies discussed here, under the philosopher Mozi (c. 470-391 BCE). The most well-known concept under Mohism was “impartial care,” also known as “universal love.” This meant that people should care equally about other people, regardless of their true relationship to that person. This opposed the ideas of Confucianism, which said that love should be greater for close relationships. Mohism also stressed the ideas of self-restraint, reflection and authenticity.
Mohism also stated that all people should be equal in their material benefit and in their protection from harm. Society could be improved by having it function like an organism, with a uniform moral compass. Those who were qualified should receive jobs, and thus the ruler would be surrounded by people of talent and skill. An unrighteous ruler would result in seven disasters for the state, including neglect of military defense, repression, illusions about strength, distrust, famine, and more.