China: The Land of the Yellow and Yangzi Rivers

The study of history has been one of China's most revered and continuous traditions for more than 2,000 years. By the second century B.C.E., the Chinese claimed a detailed history that reached back into the early third millennium. According to their vision of the past, Chinese civilization was sparked by extraordinary men, beginning with the Three Sovereigns, who laid the basis of Chinese culture by bestowing such gifts as agriculture and fire. The last of the three was the Yellow Emperor, who established an organized state around 2700 B.C.E. Four other emperors
succeeded in turn, each ascending the throne through merit and genius rather than by birth. Known as the *Five Sage Emperors*, they crafted all of the basic elements of Chinese civilization, such as hydro engineering (harnessing the waters of the violent Yellow River) and silk production. The last of the five was succeeded onto the throne by his son, thereby establishing China's first royal dynasty — the Xia (pronounced "shah") family, which ruled from 2205 to 1766 B.C.E. After Xia's collapse, the Shang Dynasty succeeded and held power, until it gave way to the Zhou (pronounced "joe") Dynasty.

Until the late 1920s, scholars lacked hard evidence that either the Xia or Shang dynasties ever existed, and Western historians generally dismissed them as romantic legends. The work of archaeologists over the past sixty years, however, proved that the Shang Era was a historical reality, and recent evidence suggests that its period of efflorescence stretched from about 1600 to around 1050 B.C.E. Xia remains an enigma due to a lack of conclusive evidence. Recent excavations, however, show that China enjoyed a period of civilization long before Shang. The discovery in Henan province of a tiny spinning wheel with what appears to be a Daoist inscription (see Chapter 4) suggests that the art of writing in China might stretch back to at least 2500 B.C.E. Whether there was a full-fledged Xia Dynasty of kings during those pre-Shang centuries is an open question.

One theory that has some evidentiary support holds that Xia, Shang, and Zhou were three coexisting centers of civilization in northern China in the area of the Yellow River and that the Xia, Shang, and Zhou eras were largely the shifting of dominance through warfare from one state and family of royal warlords to another. It appears that from as early as the late third millennium B.C.E., northern China was home to many competing small states, each centered on a clan and its walled town. Warfare and alliances allowed some states to grow at their neighbors' expense and others to lose their independence. Apparently none of the families or their states ever totally dominated northern China until the victory of the Qin (pronounced cheen) state in 221 B.C.E. (see Chapter 4), but certain families, certainly Shang and Zhou and possibly Xia, successively and successfully claimed wide-sweeping royal hegemony.

Although the details of early Chinese history still largely elude us, archaeology is providing tantalizing clues that cause us to question and even abandon once-dominant notions regarding early Chinese civilization. In the 1980s discoveries south of the Yangzi River and also in the southwestern province of Sichuan led scholars to reevaluate the prevailing diffusionist theory of the origins of Chinese civilization. According to that model, civilization began in the north, around the Yellow River, in the late third millennium B.C.E. and slowly spread out from there, not fully penetrating the southern region of the Yangzi River Valley until the early centuries B.C.E. The first four editions of *The Human Record* reflected that picture. However, the discovery of bronzes and other artifacts far to the south and the southwest of the Yellow River has forced a rethinking of that model. Many of the artifacts in the Yangzi River area, which date to the late Shang Era, show clear Shang characteristics, indicating that Shang cultural influences had spread far beyond its political borders. More significant, the artifacts discovered in the southwestern region of Sichuan, as well as some items from the Yangzi River area, exhibit styles and forms that differ greatly from those of Shang. This
has led many scholars to posit the theory that Chinese civilization emerged out of
the confluence of several independent cultures, all of which were flourishing
around 1200 B.C.E. It certainly seems as though the Yangzi River Valley, which
previous generations of historians thought was a latecomer to Chinese culture,
played a role in the evolution of early Chinese civilization. It might not have been
as dominating as that of the Yellow River, but it was significant.

The history of early southern Chinese civilization has yet to be written, so we
must turn to the north, to the states of the Yellow River, for the story of early Chi­
nese political development.

Our knowledge of the Xia state, if there was one, and its presumed age of pre­
dominance is less than just sketchy. We know much more about the Shang,
thanks to the work of archaeologists, who have unearthed two huge capital cities,
royal tombs, magnificent bronze ceremonial vessels, and an early form of Chinese
ideographic writing on what are known as oracle bones. Because they served the pur­
pose of magical divination of the future, the inscriptions on oracle bones are brief
and often cryptic. Nevertheless, in the hands of experts, they provide useful in­
sights into Shang society and culture.

The Shang kings reigned over a loose confederation of family-centered states
that collectively encompassed most but not all of northern China. Their world
was precarious because military alliances and loyalties were constantly shifting.
Despite limitations on the Shang kings’ political powers, they enjoyed substantial
authority as chief priests in the worship of Di, the high god of the Shang. It was
believed that the ancestral spirits of the Shang family gave the king a privileged
avenue of communication to Di. Moreover, excavated royal tombs indicate that
the Shang kings were able to mobilize large numbers of workers and extensive re­
sources in a world in which slavery and ritual sacrifice of human victims were ac­
cepted practices.

If, however, we desire a fuller story based narrative documents, we must wait
until the Zhou Dynasty (ca. 1050–256). Because China’s earliest extant literary and
political documents date from the age of Zhou rule, we know much more about
the Zhou Dynasty than about the Xia and Shang combined. The era of Zhou rule
began around 1050, when the Zhou conquered the Shang and established a royal
dynasty that lasted eight centuries. The Zhou Era is divided into two periods:
Western and Eastern. The age of Western Zhou witnessed a fairly strong but de­
centralized monarchy that presided over fifty or more subordinate states. Zhou
kings delegated authority to the rulers of these states in elaborate ceremonies that
emphasized the king’s primacy. As time went on, however, power tended to slip
away from the Western Zhou kings into the hands of local lords. In 771 B.C.E. a
group of rebellious northern nobles killed King Yu and overran the capital city,
Chang’an (present-day Xi’an), and the royal heir fled east to Luoyang, where the
Zhou continued to reside as kings until 256 B.C.E. But the kings of Eastern Zhou
never enjoyed the power of their western forebears. For 500 years they reigned
over but did not rule a kingdom where military and political power resided in the
smaller regional states and the families that controlled them. As the Son of Heaven,
however, the king continued to enjoy the exclusive right to offer sacrifices to
Heaven and to preside over ceremonies dedicated to the royal ancestors.
The Mandate of Heaven

5. THE BOOK OF DOCUMENTS

The Shujing, or Book of Documents, is the oldest of the Five Confucian Classics. These five works, which also include the Book of Songs (source 6), the Book of Changes, the Book of Rites, and the Spring and Autumn Annals, are incorrectly ascribed to the editorship of Confucius (Chapter 4, source 20). Known collectively as the Wujing (The Five Scriptures), the books became the basic elements of the Confucian educational system during the second century B.C.E., when they were reconstructed by order of several emperors of the Han Dynasty (202 B.C.E.–220 C.E.), who reversed the policy of the earlier Qin Dynasty to destroy all traces of Confucian ideology. Regardless of this reconstruction and later editing, the Shujing that has come down to us is probably pretty much the same already-ancient text that Confucius admired, studied, and accepted as an authentic record of Chinese civilization.

Also known in English translation as the Classic of History, the Shujing is not a work of historical narration. Rather, it is a collection of documents spanning about 1,700 years of Chinese history and legend, from 2357 to 631 B.C.E. Despite their ascriptions, many of the documents are the spurious creations of much later periods and therefore 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, the second Shang king. According to the story behind the document, when the first Shang king, Zheng 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 (Tianming) was a political-social-cosmological 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 1911 C.E. Whenever a dynasty fell, the reason invariably offered by China's sages was that it had lost the mandate, or authorized 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. The theory of the Mandate of Heaven and the very concept of Heaven were probably joint creations of the Zhou, who used them to justify their overthrow of the Shang around 1050 B.C.E. 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 needed extraordinary justification.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. How does a ruler earn the Mandate of Heaven? How and why is it lost?
2. What are the consequences of losing the Mandate of Heaven?
3. Modern politicians often promise "innovative answers to the challenges 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?

4. What does the theory of the Mandate of Heaven suggest about the nature of Chinese society and the Chinese worldview?