

The Zhou Dynasty

The Mandate of Heaven

In 1027 BCE, the battle-hardened Zhou people marched out of their kingdom on the western frontier to overthrow the Shang Dynasty. They set up the Zhou Dynasty that lasted until 256 BCE. To justify their rebellion against the Shang, the Zhou promoted the idea of the mandate of Heaven, or the divine right to rule. The cruelty of the last Shang king, they declared, had so outraged the gods that they had sent ruin on him. The gods then passed the Mandate of Heaven to the Zhou, who “treated the multitudes of the people well.” The Chinese later expanded the idea of the Mandate of Heaven to explain the dynastic cycle, or the rise and fall of dynasties. As long as a dynasty provided good government, it enjoyed the Mandate of Heaven. If the rulers became weak or corrupt, the Chinese believed that heaven would withdraw its support.

Floods, famine, or other catastrophes were other signs that a dynasty had lost the favor of Heaven. In the resulting chaos, an ambitious leader might seize power and set up a new dynasty. His success and strong government showed the people that the new dynasty had won the favor of the gods, and the Mandate of Heaven. Then the dynastic cycle would begin again.

1. What was the Mandate of Heaven?
2. In what ways did new dynasties come to power in China?
3. What is the dynastic cycle?

Zhou Feudalism

The Zhou rewarded their supporters by granting them control over different regions. Thus, under the Zhou, China developed a feudal state. Feudalism was a system of government in which local lords governed their owned land but owed military service and other forms of support to the ruler.

In theory, Zhou kings ruled China, and for about 250 years, they did actually enjoy great power and prestige. After about 771 BCE, though, feudal lords exercised the real power and profited from the lands worked by peasants within their domains.

1. What is Chinese feudalism?

Economic Growth

During the Zhou period, China’s economy grew. Knowledge of ironworking reached China about 500 BCE. As iron axes and ox-drawn iron plows replaced stone, wood and bronze tools, farmers produced more food. Peasants also began to grow new crops, such as soybeans. Some feudal lords organized large-scale irrigation works, making farming even more productive.

Commerce expanded, too. The Chinese began to use money for the first time. Chinese copper coins had holes in the center so they could be strung on cords. This early form of cash, or money, economy made trade easier. Merchants also benefited from new roads and canals constructed by feudal lords. Economic increase led to an increase in population. People from the Huang He heartland overflowed into central China and began to farm the immense Yangtze basin. Feudal nobles expanded their territories and encouraged peasants to settle in the conquered territories. This brought about a period of growth, economically, and physically to China, it also led to a period of peace and prosperity.

1. What are some ways farming improved during the Zhou Dynasty?
2. How did commerce improve under the Zhou Dynasty?

Chinese Achievements under the Shang and the Zhou

The Chinese made progress in many areas during the Shang and Zhou dynasties. For example, astronomers studied the movement of planets and recorded eclipses of the sun. Their findings helped them develop an accurate calendar with 365¼ days. The Chinese also made remarkable achievements in art and the technology of bronzemaking.

Silk was one of their most valuable discoveries. By 1000 BCE, the Chinese had discovered how to make silk thread from the cocoons of silkworms. Soon, the Chinese were cultivating both silkworms and the mulberry trees on which they fed. Women did the laborious work of tending the silkworms and processing the cocoons into thread. Then they wove the silk threads into a smooth cloth that was colored with dyes. Only wealthy could afford robes made from silk. Because of this silk became China's most valuable export. To protect this profitable trade, the Chinese kept the process of silk-making a secret.

Under the Zhou, the Chinese made the first books. They bound thin strips of wood or bamboo together and then carefully drew characters on the flat surface with a brush and ink. Among the greatest Zhou works is the lovely Book of Songs. Many of its poems describe such events in the lives of farming people as planting and harvesting. Others praise kings or describe court ceremonies. The book also includes tender and sad love songs.

1. What were some technological achievements of the Shang and the Zhou?
2. How did silk help China's economy?

From the Book of Songs:

“The spirits are good,
They will give you many blessings.
The common people are contented,
For they have their drink and food.
The thronging herds, the many clans
All side with you in deeds of power.
To be like the moon advancing to its full,
Like the sun climbing the sky,
Like the everlastingness of the southern hills,
Without failing or falling,
Like the pine-tree, the cypress in their foliage
All these blessings may you receive!”

1. What is this poem talking about?
2. How can this poem help us understand the Zhou dynasty?