

Background: The Mandate of Heaven

Essential Standards: RH 6-8.1, RH 6-8.2, RH 6-8.4, RH 6-8.10

Introduction

From: <http://acc6.its.brooklyn.cuny.edu/~phalsall/texts/shu-jing.html>

In 1027 B.C., the Zhou overthrew the Shang and set up their own dynasty. The Zhou told the people that the gods had become angry with the Shang and had chosen the Zhou to rule instead. The Chinese believed that heaven gave the leader the mandate, or right, to rule. The people must respect that mandate and owed complete loyalty and obedience to the leader. In exchange for this loyalty, the people had the right to expect good leadership. If there were problems in the dynasty (war, famine, floods, drought) this was a sign of the ruler had lost the Mandate of Heaven. From that time on, each new dynasty would claim the Mandate of Heaven.

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

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... 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...

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... 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,... - 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...

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.

What happened to the ruler who did not follow the correct example?

What did the new ruler do differently to gain favor?

What cultural values are shown based on the advice given?

What are the consequences of losing the Mandate of Heaven?