

Key Names in the Classical Account of the Distant Past

Summary Sheet

Legendary Period

Yellow Emperor -- Traditionally, his reign of 100 years is dated c. 2700-2600. His legendary role includes bringing order by defeating great villains in combat (Fiery Emperor, Chi You).

Emperor Yao -- The first sage ruler in the most prominent Confucian account of the distant past (the *Book of Documents*). He fixed the calendar by appointing astronomers and ceded his throne to a commoner-sage.

Emperor Shun -- Received the throne from Yao on the basis of his filiality. During his long service as Yao's chief minister, he defeated evil threats in battle. As emperor, he was humane and ceded his throne to the sage Yu.

Emperor Yu -- Played a double role in Classical tale of the past. (1) As a figure borrowed from the myth of the Great Flood, he is the man who dredged China's rivers and eased the flood while serving as Shun's Minister of Works. (2) By handing the throne down to his son, he initiated the Xia Dynasty.

Transitional Period

The Xia Dynasty -- Hereditary line of kings ruling as Yu's descendants for about 450 years. The historicity of the Xia is still unclear. The last ruler, Jie, is said to have been supremely evil. There are few legends about the Xia kings.

Historical Period

Tang the Successful -- Founder of the Shang Dynasty. As sage ruler who, with his sage minister, a man named Yi Yin, deposed the last ruler of the Xia by conquest and founded a new dynasty.

The Shang Dynasty -- c.1700-1045. This line of kings is historical. Only a few of them, however, have distinctive characteristics in historical accounts. The last ruler, Zhòu, caused the dynasty's downfall through his evil character.

The Zhou Founders -- The key founders of the Zhou are:

- **King Wen** (r. c. 1100-1050). The pre-conquest leader of the Zhou people. His cultural transformation of the Zhou people made them capable of succeeding the Shang.
- **King Wu** (r. 1050-1043). Conquered the armies of the Shang in 1045. Established the Zhou as China's ruling house.
- **The Duke of Zhou**. A brother of King Wu. He ruled as regent for seven years before returning the throne to King Cheng. Suppressed rebellion; built the Eastern Capital; created systems of ritual and of government organization.