

## THE RISE OF THE HOUSE OF ZHOU

### *The Basic Annals of the Zhou, from the Shi-ji, by Sima Qian (c. 100 B.C.)*

The earliest comprehensive account of the founding of the Zhou Dynasty (which lasted from about 1045 B.C. until its extinction by the armies of the state of Qin in 256 B.C.) appears in the Shi-ji, or “Records of the Historian,” a history compiled about 100 B.C. by Sima Qian, the imperial historian and astronomer of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty. Sima Qian was unable to escape completely from the perspective of legend when writing about the past, which for him was a moral story that revealed complex interplays of heroism and immorality, often in a single individual. Nevertheless, Sima Qian was an independent thinker and judge of character, and if he did not achieve objectivity, he did at least attempt wherever possible to base his information on the best sources available to him. Sometimes he lists his sources for us, and in other cases he is willing to alert us that his account is based on unverifiable hearsay.

In telling the story of the Zhou royal house, Sima Qian was not looking for men with feet of clay—he accepted the prevailing vision of the founders as ethical giants. Nevertheless, he did his best to create a coherent chronology of the events of the founding, and we can see his account as a comprehensive summation of the great tale that lay behind all the social and political thinking of Classical China.

The dates of the events that are narrated here, to the degree that they may accurately reflect what occurred, are generally uncertain. The date of the Zhou conquest of the Shang remains a hotly debated point, but the year 1045 B.C. seems increasingly persuasive, and alternative theories now tend to converge very close to this point. The reign of King Wen over the pre-dynastic Zhou lands was a long one; his accession may be dated c. 1100, which would roughly coincide with the accession of the last king of the Shang, whose name, perversely enough, was Zhou—he is referred to here as “Zhòu,” the diacritic mark “ò” distinguishing him from the dynastic house that brought him down.

The account translated here is only the first quarter of a longer text that carries the story on through eight subsequent centuries.

## An Account of the Founding of the Zhou Dynasty

**The personal name of Hou-ji (his name means Prince Millet) of the Zhou was Qi (“the castaway”). His mother was a member of the You-tai branch lineage of the Jiang clan, and her name was Jiang Yuan. Jiang Yuan was the principal wife of the Emperor Ku.**

It was a well established tradition from the early days of Zhou rule, about a thousand years before this account was written, that the grand progenitor or the Zhou clan line was Hou-ji, who is often pictured as the man who taught the Chinese how to cultivate grains. He may be seen as a counterpart of the Spirit-like Farmer, whose similar role as founder of agriculture probably belongs to an alternative mythic tradition. In this opening paragraph, Sima Qian is tying the lineage of the Zhou house to that of the highest of all the sage kings of remote antiquity. The Emperor Ku was the great-grandson of the Yellow Emperor, who for Sima Qian represented the start of history.

**Jiang Yuan ventured out onto the plains one day, and there she saw the footprint of an enormous man. She felt in her heart a great stirring of pleasure and wished to tread upon it. When she did so, her body was stirred as if with child. A year later a child was indeed born. Because he was viewed as inauspicious, the baby was cast away into a narrow alley, but the horses and oxen who trod past would not step on him. So he was cast away into a deep forest, but people of the mountain woods found him and moved him. So he was cast away onto the ice of a frozen waterway, but flying birds came and sheltered him with their wings and brought him back. Jiang Yuan concluded that a spirit force lay behind all this and so she took him back in and nurtured him. Because she initially wished to cast him away he was named Qi: the castaway.**

The word translated as “spirit force,” shen 神, refers both to the inhabitants of the supernatural realm of the spirits (who may be the dead or who may represent various types of animistic beings) and also to those mysterious powers that lie behind the inexplicable aspects of experience, like the miraculous events surrounding the baby Hou-ji. In picturing their founder as a castaway, the Zhou employed a world-wide folklore theme that equally pertains to figures like Moses or Oedipus.

**When Qi was a youth, he grew very tall, like the mark of the enormous man. In his childhood play, he loved to cultivate plants such as hemp and beans, and his hemp and bean plants flourished. When he grew into an adult he loved ploughing and agriculture. He was skilled at assessing the nature of land and selecting the appropriate grains to plant. The people all imitated what he did.**

**The Emperor Yao heard of him and raised Qi up to be his Chief of Farming. All in the empire benefited and his work was successful.**

The Emperor Yao was a son of Emperor Ku. When the late Zhou Confucians crafted accounts of the beginnings of history, they chose to place Yao and his successor Shun at the head, omitting mention of the Yellow Emperor and those who immediately succeeded him.

**The Emperor Shun said, “Qi, the common people are hungry. You, Prince Millet, must broadcast the hundred grains.” And so saying, he bestowed upon Qi an estate at Dai. He gave him the sobriquet Prince Millet, and bestowed upon him a new surname, the clan of Ji.**

Family names and genealogies. In ancient China, surnames were possessed only by those patrician families who played significant social roles. While some clans seem to have possessed surnames from a very early date, we still see at a late date rulers creating new clans through the bestowal of surnames, which was a great honor. Qi, by receiving a surname, now became the head of a clan (whereas before, according to the myth, he would have been a man without any clan status whatever, his father being a footprint without social standing). By granting Qi an estate, Shun also assured his clan of membership in the patrician elite, as each generation of subsequent clan heads would inherit the title of the ruler of Dai. The surname of the Zhou ruling house was, indeed, Ji. The skeptical historian will suppose that this account of the origins of the Ji clan was an invention devised sometime near the date of the Ji clan’s conquest of the Shang (whose grand progenitor Xie was also a legendary minister to Shun), to glorify their history and present themselves to the various clans of China as worthy successors to the Zi clan, which had provided the rulers of the Shang.

**Prince Millet flourished throughout the rule of the houses of Yao-tang, Yu, and into the Xia Dynasty. To each age he contributed his splendid virtue.**

**When Prince Millet died, his son Bu-zhu inherited his duties and position. In his later years, the government of the Xia Dynasty began to decline, and Bu-zhu discarded agricultural pursuits. Thus losing his official position, he moved away to the lands of the nomadic tribes of the Rong and Di.**

The Xia Dynasty, a predecessor of the Shang Dynasty whose historical authenticity remains uncertain, is said, in traditional accounts, to have ruled China from about 2000 to 1750. Its founder, the Emperor Yu, was the successor of the Emperor Shun. The Rong and Di were, during the late Shang and early Zhou eras, non-Chinese groups living to the north and west of China. Once Bu-zhu moves to live among them, his status becomes merely the leader of his clan and of any people from his original patrimonial estate in Dai who may have followed him.

**When Bu-zhu died, his son Ju succeeded him. When Ju died, his son Gong-liu succeeded him.**

**Although Gong-liu dwelt among the nomadic Rong and Di tribes, he reinstated the pursuit of agriculture, was assiduous in ploughing and sowing, and assessed the character of his lands. From the Rivers Dai and Ju across to the far side of the River Wei he collected wood for his people to use, so that those whose work involved moving goods had material for transport, and those whose work kept them at home would have the means to raise livestock. All of his people relied on his beneficence and the common folk cherished him. Many moved to his lands in order to be under his protection. It was at this time that the Dao of the Zhou first arose, and so his virtue is recalled and celebrated by the poets.**

The word “Dao” has far-reaching meanings. It can denote a path or an art, or in this case a tradition. It is frequently translated by the English “Way.” Confucius frequently celebrated the Dao of the ancient kings. Some interpreters believe that his praise was chiefly for the Zhou Dao, the Zhou tradition of the art of statecraft, and Sima Qian is careful to denote what he takes to be the origins of this distinctive Dao.

**When Gong-liu died, his son Qing-jie succeeded him and established a state in Bin. When Qing-jie died, his son Huang-pu succeeded him. When Huang-pu died, his son Chai-fu succeeded him. When Chai-fu died, his son Hui-yu succeeded him. When Hui-yu died, his son Gong-fei succeeded him. When Gong-fei died, his son Gao-yu succeeded him. When Gao-yu died, his son Ya-yu succeeded him. When Ya-yu died, his son Gong-shu Zu-lei succeeded him. When Gong-shu Zu-lei died, his son Gu-gong Dan-fu (“The Old Duke, Father Dan”) succeeded him.**

There are only a half-dozen Zhou ancestors who play a significant role in the narrative, but the patrician class was highly conscious of genealogy. These names would have appeared in a long array of wooden tablets in the grand progenitor’s shrine of the royal Ji clan temple complex.

**The Old Duke, Father Dan revived the enterprise of Prince Millet and Gong-liu. He built up his virtue and performed acts of righteousness, and the people of the state stood by him. The Xun-yu, a people of the Rong and Di tribes, attacked him, wishing to obtain his stored riches. He willingly gave his riches to them. They attacked again, wishing to obtain his land and its people. The people were all furious and wished to go to battle. The Old Duke said, “Rulers are set up by the people in order to benefit the people. Now the Rong and Ti make war on me on account of my land and people. What difference would it make to the people if they were under me or under another? The people wish to go to war on my behalf, but I could not bear to cause the slaughter of their fathers and sons and then rule over them!”**

This position, a vaguely populist notion that the legitimacy of rulers is tied to the interests of the people, is a powerful notion connected with the late Zhou vision of what made the Zhou founders great.

Thereupon, the Old Duke gathered together his personal retinue and moved away from Bin. He crossed the rivers Tai and Ju, and traveled over Mt. Liang, settling finally at Qi-xia. And then the entire people of Bin, with the young supporting the aged and parents holding their children, removed en masse to Qi-xia in order to return to the protection of the Old Duke. When nearby states heard of the humaneness of the Old Duke, many of them too removed to Qi-xia.

Then the Old Duke discarded all the customs of the Rong and Di peoples and ordered the construction of walled cities and private enclosed dwellings. He built walled towns apart from his own. He established the five high ministerial offices and the people all celebrated his virtue in song.

This portrays the most significant sorts of transformations: the creation of fully ordered space, physically demarcated by walls, and the introduction of self-perpetuating proto-bureaucratic social organization. These changes are pivotal signs of *sinicization* (acculturation to Chinese norms). It is provocative that in this narrative, they follow the success of the Old Duke's moral accomplishments.

The eldest son of the Old Duke was named Tai-po; the second son was named Yu-chong. The consort Tai-jiang gave birth to the youngest son, Ji-li. Ji-li married Tai-ren. All the wives were most worthy. Tai-ren gave birth to Chang, and at the time of his birth, the portent of a sage was seen.

Portents. In ancient China, there was a widespread interest in supernatural portents that foretold great events to come--flaming birds appearing atop walls, prophetic texts being eaten into leaves by worms, unicorns wandering into the fields, two-headed cows being born to nanny goats (not a good sign) and so forth. A late commentary work tells us that in this case, the omen was a crimson sparrow bearing in its beak a cinnabar text with a long, unusually dull, inscription. It landed at Chang's family gate. Whenever we may be tempted to think that the Chinese imagination was dry, something like this seems to turn up.

The Old Duke said, "The flourishing of my house would seem to lie with Chang!" The older sons, Tai-bo and Yu-chong, saw that the Old Duke wished to have Ji-li as his successor in order that the rulership ultimately be passed to Chang. Thereupon, the two men fled to the lands of the Jing and Man tribes in the south, tattooed their bodies and cut their hair, in order that the throne be passed to Ji-li.

The Zhou followed a strict rule of succession: the oldest son always succeeded the father. This text, however, reflects not fact but the historical vision and values of authors from the late Zhou and early Han, and as we shall see, there was among them great interest in the idea of legitimacy through virtue, rather than through blood. This tale, popular in the late Zhou, elegantly blends the two ideals.

**When the Old Duke died, his son Ji-li succeeded him: he is known as Gong-ji. Gong-ji cultivated the Dao of the Old Duke. He was earnest in acts of righteousness, and the patrician lords followed him. When Gong-ji died, his son Chang succeeded him. He was known in his day as the Lord of the West, and we refer to him as King Wen.**

Rulers' titles. In general, rulers are known in the histories by a posthumous title which gives their rank and adds one of a relatively short list of honorifics. "Wen," which means "patterned," "cultivated," or "refined," is such an honorific. Its assignment to King Wen indicates that it was he who brought the Zhou people most decisively into the Zhou cultural sphere. Since the posthumous title and basic legends of King Wen are attested to from the start of the Zhou kingdom, it may be that many of sinicizing features here attributed to the Old Duke's reign were originally understood to have been the work of King Wen.

**King Wen followed the course set by Prince Millet and Gong-liu and emulated the models set by the Old Duke and Gong-ji. He was earnest in his humaneness; he honored the elderly; he was caring of the young; he treated worthies in lower positions with ritual courtesy. He attended upon the shi (elite men) of the realm with such assiduousness that he took no time to eat all day long, and for this reason the shi allied with him in great numbers. The incorruptible hermits Bo Yi and Shu Qi living in Lone Bamboo heard that the Lord of the West earnestly nurtured elders and said, "Why should we not go to him?" Worthies such as Tai-dian, Hong-yao, San Yi-sheng, and the grandee Xin Jia all went over to the Lord of the West.**

The late Zhou vision of political legitimacy took as a key test the responses of men who had held aloof, at personal cost, from prevalent political corruption. These were men who responded only to virtue and never to personal gain, and legends of the sage kings focus on the moment when their transcending virtue is "recognized" by worthy men who have hidden their talents from the world.

**Hu, the Marquis of Chong, slandered the Lord of the West to the Shang king Zhòu. "The Lord of the West is storing up good deeds and piling high the influence of his virtue. This will become most unfavorable for your Majesty." The Emperor Zhòu thereupon imprisoned the Lord of the West at You-li.**

The traditional tales of the evil nature of the last king of the Shang are legion. Generally, he is portrayed as a sex-crazed alcoholic whose greatest delight was disemboweling virtuous ministers, his literary character thus being a perfect foil for the flawless King Wen.

**Hong Yao and others like him were distressed at this. They sought from the Yu-xin clan one of its beautiful maidens, from the Rong tribe of Li a finely dappled horse, from the tribe of Yu-xiong nine teams of horses, which together with other objects strange and rare they**

offered to Zhòu through his court favorite Bi Chong. Zhòu was greatly pleased. “One of these things would have been sufficient to free the Lord of the West--and how many there are!” And so he released the Lord of the West. He presented him with bow and arrow, hatchet and war axe, and set him to lead his armies. “The man who slandered the Lord of the West,” he said, “was Hu, Marquis of Chong.”

While Zhòu’s action here is recounted to show his corrupt character, it is worth noting that throughout Chinese history--some would say until today--legal practice has adhered to the principle that the innocence of a prisoner is chiefly determined by the net worth of bribes offered on his behalf.

Thereupon, the Lord of the West presented to Zhòu the lands west of the River Luo that were in his possession, with the request that in recompense Zhòu abolish the practice of subjecting criminals to the punishment of walking over hot coals. Zhòu agreed to it.

The Lord of the West continued to carry out good practices without fanfare, and the patrician lords all came to him to have him mediate their disputes. At this time, there was a legal dispute between the men of Yu and Rui that defied all solution. They took the case to the land of Zhou. Entering within the borders of the Zhou lands, they saw that those who tilled the land all yielded to one another on issues concerning the boundaries of their fields, and the custom of the people was always to yield to their elders. Before they had reached the court of the Lord of the West, the men of Yu and Rui all felt shamed. “The people of Zhou would be ashamed to wrangle as we do. What is the point in going on? We can only humiliate ourselves!” And so they returned home and settled their dispute by yielding to one another. When the patrician lords heard of this, they said, “It would appear that the Lord of the West is destined to receive Heaven’s mandate.”

The growing power of King Wen (referred to in the text as “Lord of the West,” the title he enjoyed during his life) is portrayed in terms of his increasing influence among the patrician lords; that is, the local lords of patrimonial estates allocated by royal fiat. Yet our texts often picture the Zhou founders as the innovators of this system of dynastically dispensed patrimonial rights, and this account, and others like it, may be suspected of projecting the late Zhou community of contending patrician lords into its vision of the past. In terms of traditional ways of speaking of these phenomena, we can say that it is projecting “Zhou Feudalism” into the Shang period.

The following year, the Lord of the West campaigned against the Western Rong tribes. The year after, he campaigned against the state of Mi-xu. The year after, he defeated the state of Qi. When the Shang minister Zu-yi learned of this, he reported it to Zhòu. Zhòu replied, “Do I not possess the Mandate of Heaven? How could this man affect me?”

The Mandate of Heaven. The doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven forms the principal rationalization of the Zhou conquest of the Shang. In brief, the affairs of

China, as the center of the civilized world, were viewed as being under the loose protection of a benevolent deity, Tian 天, a title which translates well as “Heaven.” Heaven exercises its benevolent influence by bestowing a mandate to rule upon the most virtuous clan in the land. If the moral quality of the descendants of that ruling house declines beyond a critical point, and governance ceases to benefit the people and to accord with basic norms, Heaven shifts the mandate, a change which takes the form of military conquest by the new recipient of the mandate, who would naturally receive enthusiastic support from the people. Sima Qian’s narration assumes that this doctrine predated the Zhou conquest. Zhòu, however, seems to understand the mandate as an *unqualified* grant of perpetual hereditary power from Heaven, precisely the opposite of the doctrine that the Zhou founders elaborated to legitimize their conquest of the Shang.

**The following year, the Lord of the West campaigned against Gan, and the year after that against Hu, Marquis of Chong. At this time, the Lord of the West ordered the construction of the walled city of Feng and moved his capital from Ji-xia to Feng.**

**The following year, the Lord of the West died. He was succeeded by his son, Prince Fa, who is known as King Wu--the “Martial King.”**

**The Lord of the West occupied his throne for about fifty years altogether. When he was a prisoner in You-li, he is said to have fashioned the sixty-four hexagrams of the Yi jing from the eight trigrams. The poets tell us that the Lord of the West’s receipt of the mandate should probably be dated from the resolution of the dispute between Yu and Rui, ten years before his death. He was posthumously titled King Wen--the “Civilizing King.” He reformed the legal codes and rectified the calendrical periods according to the dates of the new moons. He posthumously honored the Old Duke as King Tai, and his father, Gong-ji, as King Ji. It seems that the portents foretelling that this clan would rule as Kings over all China date from the reign of King Tai.**

King Wen is frequently cited as one of the prime contributors to the canonical mantic work, the Yi jing, a text we will discuss later on. The legend greatly enhances his prestige as a universal sage, rather than merely a political paragon. Note all the words and phrases qualifying the certainty of the facts cited here. Sima Qian often softens his assertions when he has doubts about the adequacy of his evidence.

**When King Wu assumed the throne, he had the Grand Duke Wang as his commander-in-chief and Dan, the Duke of Zhou as his chief of staff. Others, like the Dukes of Shao and Bi, were his advisors. He took the example of King Wen to be his teacher, and he set about to continue his work.**

Chinese readers would recognize the high officers of King Wu named here as a roll of great “founding fathers.” The Grand Duke Wang was an aged hermit who had

been “discovered” by King Wen (he is a “patron saint” of military masters). The three other dukes were all younger brothers of King Wu.

**In the ninth year of his reign, King Wu went to perform sacrifices at Bi.**

Historical dating and calendars in ancient China. In traditional China, there was no system of dating years in an unbroken, consecutive stream. Years were noted according to their location within the reigns of specific kings. One sign of the legitimacy of a ruler is whether or not chronicles date events according to his reign. A new ruler, properly a king, but during the eras of disunity of the late Zhou sometimes simply any patrician lord, would often upon assuming the throne issue a calendar in his name. This was often not an empty gesture. The basic calendrical system of ancient China was a rather unstable solar-lunar year, calculations for which were complex and difficult. Calendars frequently moved far from synchronization with the natural rhythms of the seasons and the stars, which could disrupt agricultural planning (with devastating effects on the economy), confuse the systems of religious sacrifice, and make political activity chaotic--imagine a state where not only clocks but even calendars were not synchronized trying to map out a prolonged military campaign! Earlier, Sima Qian’s narrative noted as one of King Wen’s accomplishments that he adjusted the Zhou calendar: this was a significant political act standardizing a basic social measure. Now, when Sima Qian begins to date events according to the elapsed years from King Wu’s accession, he is sending a strong signal that the locus of legitimacy in the Chinese cultural sphere had, from this point on, effectively shifted from the Shang king to the lord of the Zhou people.

**He went east to review his troops, reaching the Ford of Meng on the Yellow River. Here he had a wooden temple tablet for King Wen crafted, and he placed it in a chariot located in the midst of his armies. Referring to himself as “Prince Fa,” he declared that he meant to campaign according to the intention of King Wen, and that he dared not presume to take such a decision upon himself. Thereupon he issued a statement to the chief officers in charge of the cavalry, the infantry, public works, and the royal seals. “Be earnest and solemn, all of you! I am but ignorant. Yet because my forbears had virtuous ministers, I, a mere child, have inherited great works, and I shall thoroughly establish codes of reward and punishment in order that further meritorious deeds may be accurately assessed.”**

**Then, King Wu raised his armies. The Grand Duke Wang addressed his troops thus: “Oh, you masses of infantrymen and you who man the oars of our ships! Know that should any of you dally to the battle, he will lose his head!”**

**King Wu crossed the Yellow River. In midstream, a white fish leapt into the royal boat. King Wu stooped to retrieve it and offered it up in sacrifice. Once he had crossed over, a fire came plummeting down from above and landed by the king’s chamber, where it flowed into a crimson crow which cried with a ghostly sound.**

**And just at this time, eight hundred patrician lords converged upon the Ford of Meng, all by chance, without any prior planning. They all said, “Let Zhòu be attacked!” King Wu replied, “I am not yet certain of the Mandate of Heaven. The time is not yet right.” And he led his troops back home.**

What are we to make of this? Why is King Wu--the Martial King--portrayed as so reluctant to overthrow a dissolute ruler, despite some broad hints that destiny just may be on his side (it's important to know that meteoric red crows are not native to China)? Was this legend a cautionary lesson that the early Zhou royal house wished to propagate for the benefit of would-be usurpers--one should only contest for the Mandate with excruciating caution?

**The king abided for two more years. Then he heard that the depravity of Zhòu had reached new depths, that he had killed Prince Bi-gan and imprisoned Prince Ji.**

Conventions for evil rulers require not that they lack sage advisors, but that sage advisors be rejected, and, if literary license permits, horribly killed. The two princes mentioned are supposed to have been highly moral men. Bi-gan, other texts tell us, was killed by being split in two.

**The Master Musician Ci and the Junior Musician Qiang packed up their instruments and fled to Zhou. Thereupon, King Wu issued a proclamation to the patrician lords that read: “The Shang have committed repeated crimes. They cannot but be attacked to the end!”**

**Then, following after his father, King Wen, he led into campaign three hundred war chariots, the Tiger Brave Guard, numbering three thousand, 45,000 armored soldiers, all marching eastward to attack Zhòu.**

Warfare in ancient China. Sometime during the second millennium B.C., probably during the era of the Shang Dynasty, the horse-drawn war chariot was introduced into China from the West, this technology having been diffused across Central Asia. In warfare, the leaders of the military generally rode in these two-wheeled chariots, which were drawn by two horses, and which permitted two to three men to stand abreast; the patrician warrior-leader, flanked by a driver, and often an armed escort, both of whom were themselves junior patricians. Large armies also included trained ranks of dismounted archers and large masses of infantrymen armed with spears, axes, and halberds, who were mostly untrained draftees from among the peasantry located on the lands controlled by the patrician lord leaders. During the last two centuries of the Classical era, mounted cavalry also became common. Armor, fashioned from leather or metal and usually covering only a portion of the torso, was common among the shi warriors. Naval technology developed only during the later Zhou in the states of the south, where navigable waterways were plentiful and control of the rivers an essential part of strategy.

Military goals included the less important one of occupying territory, which was, in general, lightly settled except near cities, and the central aim of successfully invading urban centers. Since these were defended by enormous earthen walls, this generally involved a prolonged siege, which could degenerate into a contest to see whether the inhabitants within the walls could consume their stores more slowly than the invading army could consume the crops and livestock in the fields and farms adjacent to the city walls.

The size of the armies described in historical sources sometimes grows beyond all credibility, and it is likely that no account exists free of some exaggeration, but the numbers here, near fifty thousand total, could very well reflect the appropriate order of magnitude.

**In the eleventh year of the reign of King Wu, on the day wu-wu in the twelfth month (roughly January) the entire army crossed the Ford of Meng and the patrician lords all convened.**

More on calendrics: the ten and sixty-day cycles. Although the annual calendar of early China underwent constant revision and years were always calculated relative to political rhythms, there was nevertheless one form of absolute timekeeping that, from Shang times to the present, has persisted unbroken. This is a sixty-day or sixty-year cyclical system, generated by the ordered succession of two series of ordinal signs, known as the ten heavenly stems and the twelve earthly branches. By matching, in sequence, the elements of the set of ten with the set of twelve, a sixty unit series is generated, organized in six units of ten. In this passage, the term wu-wu represents such a stem-branch combination (the two “wus,” though homophones, are different characters).

In ancient China, each day could be designated by a reign year, a month of the lunar calendar, and a day of the month, but it was also designated independently by a stem-branch cyclical sign, which showed its place within the sixty day sequence. Some aspects of daily life, such as sacrificial schedules, were based on the ten-day rhythm of the heavenly stems, which may be thought of as a type of week. (Months and years also received cyclical sign designations, although the earth-branch set of twelve figured more importantly there. The well-known Chinese animal-year cycle simply represents the earthly branches associated with corresponding animals.) Issues of fortune telling, a major concern of traditional China, were closely tied to the cyclical signs, which were considered to have deep mantic significance. In the histories, the role of the cyclical signs can be significant.

For instance, when we read below that the Zhou conquest occurred on the day jia-zi, which was the first day of the sixty-day cycle, we may wonder whether this is an actual fact or simply the historian’s idea of a magically appropriate day (we will discover what the actual day was later in the course).

The stem-branch series of signs is linguistically very puzzling, and there are some scholars who believe that it is of non-Chinese origins. There are several other very unusual such sets associated with calendrical and astronomical terminology

which also are suggestive of diffused cultural influences, perhaps from Central Asia or Mesopotamia.

**They said, “Let there be no delay!” King Wu then uttered the “Great Oath,” proclaimed to all the hosts.**

**“Now king of the Shang, Zhòu, heeds the words of his wife and cuts himself off from Heaven, destroys the three standards, leaves behind his ancestral fathers and mothers, abolishes the music of his ancestors and creates lascivious music in its stead, thereby altering and bringing chaos to the correct notes of the scale in order to please his wife. Therefore I, Fa, will now reverently execute the punishment of Heaven. Gentlemen, be zealous! Let there be no need for a second or third assault!”**

Royal women. Ancient China was a patriarchal society--the term “sexist” would not begin to suggest the categorical divide which social mores created between the sexes, all to the disadvantage of women (and in this way, very much adhering to the norm for premodern societies). Virtually all positions of public power were understood to belong exclusively to men. Women did play important roles in some areas of religion, serving as spirit mediums in some cases and as essential participants in patrician clan rites, and there is considerable evidence of their informal influence within clan social structures. However, in the sphere of public politics, women were, with some notable exceptions, viewed as evil influences. The families of rulers’ wives often enjoyed extensive and irregular privileges, and the sexual allure of wives and concubines was viewed as a most dangerous influence upon rulers, whose motives and inclinations had so great an effect upon their subjects. The classic evil rulers--the last kings of the Xia and Shang, and the kings who brought the Western Zhou to ruin--are all pictured as being under the influence of wives and concubines. It is noteworthy that the formal charges here proclaimed against the Shang ruler are almost exclusively tied to his wife’s influence.

Music. We will explore in more detail at another point the enormous influence which music played in ancient Chinese conceptions of society, politics, and the workings of the universe. If this passage seems strange in the emphasis it places upon music, those familiar with the role of music and dance in the tribal structures of Native American peoples might find it interesting to recall that the Chinese and Native American peoples were, most probably, distant cousins, fifteen thousand years removed. While it would be prudent to be skeptical of any claim of shared cultural roots across the Pacific, noting similarities in this ritual area at least helps bring the Chinese case into more coherent focus.

Note that earlier in this narrative, though Zhòu’s ghastly evil and a series of wondrous portents failed to move King Wu to war, the defection of the Shang royal musicians did.

In the second month (roughly March) at first light on the day Jia-zi, King Wu held a dawn court outside the capital city of Shang, in the suburban plain of Mu-ye. King Wu leaned upon a yellow battle-axe in his left hand, and grasped a white banner in his right, which he waved high.

“How far you have come, men of the western lands! We have with us great lords, infantry chiefs, cavalry chiefs, ministers of works, clan leaders, and generals. We have a thousand lesser officers and a hundred high officers, and men from Yong, Shu, Qiang, Mao, Wei, Lu, Peng, and Pu. Raise your halberds! Line up your shields! Set your spears! I will swear an oath.

“The ancients had a saying. ‘The hen does not crow at dawn. When the hen crows at dawn, the household is doomed.’ Now Zhòu, the king of the Shang, heeds only the words of his wife. He discards his ancestors and keeps not to his sacrifices. Benightedly he casts away his house and his state, abandoning the path of his ancestral fathers and mothers. The criminal outcasts of the four quarters he honors and appoints to high office, entrusting them with his missions of state, letting them violently oppress the common folk in the rape of the Shang state!

“Now I, Fa, reverently execute the punishment of Heaven. In the affair of this day, go no further than six or seven paces without stopping to regroup -- gentlemen, be zealous! Charge no more than four times – five – six – seven – and then regroup. Gentlemen, be zealous! Be awesome-like tigers! Like bears! Like jackals! Like dragons! Here in the suburbs of Shang, do not slaughter those Shang troops who flee, for they will serve us in the west. Gentlemen, be zealous! If you should not be zealous, may you yourselves be slaughtered!”

Sima Qian has taken this entire passage from one of the canonical books of the Confucian tradition, the Book of Documents. This section is a chapter known as the “Oath of Mu” (that is, the speech at Mu-ye).

When the oath was finished, the patrician lords arranged their four thousand chariots in battle formation on the plain of Mu-ye.

When the Emperor Zhòu learned that King Wu had come, he too called up his troops, numbering 700,000 (!), to repulse the attack of King Wu. King Wu dispatched the Grand Duke Wang with a hundred officers to inspire the troops and detached a corps of cavalry to charge the soldiers of the Emperor Zhòu. Zhòu’s troops, though numerous, possessed no will to fight whatever; it had been their wish that King Wu come as quickly as possible. The armies of Zhòu all reversed their weapons as they engaged in the battle, that the way might be opened for King Wu. And as King Wu galloped through the ranks, the soldiers of Zhòu all collapsed and turned in revolt upon Zhòu himself.

Zhòu fled back to his palace and mounted to the tower of Deer Pavilion. There he clothed himself in his most precious jewels and, setting himself afire, burned to death.

King Wu grasped the great white banner to signal to the patrician lords, and the lords then all bowed low to King Wu. King Wu bowed in return, and every one of the lords became his follower.

As King Wu approached the city walls of Shang, the people of the city all awaited him outside the wall. Thereupon, King Wu ordered his officers to proclaim to the people of Shang, "Heaven above has sent down its blessing!" And the people of Shang all fell to the ground bowing prostrate with hands clasped. King Wu bowed to them in reply.

Then King Wu entered the city and went to the place where Zhòu had died. The king himself shot the corpse three times with arrows before descending from his chariot. Then he stabbed it with his sword, grabbed his yellow battle axe and chopped off Zhòu's head, impaling it on the pole of his white banner. Then he sought out Zhòu's two favorite concubines; they had already hung themselves. King Wu also shot them three times with arrows, stabbed them with his sword, and, using a black axe, chopped off their heads, impaling them on the poles of smaller white banners. Then King Wu left the city and returned to his troops.

The following day the king performed ceremonies purifying the roads and repaired the state altars of the Shang, together with the Shang palaces. At an appointed time, a hundred officers led the way, riding forth with raised flags. Shu-zhen Duo, a younger brother of King Wu, followed leading the battle chariots. Dan, the Duke of Zhou, carried a great battle axe, the Duke of Bi carried a lesser battle axe, and they flanked King Wu. San Yi-shang, Tai-dian, and Hong-yao formed King Wu's personal guard, armed with swords. Entering into the city, they took up positions south of the altar of state to the left of the leading warriors, with their retainers all arrayed to their left. Mao-shu Zheng offered up the ritual water; Kang-shu Feng of Wei laid out the reeds; Shi, Duke of Shao, presented the vegetable offerings; the Grand Duke Wang led forth the sacrificial ox.

Yin Yi, the liturgist, spoke. "The last descendant of the Shang, Zhòu, discarded the bright virtue of his forbears, disgraced the spirits by ignoring their sacrifices, and brought benighted violence against the people of the city of Shang. His doings became known to the Heavenly Emperor, the Lord on High."

King Wu then repeatedly bowed prostrate. "The receipt of the great mandate has been shifted away from the Shang. I receive the bright mandate of Heaven." Again he repeatedly prostrated himself, and then they departed.

The son of Zhòu, Lu-fu, was awarded a patrimonial estate within which were settled the remnant people of the Shang. Because King Wu was only first settling the Shang people and had not yet achieved full control, he appointed his younger brothers Guan-shu Xian and Cai-shu Tu to serve Lu-fu as chief ministers and control the people of Shang.

The granting of an hereditary estate to Zhòu's son was an important pious act. Although Zhòu himself was morally discredited, the Zhou founders did not wish to discredit the Shang Dynasty as a whole. Their own legitimacy depended upon their claim that they had received the heavenly mandate that the Shang had once properly held. In setting up Lu-fu, King Wu was ensuring that the entire line of Shang kings and queens would continue to receive the sacrificial offerings upon which they depended for sustenance--it would be grotesque, in the political and religious culture of the time, to subject the spirits of the former holders of the mandate to starvation. Hence Lu-fu was established not as the head of a state, per se, but as the leader of a clan lineage and its sacrifices.

Ghosts and spirits. It may seem odd that the ancient Chinese were concerned about ghosts starving. Early Chinese notions of the spirit world were very different from those evolving in Europe; they were also unsystematic. In the Classical era of the late Zhou, the spirits of the dead were conceived as inhabiting a variety of spaces. They could be pictured in heaven, which was up, or in the region of the Yellow Springs, which was down, or as occupying the same space as humans, which was scary. Sometimes, these spatial ideas were related to a notion that humans possessed two types of death-surviving entities: one rose upon death and tended to be thought of as a benign spirit, and one descended into the earth as a spirit which could possess frightening tendencies, but was not necessarily threatening.

Spirits of the dead were very different from the living, but were not a-physical and did require sustenance. This sustenance was the responsibility of their descendants, and was maintained through regular sacrifices of food and drink. Spirits "descended" at the time of such offerings and partook of the food, although their particular physical needs were tenuous enough that no apparent change in the offerings would appear, and apart from certain unpalatable ritual items, the "leftovers" were consumed by the thrifty clan members, an act which was itself viewed as pious. Ancestral spirits took a great interest in the affairs of their descendants, and their influence varied according to their lifetime temperaments, any crotchets which they may have picked up through the unpleasant experience of death, their judgments of the conduct of the descendants, and the quality of the sacrificial menu. As ancestors grew more remote, their impact grew more tenuous, and if they continued to exist, their existence was such that they no longer required further human attention--only recent ancestors showed up at dinnertime. The relatively tame ancestral spirits shared an influence on the course of human events with a host of much more interesting animal demons, nature gods, city gods, anonymous revenants, and unidentified spooky things, all of which made the nighttime good to sleep through and Chinese religious beliefs colorfully incoherent.

Kings were different. For the Zhou, if they died peacefully they went up to heaven where they were seated to the left and right of the "Lord on High," an anthropomorphic high deity roughly equivalent to Tian, the term we translate as Heaven. The former kings of the Zhou ruling house remained important to the

political health of the realm, but spiritually unproblematic. The Shang view of former rulers was more complex, but we will encounter those only later in the course, as the writers of Classical China were no longer aware of them.

**Then King Wu ordered the Duke of Shao to release Prince Ji from prison, and he ordered the Duke of Bi to release all common people from prison. He ordered that the gate of Shang Rong's neighborhood be specially marked.**

Shang Rong was a minister of the Shang who had dared to remonstrate to Zhòu about his faults.

**He ordered Nan-gong Kuo to distribute the goods collected in the storerooms of Deer Pavilion and the grain in the granaries of Ju Bridge, in order to succor the poor and the weak and the masses of laborers. He ordered Nan-gong Kuo and Shi Yi to set out the nine cauldrons and precious jades.**

These were sacred properties belonging to the holder of the mandate.

**He ordered Hong Yao to erect a raised earthwork to surround the grave of Prince Bi-gan.**

**Then King Wu ordered the liturgist of the clan to perform a grand sacrificial rite among the armies, following which he demobilized his troops and sent them back to their homes in the west.**

**KEY NAMES**

Qi (Prince Millet)  
King Wu

The Shang king Zhòu  
The Duke of Zhou

King Wen

**STUDY QUESTIONS**

- 1. List at least three notions about the right to rule conveyed by this story.*
- 2. What qualities did the Zhou royal line, starting from Prince Millet, possess that marked it as worthy to rule?*
- 3. How do the authors of this text conceive of political evil?*
- 4. How many different types of religious ideas can you detect in this narrative?*