

Chinese Civilization: Understanding the Mandate of Heaven

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Performers reenact a traditional Qing Dynasty ceremony, in which the emperors prayed for good fortune, at the Temple of Heaven in Beijing, China, on February 14, 2015, as part of Chinese Lunar New Year festivities. Photo by: STR/AFP/Getty Images

The people of ancient China believed there was a supreme powerful god, known as Heaven or Sky. When a new king or emperor of China came to power, they believed that they had special permission from Heaven to rule people on Earth. This is known as the Mandate of Heaven.

Although the ruler had been given great power, he also had a responsibility to do good for his people. If he did not, his land would suffer terrible disasters and he would lose the right to govern.

Wen and the responsibility of rule

The first Chinese ruler to claim he had been chosen by Heaven to rule was King Wen. He ruled the Zhou, a feudal state in the Wei River Valley of China. In Chinese feudalism, the emperor gave some of his land to the area's nobles. In return, the nobles were expected to serve the emperor for life. The nobles relied on the commoners, who had neither land nor power. These commoners were peasants, servants, artisans and slaves.

At this time, the Chinese had a well-established tradition of worshipping their ancestors. Building from this tradition, Wen was known as "Son of Heaven," as were all the kings after him. He was considered the head of the royal family, the state, the courts and religious leadership.

One night in the year 1059 B.C., five major planets aligned in the night sky. This was said to be a sign from the heavens that Wen should be the divine ruler. When Wen and his successors died, it was thought that they rose to Heaven and served at court there. Soon, rulers and emperors were treated with awe by any person lucky enough to even touch them.

Wen had a long, peaceful reign during the 11th century B.C. His governing choices were seen as good for all people, and he became a model for many later kings, emperors, politicians and historians. His reign also stood in strong contrast to the corruption of the previous king of Zhou.

The concept of the Mandate of Heaven has roots in Confucianism, a major religious and philosophical movement that emerged in China around 2,500 years ago. The Confucian author Mencius and others looked up to Wen as the great example of a ruler whose every decision was based on the best interests of his people. Wen even shared parts of his palace with common people. Mencius believed that the ruler must at all times be guided by the principle of benevolence, or jen. He is both the mother and father of the people.

If China were hit by a flood and drought, this was seen as a sign from Heaven that the ruler was doing something wrong. In this instance, Mencius considered it appropriate for the people to overthrow their ruler, or at least to show their disapproval through rebellion and protest.

Wen built up so much goodwill and trust, ancient Chinese historians believed, that it made it possible for the next king, Wu Wang, to finally conquer the powerful Shang Dynasty. The Shang had ruled China for centuries.

Afterward, Wu Wang would establish the long-lasting Zhou Dynasty. In his Announcement of Shao, the Duke of Zhou described the Mandate of Heaven. He explained that his new ruler was called to control Shang and that the king would rule fairly over them:

"Heaven has rejected and ended the Mandate of this great state of Shang. Thus, although Shang has many former wise kings in Heaven, when their successor kings and successor people undertook their Mandate, in the end wise and good men lived in misery ...

"Look at the former peoples of ancient times, the Xia. Heaven guided, indulged and cherished them, so that they would strive to understand what Heaven favors, but by this time they have let their Mandate fall to the ground. Now look at the Shang; Heaven guided them, stayed near them, nourished them, so that they would strive to comprehend what Heaven favors; but now they have let their Mandate fall to the ground."

According to the Duke, the Xia and Shang rulers no longer had the approval of Heaven because they were poor leaders who misbehaved.

The Zhou rulers who followed Wen's reign were aware that if they did not rule well, then they too could lose the Mandate of Heaven. If that happened, they would no doubt be conquered by a more virtuous enemy state. If they ruled well, then they were chosen by heaven to conquer the very same rival states.

The evolution of the mandate

During China's Warring States period, there was a lack of unity, and many states were fighting for total power. One was the state of Qin. Its early rulers claimed to have the Mandate of Heaven and that it no longer belonged to the Zhou.

But later rulers, such as China's first emperor Shi Huangdi of the Qin and the Han Emperor Gaozu, were much less concerned with being kind, gentle rulers. They thought they earned their victory because of a strong military and because of good luck.

Later thinkers believed that the emperor wasn't given power from heaven at all. Rather, he was a necessary public servant. Still, right up to the 1800s, emperors continued to argue that they had the Mandate of Heaven.

Despite having absolute power, an emperor could not do all that he wished. His ability to rule effectively depended on how big or small his state was. He depended on loyal supporters to carry out his policies using traditional government methods.

Finally, although the emperor was powerful and influential, he had to follow many rules that had been written before his time. King Wen, especially, was seen as the ultimate example to follow. Since all rulers were chosen by a divine power, all kings who came after them had to respect the policies the old kings had written. So even the "Son of Heaven" had to, at least sometimes, work within certain limits.

Quiz

- 1 Read the selection from the section "Wen and the responsibility of rule."

The Confucian author Mencius and others looked up to Wen as the great example of a ruler whose every decision was based on the best interests of his people. Wen even shared parts of his palace with common people. Mencius believed that the ruler must at all times be guided by the principle of benevolence, or jen.

What is the BEST definition of "benevolence" as used in the selection above?

- (A) perfection
- (B) intelligence
- (C) kindness
- (D) excitement

- 2 Read the selection from the section "Wen and the responsibility of rule."

The Zhou rulers who followed Wen's reign were aware that if they did not rule well, then they too could lose the Mandate of Heaven. If that happened, they would no doubt be conquered by a more virtuous enemy state.

Why does the author use the word "virtuous"?

- (A) to show that conquering states believed they would automatically receive the Mandate of Heaven
- (B) to show that a conquering state would need to have greater qualities of honor and goodness
- (C) to suggest that Wen was afraid of being conquered by states that were braver and stronger in battle
- (D) to suggest that Zhou rulers would need to be sneaky and strategic to keep from being conquered

3 Which two sentences from the article include MAIN ideas?

1. *Although the ruler had been given great power, he also had a responsibility to do good for his people.*
2. *When Wen and his successors died, it was thought that they rose to Heaven and served at court there.*
3. *During China's Warring States period, there was a lack of unity, and many states were fighting for total power.*
4. *Since all rulers were chosen by a divine power, all kings who came after them had to respect the policies the old kings had written.*

- (A) 1 and 3
- (B) 1 and 4
- (C) 2 and 3
- (D) 2 and 4

4 Which statement would be MOST important to include in a summary of the article?

- (A) The Mandate of Heaven had its roots in the belief that a good and just ruler was given permission from Heaven to rule on Earth.
- (B) The Mandate of Heaven had its roots and support from the religious and philosophical movement of Confucianism.
- (C) The Mandate of Heaven was believed to be lost when there was a flood or drought that caused people to overthrow their ruler.
- (D) The Mandate of Heaven was believed to be an old and ineffective idea about rulers by later thinkers and citizens.