

Origins of the Mandate of Heaven

By John Watt

Introduction: The Question of Legitimacy

The accession of new regimes brings into play one of the great challenges of political history. That is, how does a new regime legitimize itself? In history it is easy to read that A overcame (or outvoted) B and miss the point that the victory, once gained, may have taken years to validate. The forces supporting B may not accept the victory and may seek instead to overthrow or repel A by whatever means possible. If they succeed, then A becomes a nine-day wonder, and the regime of B and B's successors controls the future. If they fail, then B and B's supporters lose legitimacy as well as power, and A rules society.

For example, the popular movie "Elizabeth" depicts the very shaky start of the "glorious" reign of Queen Elizabeth I of England. The Marian party, who had supported her older sister Mary, regarded Elizabeth as a bastard and illegitimate, as did the Papacy. Several times they came close to doing her in. The movie shows how ruthless and protracted this struggle was. At great personal sacrifice Elizabeth prevailed. In due time William Shakespeare would write plays such as Richard III and Julius Caesar, which would defame the record of failed monarchs, such as Richard, and 'noble' rebels, such as Brutus, implicitly justifying the Tudor monarchy.

This question of legitimacy was also important during a critical transition in early Chinese history. This is the transition from the culturally dominant Shang dynasty to an upstart regime holding a militarily strong but culturally peripheral position on the Western flank of the Shang domain. Employing superior military force (including larger chariots pulled by more horses) the Zhou overthrew the Shang forces and emerged as victors on the battlefield.

The Zhou Crisis

How were the Zhou to translate this military victory into ideological legitimacy? The Shang forces were defeated but not destroyed. We know that they regrouped and tried to form alliances to overthrow the young successor to the conquering King Wu (the "Martial" King). The young boy King Cheng (the "Accomplishing" King) survived only because a loyal uncle, the Duke of Zhou, came to his rescue and destroyed the enemy.

The problem facing the Zhou was that while they had won the battle, the Shang still held most of the legitimacy cards. The Shang ancestors had established order in northern China. They had defined the system of ancestor reverence and its elaborate ceremonials and burial practices, and they had created the extraordinary bronze vessels that were used to validate this system. The Zhou ancestors lacked this kind of lineage and proximity to divine authority. Without it their hold on popular allegiance was very tenuous.

Some Historical Resources

To help reconstruct the development of the Zhou legitimacy myth—otherwise known as the Mandate of Heaven—let us review the sources. There are three basic kinds:

1. Inscriptions on early Zhou Bronze vessels. These tell us a little bit about who was doing what with whom to legitimize political power.
2. Early oral and documentary traditions, preserved and in the process edited up or 'redacted' by Confucianists.

3. Extensive original writings by Confucianists that are intimately concerned with questions such as how to govern and how to legitimize political authority.

From this review we can see right away that Confucianists had a good deal to do with the evolution of the Zhou myth. Indeed, the Zhou myth about the Mandate of Heaven became Confucian political dogma.

Construction of the Myth: The Zhou Bronze Inscriptions

Early Chinese bronzes are fascinating cultural artifacts. Esthetically they are a unique art form demonstrating astounding mastery of design and production. Most early bronzes are ritual vessels of many varieties, made to support the Shang ancestral cult. The most conspicuous feature of the Shang bronzes is the pervasive ritual mask or “taotie” that appears on the front and/or sides of the ritual vessels. This mask is an animal-like apparition with prominent eyes, teeth, and claws, which become more elaborated as the dynasty progresses.

Early Zhou bronzes continue some, though not all, of the varieties of Shang ritual vessels. However, different ornamentation and esthetic design rapidly takes over. A menagerie of animals including tigers, elephants, buffalo, fish, owls, and other birds, appears in increasing profusion. The taotie is transformed into an increasingly swirling and free-form design, losing in the process its ritualistic solemnity and otherworldly impact.

Zhou bronzes use detailed inscriptions to tell a political as well as ritual story. They aim to record how things happened, and why. For example, a vessel from that era tells the following story:

- Young King Cheng is offering a sacrifice to his father King Wu, in the Hall of Heaven;
- A subordinate’s ancestor served the king’s grandfather, King Wen;
- King Wen “accepted the Great Command” to replace the Shang rulers;
- His son, King Wu, conquered the Shang, announced his success to Heaven, and took control of the center to rule the people;
- King Cheng tells the subordinate to commemorate how his ancestor served Heaven by serving King Wen;
- The subordinate acknowledges that young King Cheng is virtuous, compliant to Heaven, inspiring, and generous.

Thus, all of these kings derive their virtue from their conformity to the command of Heaven. In the process they seize control over the ‘civilized’ order. To consolidate that power, ancestor worship is transformed into a ritual ceremony reconfirming the act of conquest. A cult designed to acknowledge Shang authority is transformed into one that would confirm Zhou legitimacy.

Development of the Myth: Winners and Losers

Quite a number of the poems in the Book of Songs consist of what the English Sinologist Arthur Waley calls dynastic songs and legends. We have selected one to illustrate the process by which the Zhou consolidated their authority.

The poem anchors King Wen firmly in the domain of Heaven. It also proceeds to explain not just why the Zhou won but why the Shang lost. In the process it co-opts the old Shang deity “God on High” into an accessory to the Zhou conquest and to the will and mandate of Heaven. The poet claims that the Shang lost Heaven’s mandate because they were no longer virtuous and thus had to submit ceremonially to Zhou. In advancing that case it points out that Heaven’s mandate is uncertain. Future Zhou rulers and their surrogates must cultivate their virtue and

make King Wen their role model, so that subordinate states will have confidence in their authority.

Here we have the basic outline of the Mandate of Heaven theory. In later Confucian texts this theory is amplified in the Book of Documents and the Book of Mencius, until it becomes the prevailing explanation of how power is transferred.

A Full Blown Mandate of Heaven

Some three centuries after the Zhou seized power, barbarian forces attacked the Zhou capital and forced the ruler to flee. Subordinate states began contending for power. This uneasy situation continued for several centuries, a period of bloody chaos during which the bigger states gradually swallowed up smaller ones, until a few mega-states were left to fight it out. Eventually the Han dynasty, which lasted 400 years, was founded.

The eclipse of the Zhou rulers long before the successful Han dynasty achieved power raised questions about the mandate of Heaven. What on earth was Heaven doing taking its mandate away from Zhou but not transferring it to anyone else? Why were the contending states unworthy of Heaven's approval?

One explanation, illustrated in a chapter from the Confucian Book of Documents entitled "Oath of [King] Tang," shows how mandate theory was applied to dynasties preceding the Zhou. Tang was the founder of the Shang dynasty. Tang is depicted in the Book of Documents as the instrument of an interventionist Heavenly authority that is determined to get rid of evil rulers (the Hsia dynasty). According to this document, Jie, the last king of the Hsia dynasty, is guilty of oppressing the people and thus is overthrown. The theorist is arguing that losers don't just lose—they lose because they are evil. Winners win because they are virtuous.

In this way a myth that evolved to explain how the Zhou conquest took effect came to dominate Chinese thinking about the legitimacy of political authority. Each dynasty typically ends in chaos and destruction. If rulers engage in misconduct, Heaven will find a way to remove them, sometimes using natural calamities to express its displeasure with political misconduct. Order is restored by leaders having the necessary virtue to attract popular support and win the approval of the higher powers.

So it is not so surprising that when a huge earthquake in the summer of 1976 killed over a quarter of a million people living near Beijing, many survivors came to the correct conclusion that the days of the senile Mao Zedong were numbered. The mandate was once again about to change.