

CHAPTER THREE – THE ZHOU DYNASTY AND THE WARRING STATES

THE OVERTHROW OF THE SHANG

As our archaeological record has proven, outside of Shang territory there existed a myriad of other kingdoms and peoples – some were allied to the Shang, others were hostile. Between the Shang capital at Anyang and the territory of the Qiang peoples, was a kingdom named Zhou. A nomadic peoples who spoke an early form of the Tibetan language, the Qiang tribes were often at war with the Shang kingdom. Serving as a buffer zone against the Qiang, this frontier kingdom of Zhou shared much of the Shang's material culture, such as its bronze work. In 1045 BCE, however, the Zhou noble family of Ji rebelled against and overthrew the Shang rulers at Anyang. In doing so, they laid the foundations for the Zhou dynasty, China's third. In classical Chinese history, three key figures are involved in the overthrow of the Shang. They are King Wen, who originally expanded the Zhou realm, his son King Wu, who conquered the Shang, and King Wu's brother, known as the duke of Zhou, who secured Zhou authority while serving as regent for King Wu's heir. The deeds of these three men are recorded in China's earliest transmitted text, The Book of Documents. The text portrays the Shang kings as corrupt and decadent, with the Zhou victory recorded as a result of their justice and virtue. The Zhou kings shifted the Shang system of religious worship away from Di, who was a personified supreme first ancestor figure and towards Tian, which was Heaven itself. This Zhou concept of a divine Heaven developed the idea of Tiānmìng, or the Mandate of Heaven. In effect, the Mandate of Heaven is a political ideology of legitimacy, the notion that a just ruler is on his throne because he has support from Heaven. On the other hand, a poor ruler once displaced is deemed to have lost the blessing of Heaven. This was the reason given by the early Zhou kings to justify their takeover of power from the Shang, and it would become a standard of subsequent dynastic upheavals.

THE WESTERN ZHOU DYNASTY



Western Zhou Civilization

The Zhou dynasty is conventionally broken into two periods. The first period, lasting from 1045-771 BCE, is called the Western Zhou, with its capital near modern Xi'An. In this first period, Zhou society and material culture remained similar to that of Shang times, although some religious practices, such as oracle bone divination and human sacrifice, seemed to discontinue. The head of the Zhou state was its king, who like the Shang kings, acted as a political and

religious leader. Instead of ruling all of their domains directly, however, the Zhou kings created a feudal system in which members of the Ji family nobility or other court officials were assigned as governors to specific regions. These governors would maintain and show their allegiance to the king through visits to the Zhou court, where rituals of loyalty and ancestor reverence would be performed. Material records uncovered by archaeology have allowed us to observe the relationship between the king and his vassal lords. In one such bronze inscription, the king of Zhou bestowed upon his lord Yu the gift of two bronze vessels and the additional territory of one-hundred fields to his domain as a reward for his service fighting against the Southern Huai barbarians. Outside the Zhou borders, there were many such “barbarian” tribes that existed, such as the Yi in the East, and the Rong in the Northwest. Over time, many of these peoples became incorporated into the Zhou political order, their leaders vassal lords of the Zhou king. This process of assimilation spread the use of the Chinese script into the outlying regions. The governor lordships were inherited from father to son, and so the domains governed became hereditary fiefdoms. By 800 BCE, there were some two-hundred of these feudal lords in China that operated under the Zhou monarch. Each lord had his own court of officials, that served and advised him in matters administrative, religious and military. With such a comprehensive division of power throughout the land, the Zhou state was much more decentralized and diverse than the Shang. Thus regional political factions began to emerge, and their ensuing power struggle would soon launch China a prolonged period of war and chaos.



Zhou Bronze

THE EASTERN ZHOU DYNASTY

In 771 BCE King You, the twelfth king of the Zhou, replaced his queen and son Yijiu with a concubine named Baosi and the child he had with her. In response, the queen’s father, the lord of Shen formed an alliance, with several Rong tribes and waged war against the king. They were successful in killing him, and installing Yijiu as the next king of the Zhou. Because of the damage done to the capital during the civil war however, Yijiu, known as King Ping after his coronation, moved the Zhou capital from Hao near present day Xian eastwards to Luoyang, located just south of the Yellow River. Here began the Eastern Zhou period, where as a result of the splintered royal line, there was a steady fragmentation of the Zhou court and its central authority. This period of Eastern Zhou rule from the 8th to 5th centuries BCE is also known as The Spring and Autumn Period, named after the chronological text The Spring and Autumn Annals. The Eastern Zhou kings never fully regained control over all their vassals, and their domains gradually decreased even further as time went on. By the 6th century BCE, the southern states of China declared their independence from the Zhou kingdom through military

might, soon followed by others throughout the land. Power struggles both within and between states regularly erupted, and were decided with violence. It was nigh impossible for any one state to amass too much power and attempt to reunify the country, for a coalition between the other states would keep the balance of power in check. This was a period of increased intermingling between Chinese and non-Chinese peoples, for the frontier tribes such as the Rong or Yi were often called to form an alliance with one state against another. Through it all, the one unifying element among the political chaos was the Chinese writing system.

THE WARRING STATES



Warring States

By the 5th century BCE, the Zhou dynasty reigned only figuratively, China being divided into several different warring states. This particular name comes from a Han dynasty text titled Record of the Warring States, which begins with events 490 BCE. This period of Chinese history is characterized by regional warlords annexing the smaller states around them. While China had previously been broken up into multitudes of small feudal states under the Zhou, by the 3rd century BCE, there were seven major states that fought for supremacy. Such constant warring drastically changed the nature and philosophy of warfare in China. Warfare during the Spring and Autumn period was conducted with a strict code of ritual and honour. Before commencing battle, the two sides would agree on a time to come together for sacrifice and divination. The wounded would be spared, and not killed off in battle. There were also code of ethics regarding the ruling houses of each state. No state would be attacked if it was in mourning for the death of its ruler. Royal houses would be spared and not completely decimated, so as not to anger the ancestors. In the Warring States period, such chivalrous warfare was abandoned. Rulers took all the necessary steps in trying to defeat their enemies. Battles were fought without ritual, and to the death. They were also fought on a much larger scale. Whereas armies in the Spring and Autumn period would be composed of nobility on chariots, and up to ten thousand or so professionally trained foot soldiers, conscription for citizens was commonplace during the Warring States. Usually, all men over the age of fifteen would be drafted in to serve. A typical army during this period was comprised of several hundred thousand men. The composition of armies changed as well, as thick ranks of infantry supplanted chariot lines. In the southern state of Chu, the composite crossbow was invented during this period, which allowed a foot soldier to easily strike a charioteer from afar. Under the influence of nomadic steppes peoples, the northern states began to employ cavalry, which were much more mobile than the chariots and could swiftly ambush supply lines. Thus the southern states had to start using cavalry as well to

defend themselves. This new philosophy of pragmatism over grandeur in warfare is best illustrated by Sunzi's Art of War, a text dating to the 3rd century BCE. The primary theme of its author is the waging of war efficiently – discipline and the controlled use of resources are paramount to an army's success, while acts of bravado are dismissed as needlessly reckless.

Despite the violence of the Warring States, this was an era which saw China progress economically and demographically. In fact, it was perhaps the constant warfare that triggered such economic developments. Because war took such a toll on civilian lives, many rulers tried to find ways to increase their population. This was achieved through improvements in agricultural production – thus irrigation techniques were refined, and marshland cleared for farming. Taxation was another area which rulers concentrated upon, in order to fund their military operations. Also, feudalism began to decline, as rulers no longer saw the need in having feudal lords to act as intermediaries between them and their subjects. This paves the way for the central imperial system of government which would be founded by China's first emperor, Qin Shi Huangdi and continued throughout much of subsequent Chinese history.

SOCIETY, ARTS AND CULTURE

While Zhou society was highly structured at its topmost levels, with royal house and aristocracy organized into strict hierarchal ranking, the vast majority of people were ordinary subjects of the king. They were for the most part, subsistence farmers, tied to the estate of a feudal lord. In return for their servitude, the lord would be expected to protect them. An excellent source of insight into Zhou society at all levels can be found in the classical text The Book of Poetry, compiled in the Western Zhou period. The 305 songs and poems found within cover a wide range of topics. Many deal are religious eulogies, while portray the intricacies of aristocratic court life, but there are also poems which portray the simple farmer's life – the cultivation of crops, and weaving of hemp clothing and baskets. There are of course, also, the earliest Chinese poems that deal with romantic love.

The late Zhou and Warring States period saw an incredible flourishing of intellectual life. It was in this time period, around the 5th century BCE, that the famous native Chinese philosophies such as Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism came into being. Beyond these main philosophies, there existed a multitude of other streams of thought, so much so the Chinese refer to this period as "The Hundred Schools of Thought". More detailed information about the various philosophers and their teachings can be found under the Special Topics heading.

Editor:

Walter Koh

(McGill University)