

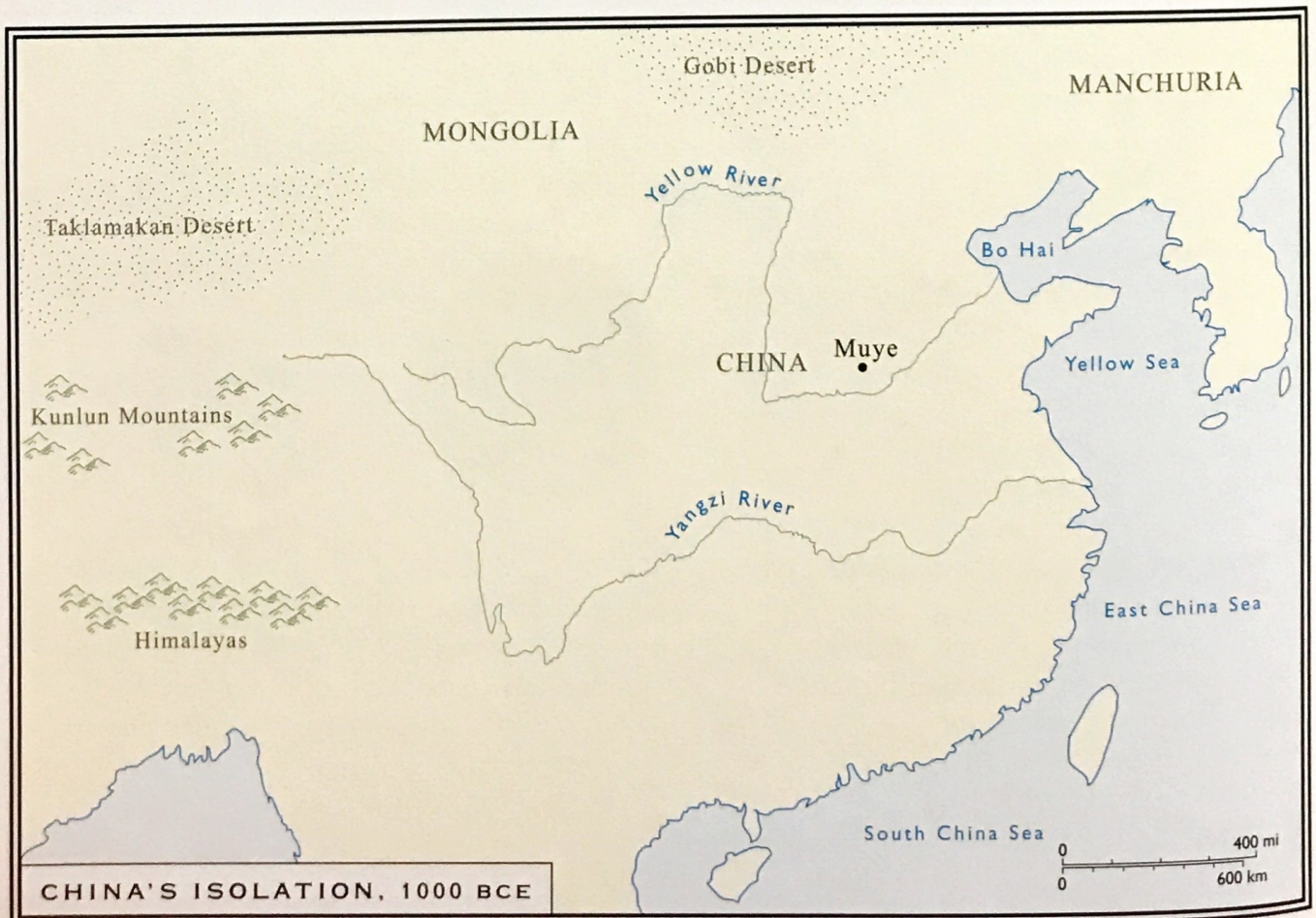
CHAPTER 6

“ BOOK OF POETRY
AND BOOK OF
DOCUMENTS

“HEAVEN IS BRIGHTLY AWESOME”

THE WESTERN ZHOU ERA AND THE MANDATE OF HEAVEN

Few modern people can understand the shock that people must have felt when a new ruling family, the Zhou, overthrew the Shang dynasty. The Shang had ruled for centuries, so long that in the minds of the people they ruled, “king” equaled “Shang.” The Shang kings were humanity’s link to the gods, especially their royal ancestors. With someone else in power, people wondered, who would ask



the Shang ancestors for good weather for their crops? Who would find out the correct sacrifice? Some must have panicked, and many of them must have had a hard time understanding what it meant to have a new family in power.

And to make matters worse, many considered the new Zhou rulers to be foreigners. They were from the edge of the Shang world, and most of their new subjects thought of them as barbarians (the Shang viewed non-Chinese people as wild and uncivilized).

Exactly what was Chinese is hard to say. Mainly it meant people who had a similar language, which is the ancestor of the modern Chinese languages, and similar customs. People who considered themselves Chinese generally followed the same laws and spoke the same language when they went from one state to another. The boundaries between what was China and what was "other" kept shifting. Many states began as non-Chinese but later merged into Chinese culture.

The geography of China isolates the area and its inhabitants from its surroundings. The Himalayas to the west are steep and forbidding (the world's highest mountain, Mount Everest, is part of that chain). The plains of Mongolia and Manchuria to the north are still difficult to cross and were almost impassable until camels and horses were domesticated. The oceans on the east and part of the south were an even more difficult barrier for the early Chinese than the Great Wall of China was to become for invaders many centuries later. Only rarely did a very brave and very tough person from the outside manage to make it into China, and the few-and-far-between strangers were looked on with suspicion.

Exactly where the Zhou came from is unclear. Most scholars think that they originated in the high plains of central Shaanxi Province. But even though their home was far away, some members of the family managed to get involved with politics even before they took over ruling the country. One Zhou man, whose title, Wen, means "civilized," was even a high official in the Shang court. But Wen got himself into trouble when he protested against the last Shang king's evil deeds. He was thrown into jail for seven years. After

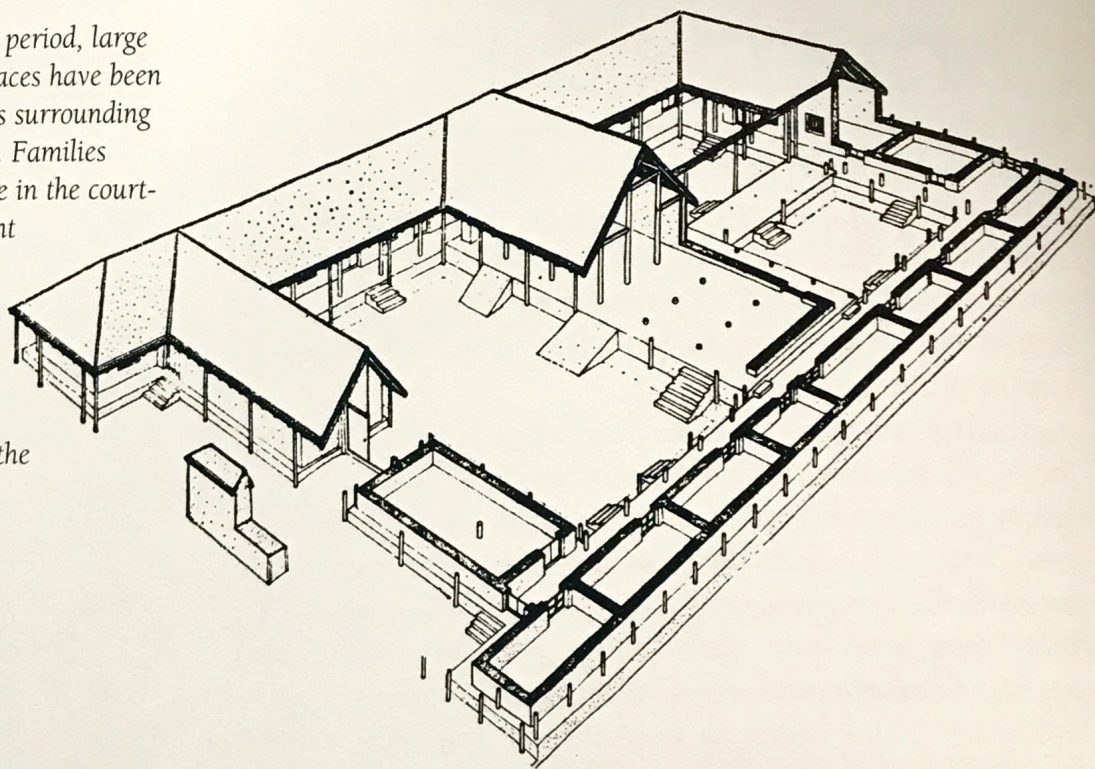
A DISCARDED BABY

The Zhou had their own theory about their origins. In the "Basic Annals" of the *Record of the Historian* of 100 BCE, Sima Qian recounts the story of a woman named Jiang Yuan who "went out into the wilderness and saw a giant footprint." She instantly became pregnant and realized that this was the mark of the great god Di.

When her baby was born, she thought he was unlucky and she "abandoned him on a narrow trail." But the livestock that passed by would not step on him. So she put him in a forest, but there were a lot of people there. She was worried that they might save him, so she abandoned him on the ice in a ditch, but there birds covered him with their wings.

Jiang Yuan thought he must be divine, so she gathered him up and raised him. Because she had at first wanted to discard him, she named him Qi, "Discarded." Qi is said to have founded the Ji clan that ruled the Zhou dynasty and also to have taught the Chinese how to grow crops.

Since the Western Zhou period, large Chinese houses and palaces have been made up of many rooms surrounding one or more courtyards. Families spent much of their time in the courtyards, where the sunlight made it possible for work to be done. The walls of the courtyard allowed women to work outside while still remaining beyond the gaze of non-relatives.



his release, Wen tried to convince other groups to join with him against the Shang, but he died before he could get anywhere.

Wen's son Wu was luckier. He gathered support from other people who wanted the Shang rule to end. He eventually led a large army (the *Record of the Historian* says that it was made up of 45,000 soldiers and 300 chariots) to victory over the Shang in the Battle of Muye, which took place 30 miles (50 kilometers) south of Anyang, in 1046 or 1045 BCE. The anonymous author of a poem in the seventh-century BCE *Book of Poetry* expressed the thrill that spectators must have felt in seeing the great victory:

“ Anonymous, *Book of Poetry*, seventh century BCE

Vast was Shepherd's Field,
Our sandalwood chariots sparkled.
The team of four black-and-white horses so stately,
That is the general Shangfu.
He soars like an eagle
To aid that King Wu.
Launching an attack on the great Shang,
He encountered a clear bright morning.

When King Wu died two years later, his son Cheng was all set to inherit the throne. But there was a problem: One of Wu’s brothers, the Duke of Zhou, argued that Cheng was too young, and said that he (the uncle) should rule for a few years. Some people objected, but the duke got his way. Modern historians aren’t sure whether Cheng really was too young, or whether the duke was just trying to take over.

People later said that the Duke of Zhou had been a virtuous man. A story about the duke says that when his brother, King Wu, was still alive, the king became very ill. The duke was afraid that his brother would die and nobly offered his own life in his place, hoping that the forces in charge of life and death would make this switch. According to the anonymous *Book of Documents* compiled between about 1040 BCE and the seventh century BCE, when Cheng found out years later what his uncle had done, he said, “Heaven has stirred its awesome power to reveal the virtue of the Duke of Zhou.”

Cheng did have some power, though, even while he was king only in name. He could wage war, for example. Once some of his uncles in the East rebelled against his rule, so he consulted the oracle bones to find out what the gods wanted. According to the reading of the bones, the gods wanted Cheng to start a war against those uncles. His counselors were nervous about attacking these powerful men, who had many supporters, and they advised him not to do it. But Cheng was convinced that the gods were on his side. “Heaven is brightly awesome,” he said, according to the *Book of Documents*. “It helps our grand foundation.” Cheng and his allies defeated the rebellious uncles, and after seven years, the uncle who had been ruling in Cheng’s place finally turned over the throne to his nephew.

It looked as if **Heaven** really was on King Cheng’s side. This was a perfect way to convince the people that the Zhou were legitimate rulers, and not barbarians from the west. If Heaven was with them, who would dare to be against them?

The concept of Heaven as a force that supported the king was new to China, but it was an idea that lasted a long time. The leaders saw this support as a mandate (a command

“ King Cheng, 11th-century BCE proclamation, in *Book of Documents*, 7th century BCE

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天
 “tian” = heaven or sky; the dwelling-place of the gods; gods and ancestors who live in Heaven; or one high god

Because of King Wu's fame as founder of the great Zhou dynasty, artists were still making paintings of him more than 2,000 years after his reign. In this portrait he looks so imposing that even with his back turned toward the viewer, he still appears powerful.



or order, usually giving someone authority to do something). Chinese rulers used the “Mandate of Heaven” for 30 centuries to justify their rule.

The Zhou said that the Shang had once had the Mandate, but that their bad behavior had caused them to lose it. King Cheng said in a proclamation,

The last ruler of the Shang was addicted to wine and believed he had the Mandate. He did not express concern for the people's troubles and he clung to old resentments and hatreds. . . . His heart was vicious and he did not fear death. . . . For this reason, Heaven sent destruction down on the Shang and did not aid them.

The notion of the Mandate of Heaven did more than convince people that the Zhou were justified in getting rid

66 King Cheng, 11th-century BCE proclamation, in *Book of Documents*, 7th century BCE

of the Shang. It changed Chinese religion, leading to a belief that the gods cared about what happened to ordinary people, since a ruler who treated his people badly might be seen as having lost the Mandate and would lose power. The belief also strengthened the king's position, since he was now considered the Son of Heaven, chosen not only to rule on earth but also to act as a go-between for Heaven and the people.

The Mandate also shaped the way Chinese people viewed leadership. Anyone who wanted to overthrow a ruler could claim that the leader had lost his Mandate and that it had passed to the person who wanted to take over. Belief in the Mandate made writers of history look for evidence that the last king in any dynasty was an evil person, and that the first king of the next dynasty was a virtuous leader whose success was proof that the Mandate had been transferred to him. Later historians called the pattern of a bad dynasty being replaced by a good one over and over again "the dynastic cycle."

For a long time it looked as though Heaven really was on the side of the Zhou. People became suspicious about their Mandate, however, when disasters started happening during the reign of King You. First there was a damaging earthquake. Then rivers dried up. Both the sun and the moon went into eclipse at different times. For people who had no idea what caused these natural occurrences, it looked as if the gods were saying that the whole universe—including the king's right to rule—was out of kilter.

It seemed that the Zhou were about to lose the Mandate of Heaven.

WATCH WHO YOU MESS WITH

King You's father, King Xuan, had some problems, too, including a run-in with an angry ghost. According to a ninth-century BCE text quoted in the fourth-century *Tales of the States*, the king had killed an innocent man named the Earl of Du. Three years later, the king went out hunting, but "at mid-day, the Earl of Du appeared on the left side of the road, wearing a red robe and cap, carrying a red bow and arrows. He shot the king in the heart, breaking his spine, and he died."