

## AP03: THE CONFUCIAN MYTH CYCLE ON THE FORMATION OF THE CHINESE STATE (3/89, 11/89, 12/90; 12/94, 9/96)

### A. Confucian Myths and the Higher Criticism

3a. How trustworthy does modern scholarship find the Confucian sacred books? How trustworthy is modern scholarship? What sorts of "myths" do the Confucian sacred books seem to recount?

#### 1. The Mythic Texts: Modern Skepticism Vs Archeology

##### a. the mythic texts

This chapter deals with the Confucian myth cycle's treatment of the formative period of the Chinese state. These myths tell a basically Voegelinian story about how the Chinese started differentiating Heaven from Earth, and how Heaven was then re-presented onto Earth.

Strictly speaking not all of the stories which we will be dealing with in this chapter are Confucian. Daoist and Buddhist stories or morals to stories are involved as well.

The first two books cited in the bibliography are "*Reader's Digest*" versions of the main Chinese myths, the equivalent of reading "stories from the Bible" compressed down to a single slim volume to distill out the essence of the Judeo-Christian myth. The third entry in the bibliography applies sophisticated secular analyses to a small number of myths from texts dating to mid and late antiquity.

Obviously so small a sample analyzed in mostly secular terms does not do justice to the situation. But if an East Asian Buddhist was trying to grasp the West's mythic tradition he would have to initially consult similar summary accounts, and we would have to warn him not to think of the limited number of stories as the whole story or as "myths" in the pejorative sense of "pious lies."

In fact there is a massive corpus of ancient Chinese "myths" (in the sense of stories that are true in some important sense) that go back in some instances to the time with which they purport to deal, and many of them even appear to tell historical truths about what actually happened.

For example, a dozen of the four dozen

chapters of the *Shujing* 書經 (*Book of Documents*) actually date in composition to within a generation or a century of the events which they describe. Segments of the *Shijing* 詩經 (*Book of Odes*) were written down within two or three centuries of some of the events they celebrate. Both books may actually also embody one or more oral traditions that go even further back. How far back we can't tell, the reliability of particular stories depending on the type of myth involved.

There are other sacred books in the Confucian canon: The *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) is a record of Confucius's conversations with his disciples which was written down c. 400 BC, nearly two generations after Confucius's death in c.479. In it Confucius often talked about the already ancient sacred stories dealing with the later of the Sage Kings of antiquity—the founders of the Zhou kingdom some 500 years before his own time. He was not only much closer in time to those events than we are, he is the first person belonging to the stage of high civilization who is reliably recorded as talking about such matters. Most of the stories he tells are at least roughly congruent with those we find in the *Shujing* and *Shijing*.

A century and a half after Confucius came Mencius. The seven long chapters of his book contain far more detailed versions than are found in the genuinely early parts of the *Book of Documents* of many of the same sacred stories. Mencius also talks of putatively earlier events and personalities about which Confucius was silent or spoke of in less detail.

A variety of other sources holding as close to orthodox status as do the *Book of Documents*, *Book of Odes*, *Analects* and *Mencius* also exist, though these last four works have come to collectively constitute the Chinese equivalent of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible) in our own tradition.

A number of the other sources are more nearly like our Apocrypha—works that straddle the line between the orthodox and the somewhat heterodox, the historical and the somewhat fantastic. The *Lost Books of Zhou* occupies such a position in the Chinese canon, but is turning out to contain very important and genuinely early material.

Other works play a role not too different from that played for Christianity by Josephus's *History of the Jews* of the 1st century AD, which retells the Biblical stories for his fellow Hellenistic Jews living in Alexandria, Egypt. Sima Qian's *Historical Records*, completed c. 100 BC plays that sort of role in China. It retells the ancient myths, trying to find and identify whatever is historical in them. In many ways Sima Qian's is the most convenient single account of these in ancient

Chinese literature.

How trustworthy are these books? It turns out that, though they run the gamut from the historical to the apocryphal, they are for the most part reasonably reliable. Honest sinological scholars wind up making the same kinds of favorable statements about the ancient Chinese sacred books as Biblical scholars increasingly winding up making about the ancient Jewish sacred books in the course of the waning years of the 20th century.

##### b. historicity of the sacred texts

A lot of naive skeptics in both the West and East have never caught up with the news about the historicity of both the Hebrew and Chinese scriptures. By the middle of the last century in Europe and by the beginning of the current century in China, a number of such superannuated sophomoric skeptics came to believe that the only way to show they had received modern tertiary educations was to sneer at their own civilization's mythic tradition. (Remember I am using myth in Voegelin's sense as talk about Heaven in compact language. I don't use it in a disparaging way as a five dollar word for "lie.")

It turns out, however, that more or less independently within both China and the West at just about that time scientific investigation via archeological excavations of sites dating to the times of the myths in places identified as important in the myths and literary-anthropological analysis of the logic of the stories embodied in the myths was tending to confirm the basic historicity of the myths.

It is ironic that archeology began to turn up serious evidence for the essential truth of much of the Confucian myth cycle, just as skeptics were denying the very historicity of the old Confucian vision of Heaven. It, along with parts of the hybrid Confucian-Daoist-Buddhist vision of Heaven into which the Confucian myth had partly been absorbed was being discredited for quite other reasons than its degree of historicity.

By the turn of the century, the Chinese were deep into a crisis of civilization. The intellectuals began to perceive their old vision of Heaven as being grossly inadequate either to justify, or to be re-presented in the form of the Earthly arrangements they had already evolved, much less to be re-presented into some new Earthly order that the Chinese intellectuals now felt they had to create if they were going to maintain China's independent place in the world.

An increasing number of very thoughtful Chinese—not the worst, and some of the best—had concluded by around 1900 that the Buddho-Confucian Heaven's time had expired and that it had to be abandoned for a Heaven based on the European Earth (but not

the European Heaven). For that reason, if you did a Gallup Poll of the Chinese intelligentsia, generation by generation after 1900, you would find ever higher proportions rejecting the Confucian myth cycle outright.

And yet, some of the same people who were rejecting this myth because they rejected the Heaven from which it was derived were themselves doing the scientific archeological work which was showing the historicity of a large part of this myth.

Some old fashioned intellectuals remained Buddho-Confucians. They refused to alienate or deracinate themselves into becoming "crabwalk scholars," as wits called those who studied Western languages (written sideways, the way crabs walk). They never gave up on the old Chinese Heaven. Some of them were doing the historical and philological and even the excavation work that was showing that the king lists of Zhou and Shang were accurate; and that by reasonable extension you could surmise that the names of the kings of Xia as presented in the myth cycle were also probably authentic. In scientific terms, the only names still up for grabs as authentic were those of the pre-Xia culture heroes.

Anyway, the purportedly earliest of these pre-Xia myths were very likely not Confucian in origins. They were either Daoist or Buddhist, and had been cemented onto the Confucian tradition at a relatively late time, when they may have replaced proto-Confucian myths on the creation of the universe and human culture. Perhaps, though, there were no proto-Confucian creation myths, only proto- Daoist ones, and it was these that were co-opted by the Buddhists and cemented onto the front end of the Confucian myth cycle to serve functions that Confucian myths neglected.

## 2. Possible Types of Myth

### a. euhemerism

This raises the question of whether all myths are all of a piece. It turns out there are any number of things that can pass under the label of "myth" without using that word in a disparaging sense.

The one usage that is of most interest to us here is the proto-historical type of myth. These myths are historical narratives which have been only slightly distorted by the compact language into which they are cast. Even if they talk about certain personages as gods, it seems plausible to surmise that these are really heroes whom the myths have turned into gods, or by employing our Voegelinian insight, we can surmise that they are employing compact language for talking about men who discovered Heaven and who demonstrat-

ed some sort of relationship to Heaven.

When differentiated language for talking about Heaven was only just beginning to be worked out, the easiest way to demonstrate such a relationship was to make the protagonist of such a myth divine or the descendant of the divine. There is a term for this in the study of Greek myths: euhemerism. This sounds like something potentially fatal, as in "He suffered a euhemerism and died." But all it means is to take a human for a divinity, the turning of men into gods. It is named after the late ancient period Greek writer Euhemerus, whose theory this was.

That's why Schliemann, for example, when he visited the east coast of the Mediterranean looking for Troy had a copy of Homer's *Iliad* in one hand and a shovel in the other. He believed that Homer was a euhemerist; that he was taking literal history and turning it into compact, poetical language about gods interfering in events on Earth. Schliemann dug where Homer's text seemed to suggest he should and found remnants of cities piled atop one another, one of which may well have been Troy.

There seems to be much more euhemeristic myth in the Chinese mythic tradition than in the Greek, and just about as much and maybe a bit more than in the Hebraic myths. The modern Chinese archeologists profitably carry even more of their old sacred books with them when they go off digging than do people studying the Greeks.

### b. other kinds of myths

Another type of myth is what Emile Durkheim, one of the founders of modern sociology, called myth as repository of allegorical instruction. Such myths are poetic stories created by later people to illustrate some lesson, and given by them a spurious antiquity, one cobbled up for the occasion. The Daoist aspects of Chinese myth are often like this.

Still another level is linked to allegorical instruction: primitive natural science. This is the function Kipling was illustrating humorously with the "just so" stories. Some of the stories that Frazier collected for *The Golden Bough* are also myths of this type. Some aspects of the stories of the most ancient Chinese culture heroes which describe how agriculture or carpentry were invented are also of this type.

Another layer of myth is the poetical fantasy—in effect myths in the form of religious plays and religious novels, often in verse. Because of the dramatic form they assume, these can be misunderstood as history by later readers not familiar with the religious ceremonials which provided their original contexts. When we read them as mere secular histories we distort the mean-

ings originally intended by the creators of these myths. Where they were writing the equivalent of the text of a high mass, we take their plots as equivalents to the plots of historical novels.

At yet another level is the contribution of Carl Jung, Freud's somewhat heretical pupil. Jung talked of myth as a kind of group dream, symptomatic of the archetypical urges of the collective unconscious of the species. Jung assumed that since we all have essentially the same kind of mind, we are "hard wired" to come up with basically the same kinds of myths. Joseph Campbell's popular work, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, makes considerable use of this thesis.

There may be something to it. An MS-DOS type of computer is ready to do certain kinds of things when you turn it on, whether it was made by IBM or some other firm. These differ from what an Apple-DOS machine can do. The latter is a related but separate species of computer. As it turns out, Jung observed, there is only one surviving species of hominid on this planet, and all members of that species come with their brains wired the same way. This analogy allows you to drain much of the seeming mysticism out of Jung's approach.

Yet another layer of myth is a kind of vehicle for metaphysical thought. It is a way to talk metaphysics before a differentiated language for philosophical discourse has been invented. This type of myth represents another kind of allegory, an allegory for philosophy rather than for religion. The late ancient period Daoists, especially Zhuang Zi, composed many such myths.

Finally, myth may simply be (or be interpreted as) flat truth. This is a kind of fundamentalist approach to myth. When the myth says God created the world in seven days, that is exactly what He did. This truth was intended to be revealed, and myth is the vehicle for doing so and thereby for opening man up to Heaven. However much some philosopher might blur the situation by talking of the myth's compact language which can be differentiated, that compact language is the aboriginal description of what Heaven actually did, or at least what it wanted revealed about its actions at that stage of man's mental development.

All these kinds of myths are possible. You could subsume them into two main categories: the historical and nearly historical on the one side and the allegorical or revelatory on the other side. It is just a question of where the balance lies for any particular nation's myths. It so happens that the Chinese myths are heavily tilted toward the historical side, just as were the Hebraic myths, apparently more so than the other myths of the Mesopotamian world out of which the He-

braic culture grew. The Greek myths seem to be weighted more toward the non-historical side.

This means there is some potential for revealing historical truths if we begin to peel various non-historical elements away from the Chinese myths. Unlike most of the Greek myths, the Chinese myths will not turn out to be like the onion, which if you keep peeling layer after layer from it, ultimately leaves you with nothing at all at its center. The Chinese myths are more like an avocado. You peel away those fleshy and tasty flaps to reveal an enormous pit of historicity!

### 3. Types of Chinese Myths

The supposedly earliest Chinese myths—the demiurge (half-creator, half created)—and culture hero myths actually aren't Confucian. They represent Buddhist and Daoist overlays atop Confucianism.

From the 3rd century AD on, the Chinese learned about an at least partially new Heaven from the Buddhists. Conversely, Buddhism first began to domesticate itself into China by swallowing an already existing Daoist Heaven. Then the two of them together incorporated the Confucian Heaven as a kind of suburb or antechamber or subdivision of Buddho-Daoist Heaven. If you think of the new Heaven as like a new municipality, that new Buddhist Heavenly city swallowed a pair of old suburbs, keeping some parts of them almost unchanged.

The Buddhists took over the nominally earliest mythic times partly because the Confucian and proto-Confucian Heavenly myths dealing with earliest times either were relatively primitive or did not exist at all. What fragments survive are the astronomical aspects of the Confucian Heaven. The state of the early civilization of the Chinese, like that of the Mesopotamians, supported a corps of indefatigable sky-watchers from a very early stage of the transition into civilization. The organizational pattern of the night sky was the lever for connecting up Earth with the newly discovered realm of Heaven that the rulers were staking out. The sky was the place where this Heavenly drama was happening.

There may once have been all sorts of interesting proto-Confucian sky stories of which only the barest outlines or fragments remain in a few ancient Chinese books. These hint at the existence of what must have been a much richer proto-Confucian astronomical myth cycle than we now have.

The sky-god Tian 天, for example, almost certainly was conflated with the North Star. Important things also happened when the planets went into conjunctions—i.e.

moved into the same segment of the night sky. Much was also made of this rare event in Mesopotamian astronomy. The visible planets, unlike the stars, jiggle back and forth across the sky in some very strange patterns. Jupiter was apparently very important to the ancestors of the Zhou people, and possibly to the Xia and Shang before them. When Jupiter moved into certain locations, people expected enormous effects to occur on Earth.

Only recently have our own paleo-astronomers begun to rescue some of these myths from the mere hints that remain in a few of the ancient books. (Cf. chapter 7 for a summary of what remains of these astronomical myths of the Zhou people.) All the rest have disappeared for all time because the pre- and proto-Confucian astronomical myth cycle was swallowed whole to be replaced with its own substance by the Buddhist and the Buddhist-controlled Daoist myths.

## B. The Chinese Demiurge and Culture-Hero Myths

*3b. Describe the Chinese demiurge and culture-hero myths. In what ways, metaphorically and pseudo-historically, do they set the stage for the appearance of the state?*

### 1. Pan Gu and the Three Emperors

The putatively earliest account we have and the one closest to a creation myth of the Hebraic type is of the demiurge Pan Gu, who was born at the very beginning of Earth and grew to maturation at a rate of ten feet per day for 18,000 years. We are told this in a post-3rd century AD. account.

After reaching this enormous size and age Pan Gu died and rotted away. Out of his rotting corpse came the material universe as we know it. His limbs became the four sacred mountains of China. His eyes became the sun and the moon. His blood became the rivers and the seas. His hair became the forests and the meadows. The sweat from his dead body became the rain. His breath became the wind, moving forever thereafter through the realm of man. The echo of his voice became the thunder. The parasites from his body became mankind.

That last point is the giveaway that this myth was not originally Chinese! The Chinese take mankind much more seriously. This displays a Hindu way of looking at the world. And, like Forrest Gump, that's about all we can say about Pan Gu. He's too un-Chinese to

be our meat.

Then come the Three Emperors. These fellows are not men, or even gods, but merely metaphysical principles, as is evident from their names. They are the Heavenly Emperor, the Earthly Emperor and the Human Emperor. The principles they embody—Heaven, Earth and Man—are the three coordinating principles of a lawful universe as envisaged by the philosophical Daoists of late antiquity.

The Three Emperors symbolize mankind's first coming into awareness of being. The last of them, the Earthly Emperor, is the rough Chinese equivalent of Adam in the Garden in the Genesis 2 version. The Earthly Emperor symbolizes man fitting into the natural order as the consequence of the interaction of Heaven and Earth. In poetic terms, this is man living in the state of nature, as part of nature. In anthropological terms, this is Upper Paleolithic man, who just barely intrudes upon his environment.

### 2. The First Two of the Five Emperors

With the Five Emperors (not to be confused with their immediate predecessors, the Three Emperors) we begin to get something a bit more Confucian looking, and a rather more historical-seeming narrative. According to the chronologies worked out in late ancient times, the age of the Five Emperors lasted 647 years. It began with Fuxi who came to the throne in 2852 BC

These dates were calculated in late antiquity, not by Sima Qian, the first full-fledged historian, who did not think it prudent to go back so far, but by a court writer a century later, Liu Xiang and his son Liu Xin, who wrote at the turn of the Christian era. They were finishing off the job of historicizing or de-euhemerizing the Chinese myth cycles begun by Sima Qian c. 100 BC. The earliest of these Five Emperors may merely have been gods, but the impulse of the late ancient Confucians was to treat them as men.

Fuxi 伏羲 was associated with urban life. He was credited with the invention of the carpenter's square and the pair of compasses for drawing circles. He was also supposed to have invented the most localized forms of village-style government.

His successor, in 2737 BC. (Chinese culture heroes, like the Old Testament patriarchs before and after Noah's time, lived long lives.) was called Shennong 神農. His name literally means "Spirit of Agriculture."

Fuxi's name doesn't translate into anything particularly coherent. Some people speculate that this means it was originally a non-Chinese name. Maybe Fuxi was the name of a culture hero from among the Ma-

lay or perhaps Vietnamese-like peoples who lived along the east coast of China during Neolithic times, and constituted the family of cultures descended from the Qingliangang culture of the Yangzi delta. The name Fuxi might have meant something in one or another of the non-Chinese languages spoken by these peoples.

By this reasoning Shennong would seem to belong to the proto-Chinese language speakers who lived further inland, and whose culture, called Yangshao by the modern archeologists, radiated out from the region just east of the Great Bend of the Yellow River not far from modern Loyang.

Shennong is credited with inventing agricultural tools and farming, but is most conspicuously associated with medicinal herbs. He is supposed to have had a hole in his stomach, whether through accident or genetic flaw we are not told, through which he could watch what happened inside himself to the various things he ate. I understand that is actually possible; that there have been cases of people surviving for long periods with holes in their stomachs.

Shennong perhaps represents the mythic representation of the transition into fully Neolithic life. The year 2737 BC isn't that far off from the late Neolithic's beginnings as dated by the modern archeologists.

We are told that all of these fellows ruled without force and without formal law, that is, solely by the sanctions of local village custom. Aside from the indication this provides that these first two of the five Emperors were interpreted by the mythmakers as "big men" rather than chieftains running local states, that absence of coercion and law sounds more like the Daoist version of a pre-state utopia than anything Confucian, though a Confucian tinge begins to show up in these accounts' emphasis on the virtues of the culture heroes.

### 3. The Last Three of the Five Emperors

The third of the Five Emperors, Huangdi 黃帝 (Yellow Divinity), seems to belong to a new stage of development. Sima Qian, writing in the late 2nd century BC, considered him the earliest figure for whom reliable historical evidence existed.

He is the first to have the suffix *di* added to his name. *Di* eventually became the second syllable of the word we translate as "emperor." In Shang times, nearly a millennium after Huangdi, it was a label meaning "dead ruler," to whom a living ruler sent oracle-bone messages and the steam from sacred meals cooked and served in holy bronze pots.

Huangdi's name is a homonym for the much later word *huangdi* 皇帝 meaning em-

peror, and with which it shares a final syllable. The two *huangs* are, however, different characters. The one in Huangdi's name means "yellow." To call him Yellow Emperor (though that is the normal translation) is an anachronism. Yellow Divine Ancestor or, for short, Yellow Divinity would seem to be more accurate.

His traditional date is 2697 BC This puts him right in the middle of the late Neolithic as the archeologists now date it. The myths associate the higher crafts and proto-sciences with Huangdi: Astronomy is supposed to have begun with him. Along with astronomy came calendar-making. The rules for when to plant and harvest crops were linked to calendar making. A medical text and pharmacopoeia actually dating to late ancient times is ascribed to him. Huangdi's wife is credited with the invention of sericulture—the raising of silkworms and the spinning of the fibers from their cocoons into silk thread, in East Asia the fiber associated with the ruling class.

Huangdi and his wife also invented the formal rules for marriage and for the sacrifices by which man connected his life on Earth with Heaven. Linked to these were the formal rules for organizing clans. The major clans of high antiquity, the Zi, the royal clan of Xia and Shang and the Ji, the royal clan of Zhou, are connected up by the later myths with courtiers in Huangdi's court.

Something new is going on here. The myths themselves explicitly label Huangdi as the earliest ancestor of the Chinese people. Obviously there were people in continental East Asia before then, but it was only from Huangdi's time that at least ruling class people had rules for tracing their descent.

Formal law, armies, larger scale engineering projects, much larger communities are all claimed as being present for the first time then. Huangdi is described as traveling some distance from one community to another without leaving the territory which was turning into the sphere which he ruled. By contrast, his predecessors appear to have been living in isolated little communities. No longer. In Huangdi's time and thereafter the little communities seem to form networks. The state, we implicitly are told, is now present, and the behaviors summarized in this and the previous paragraphs are the evidence given for it.

A number of other genuine rulers followed Huangdi, according to Sima Qian's *Historical Records*, but the historian says little about most of them. In terms of the dramaturgy built into the myth cycle, they are merely leading up to the last two of the Five Emperors, Yao and Shun, who in turn evolved the state to the point where the first of the three hereditary dynasties could come

into existence.

Yao 堯 came to the throne in 2356 BC. His successor, Shun 舜, took over nearly a century later, in 2255 BC. In terms of the archeological dating, this corresponds to the period of the last blossoming of late Neolithic culture, just before the limited appearance of copper and then bronze.

We are told by Mencius that Yao was the best qualified person to rule in the entire country. Commoners insisted on having their disputes judged by him. Courtiers spontaneously flocked to his court to seek to serve under him. Hence he could pick the best available men of talents from among them to aid him.

Of these talented men, Mencius says, Shun was clearly the best. He was even more suitable as ruler than Yao's own son. Eventually, Yao married his two daughters to Shun, retired from rule, and allowed Shun to succeed him. That Heaven agreed with Yao's judgment is shown by the fact that commoners shunned Yao's son and brought their lawsuits to Shun instead. Local rulers came to receive his blessing. By this time there were nine provinces in the kingdom, not one of which had Shun omitted to visit to improve the hydraulic engineering facilities thereof in the course of his many travels to carry out Yao's orders.

No matter that Shun's father was a nasty and untrustworthy old man, and that he tried to betray even Shun. Shun still did him honor. That doesn't mean that the old man was sacred but rather that Shun had virtues transcending his origins. According to the rules established by Huangdi, it was Yao who presented Shun to Heaven. Once Heaven accepted Shun the people accepted him too. And so when Yao died, Yao's son went off to another place, but the people did not follow him there. They instead remained with Shun.

Shun followed Yao's precedents, the rules first established by Huangdi. Near the end of his long reign he selected a worthy fellow named Yu to complete the tasks Shun himself had previously worked on. Yu traveled repeatedly to each of the nine provinces, and also engaged in heroic feats of hydraulic engineering—taming rivers and draining marshes.

These excessive waters are described in the *Book of Documents* in terms remarkably like some Chinese version of the great flood that Noah faced. Imagine how that story struck the 19th century Methodist missionaries, and what fun they had trying to get the chronologies of Genesis and *Shujing*, which seems to place the beginning Yu's reign in 2205 BC to jibe. Unfortunately, Yu is likely at least a millennium too late to have been fighting Noah's flood. What this may be, of course, is a Jungian archetypical myth. Per-

haps one of the stories we are hard-wired to tell is a flood story. There seem to be enough flood myths scattered about the ancient world at different times to render a Jungian explanation plausible.

Yu 禹 came to the throne in 2205 BC. Clearly, “throne” is something of an anachronism. Yu, like his two predecessors must not have amounted to much more than a late Neolithic chieftain of a local state in the neighborhood of modern Loyang.

Still, something new seems to have been going on. The first mythic mention of bronze occurs in the narrative of Yu's time. Nine bronze tripods are built by him, one for each of the nine provinces of his Central Realm.

A new succession method—from father to son—also appears in the mythic record. Bernhard Karlgren suggests Yao and Shun were the founders of short local dynasties and that is why the succession from one to the other is only hereditary on the female side. The founder of the new Shun dynasty might have married into the preceding Yao royal clan. In any event, a much more long-lasting and somewhat larger state seems to have begun with Yu.

## C. The Three Dynasties

*3.c Describe the Confucian myths on the Three Dynasties. In what ways were and were not the Confucian myths congruent with the criteria for “early civilization” given earlier?*

### 1. Xia 夏

Yu had a minister named Yi, but for some reason Mencius does not specify Yi did not find favor with Yu. Yu did not present Yi to Heaven, at least as Mencius told the story in the middle of the 4th century BC. Instead, Yu presented his own son Qi to Heaven. And so when Yu died, Qi went in one direction and Yi went in the other, and this time all of the princes followed, Qi, the son, rather than Yi the able minister. All the litigants also followed Qi to get their cases judged.

Since, Mencius tells us, the people speak with the voice of Heaven and the people hear with the ears of Heaven, then what the people do is a measure of what Heaven has in mind. It was not that the metaphysical principle for selecting the ruler had changed, Mencius explained. It just so happened that Yu had a bright and virtuous son.

Thereafter, however, this new Earthly succession procedure began to be institutionalized. The kings who followed Yu formed a dynasty called Xia, with succession going from father to son or from elder to

younger brother. This Xia Dynasty continued for eighteen generations; 439 years from Qi's succession in 2197 BC. until the evil bad last king, Jie, who came to the throne in 1818 BC., and got his just comeuppance in 1766 BC. at the hands of another member of his own Zi clan.

Where did the Zi come from? According to the *Book of Odes*, back in Huangdi's time, a black swallow came down from Heaven and got a certain lady pregnant by flying over her. The lady gave birth to the first member of the Zi clan. This northern account is confirmed by one of the Songs of the South from the state of Chu which probably preserves some ancient Shang mythological traditions. It too says that a black bird did the deed. The *Odes* merely adds that this bird came direct from Heaven. It was a black bird of the north, as opposed to the red bird associated with the south.

The Ji, the clan associated with the later Zhou state of the Wei River valley, also had their first ministers in Huangdi's court. According to one controversial gloss of a segment of the *Book of Odes*, a lady named Jiang Yuan, got pregnant when she stepped in a toe print of a di and gave birth to Houji (Millet Spirit), the first ancestor of the Ji clan.

The poetry is rather nice. Here is my rendering of the poem “Sheng Min” in the *Da Ya* section of the *Shijing* (I beg several of the translation problems faced by James Legge, *The Chinese Classics, The Book of Odes*, pp. 465-7):

Anon our folk of Zhou began,  
Alone with maiden Jiang Yuan.  
How did she our folk produce?  
With offering pure did sacrifice,  
To end her barren childlessness.  
Upon the toe-print of the Di she  
pressed.  
Then in spacious place to rest,  
Pregnant, birth awaited she.  
Birth she gave and suckled son:  
None other he than Millet Lord.

Her son was called Millet Lord or Millet Spirit because that footprint was in a millet field. After his birth, Jiang Yuan hid little Millet Lord in a swamp in a cradle made of bull-rushes. The story sounds very much like the birth of Moses story. Apparently this is another Jungian archetype.

The two great royal clans of the Three Dynasties, the Zi and Ji, both claim connections with visitations onto Earth from the realm of Heaven, and both had ancestors who were courtiers in Huangdi's court. The Zi gave rise first to the Xia, and one of their sublineages later on to the Shang. The Ji started with Houji (Millet Spirit) and much

later gave rise to the royal house of the Zhou Dynasty.

With the establishment of the two great clans linked to Heaven the *dramatis personae* of late antiquity were pretty much in place.

## 2. Shang 商

We are told by Mencius that Jie 桀, the eighteenth ruler of Xia, was a bad king and therefore Heaven took the Mandate (symbolizing the right to rule) away from him. A mandate was a specific kind of object—a piece of jade or wood—which an ancient ruler would break in half. He would give one piece to a subordinate whom he sent off to operate at a distance. The other half he would, when necessary, give to another subordinate to carry to the distant subordinate to certify that the order he carried was indeed from the ruler by the fact that the two halves of the mandate fit together.

The god Tian (Heaven) sent similar but more abstract mandates to Earth. So long as the descendants of the Zi clan showed virtue, they could continue to rule in the lands between the Yi and Lo Rivers (the middle Yellow River valley region centering on modern Loyang). But when they lost their virtue, this mandate was taken away from them, and given to another branch of the Zi clan.

This other branch was led by a brave fellow named Tang, who lived far to the east in the neighborhood of the modern city of Shangqiu. He was known as Cheng Tang 成湯—Successful Tang. He is traditionally depicted leading the tame wolves who accompanied him on the hunt. Cheng Tang succeeded in destroying Jie's regime because Jie had become wicked, and the Mandate had been transferred by Heaven from Jie's branch of the Zi clan to Tang's branch.

In some ways the new state that Cheng Tang set up was an adjunct to the old one. The old ruling clan remained in power after 1766 BC., according to the traditional chronology, when Tang took over Jie's capital city near Loyang, burned it down and then abandoned his own original territory near Shangqiu to build his new capital upon the charred ruins of the old Xia headquarters. Tang's descendants continued to rule the middle Yellow River region until 1122 BC.

Two-thirds the way through that time, Pan Geng (trad. 1401-1373 BC) moved the capital from the region between modern Loyang and Zhengzhou, where the first five capitals had been located, to the Great City Yin, to the north of the Yellow River, near the modern city of Anyang. Supposedly the aristocrats had been giving Pan Geng a hard time in the old capital and he determined to

make a fresh start in an entirely different location. The relevant myths, contained in the *Book of Documents*, are unclear as to what the issues were, and in any event these chapters of that work date to as much as a millennium after the events of late Shang.

It is, however, clear from the myths as well as from modern archaeology that the size and ambitions of the Shang state grew larger under Pan Geng's successors. Finally, however, there came a bad last king, Dixin 帝辛, who had a long reign, 1154-1122 BC, but was finally overthrown by the military founder of the Zhou power.

### 3. Zhou 周

Now there occurred a far more fundamental change than during the earlier shift from Xia to Shang. Heaven changed the mandate to a new people, Zhou, with a new ruling clan, the Ji, supposedly descended from Houji (Millet Spirit) of Huangdi's time.

According to one version of the myth cycle, after his mother's divine conception in the millet field, his birth, abandonment and miraculous survival in the wilderness, Houji grew up to serve as minister of agriculture to Huangdi.

According to another mythic version, Houji was the chief minister of agriculture to Yu just before the founding of Xia. All of the versions, however, assert that Zhou came from a different clan than Shang. This sounds fairly historical, since it would have been in the interest of un-historical myth-makers to have claimed a common descent for Zhou with those whom they displaced. Of course the Zhou religion allowed exploitation of this difference in clans to emphasize Heaven's shift of the Mandate to rule to the new clan.

The sacred books also disagree over what happened between the time of either Huangdi or Yu and the coming to power of the Zhou over a thousand years later. A consensus story would go something like this:

Houji had a son, Bu Ku who inherited his father's responsibilities. But Bu Ku got tired of being Minister of Agriculture, roused himself and left the Central Area (i.e. the Loyang region) where the pre-Xia and Xia local states founded by Huangdi and his successors had all remained.

Bu Ku moved north into the edges of the pastoral-nomad area. There he hung out with the Di and the Rong in the north and the west. He and his dependents learned some of their tricks. But then his descendants, beginning with his son Gong Liu, moved away from the pastoral-nomads, and returned to agriculture in the west, presumably in the Wei River valley. There then passed fourteen generations, around 400 odd years, until the

reign of the Zhou scion Chang, the Lord of the West, who was the immediate ancestor of the ruler who carried out the Zhou conquest of Shang.

According to several chapters of the *Book of Documents* which may date to within a generation of his lifetime, Duke Chang was a great and virtuous person. Before he succeeded to the rulership of Zhou he lived for some time in the Great City Yin as a hostage for the good behavior of his father, but did not participate in the corruption endemic during the long and wicked reign of King Dixin.

Instead Chang studied the doctrines of Heaven. He took the eight trigrams (permutations of three lines, each either broken or unbroken) that the great culture hero of remote antiquity, Fuxi, had invented as symbols of the basic features of Earth, and he learned how to combine these eight trigrams into sixty-four hexagrams. He composed the basic descriptions of each of these hexagrams, and devised a method for casting the stalks of the milfoil plant on a sacred threshing ground in order to derive the initial hexagrams and then to turn these hexagrams into their successors. These could be used to divine the will of Tian and transmit it to Earth by way of the abstract symbols embodied in the hexagrams.

Heaven saw how virtuous Chang was, and how wicked Dixin had become. As a consequence He transferred His Mandate from Shang to Zhou. This shift was demonstrated when the wandering stars (i.e. the planets) all came together in one house of the heavenly zodiac. In response to this, all the tribes of the west urged Chang to overthrow the wicked King Dixin. As loyal as he was virtuous, Chang refused to betray his overlord. When Chang died, he was given the posthumous title King Wen 文—the cultivated, civilized king.

His son and successor, Fa, known posthumously as King Wu 武—the martial, the military king—waited until Jupiter returned to the same house of the zodiac where all the wandering planets had come together during his father's time, and then led a righteous coalition of the lords of the west against Dixin, easily defeating the wicked Shang king in battle. Dixin died, along with his wicked paramour, in a great fire he set in his palace at Great City Yin.

Unfortunately, King Wu died shortly thereafter. But his younger brother, Dan the Duke of Zhou, took over as regent for King Wu's young son, King Cheng 成, put down a rebellion by two of his (Dan's) brothers, and organized the rest of the Ji clan and its inlaws into a loyal band of feudal lords dispersed throughout the territories of the old Shang rulers and other nearby peoples.

When King Cheng came of age and ascended the throne, this feudal empire was well on its way to dominating All the Regions under Heaven (Tianxia 天下).

Kings Cheng, Kang, and Zhao consolidated the new feudal empire, and expanded its influence up to the edges of the Yangzi River valley. King Mu extended Zhou's borders west out into pastoral-nomad lands.

By this time, several centuries after receipt of the Mandate, Zhou's virtue was beginning to ebb. By the time of Kings Yi, Li, and Xuan, each successive king emitted less virtue than his predecessors. The feudal lords began to become rebellious toward the center, and to fight among themselves. The southern barbarians began to become insolent and expand at the expense of the southern border feudalities. More ominously, the northern pastoral-nomads, beginning to be called by some non-Chinese name that the Zhou transliterated as Xianyun, began to launch more than occasional raids into the Central Realm.

Finally, Zhou also produced a bad last king, King You. Like the Shang King, Dixin, he had an evil concubine, Baosi (the daughter of his most ambitious adviser at court who was much resented by the feudal lords in the countryside). Like the boy who cried wolf, Baosi enjoyed having King You light the alarm fires that indicated a barbarian attack just so she could see the feudal lords ride up to the capital with their armies. Naturally, when there finally was a barbarian attack in 770 BC, the feudal lords assumed that the signal fires' lighting was just another trick to make Baosi happy. They did not show up, and the western capital fell. (Note the resemblance to "The Boy Who Cried Wolf" in one of our mythic traditions.)

So great was Zhou's virtue, however, that even this debacle did not destroy it. King Ping managed to restore Zhou's government in its hitherto subordinate Eastern Capital near Loyang (originally founded to watch over the conquered Shang lands).

Nevertheless, the mythic age was over. The dynasty produced no more Sage Kings. Indeed, according to the Confucian myth cycle, only one more Sage was yet to appear, and he never became king. This was Confucius himself, born in the realm of the Duke of Zhou's descendants, the fief of Lu, in 551 BC., five-hundred years after the time of Kings Wen and Wu and the Duke of Zhou, just in time for another conjunction of the planets, though by his time less notice was taken of such literal Heavenly portents.

In any event, Confucius' destiny was not to sit upon any throne. His only dominion was to be over the hearts and minds of men. With him and his disciples, a new vision of Heaven took shape, one based upon the old

Zhou myths yet transcending them, and as a consequence high civilization took form. Early civilization and the mythic age ended.

### **Suggested Further Reading:**

Bodde, Derk. Ch. 8 in Samuel N. Kramer (ed.). *Mythologies of the Ancient World*. Chicago, 1961.

Karlgren, Bernhard. "Legends and Cults in Ancient China," *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*, Stockholm, XVIII (1946, 199-365).

Birrell, Anne. *Chinese Mythology: An Introduction*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1993.

"Chinese Religions—The State of the Field, Part I, Early Religious Traditions: The Neolithic Period through the Han Dynasty, ca. 4000 B.C.E. to 220 C.E.," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 54.1 (February 1995), 124-160. The most up to date collection of bibliographic essays on the subject.

"Chinese Religions—The State of the Field, Part II, Living Religious Traditions: Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Islam and Popular Religion," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 54.2 (May 1995), 314-480. Mostly not relevant to this chapter but very useful for later stages of Chinese religious history.