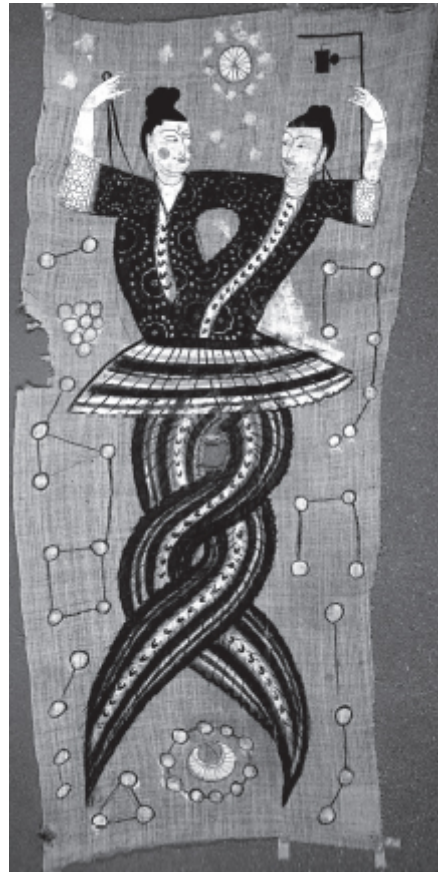


THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

I am not of their age or time and so have not personally heard their voices or seen their faces, but I know this by what is written on bamboo and silk, etched on metal and stone, and inscribed on basins and bowls that have passed down to us through succeeding generations.

—Mozi, “Impartial Caring”



In this image, the sages Fu Xi and Nuwa are depicted symbolically as intertwined snakes.

In order to understand early Chinese philosophers, we must understand the context in which they lived. As with every culture, this context consists of historical reality as well as their myths. The distinction is not sharp: myths often contain an element of historical truth, and what passes for historical truth often has mythical elements. In addition, there are different versions of the myths in early Chinese texts. I will present only one account, but we shall see in it many figures and themes that are important in the self-understanding of Chinese culture.ⁱ

I. Myth

According to Chinese tradition, the earliest people had a precarious existence, living in fear of wild animals, subsisting day to day on whatever they could forage, and sleeping in tree houses or drafty caves. They had no technology, no rituals, and no culture. Human life gradually improved and civilization developed through the actions of a series of sages, the earliest of whom are referred to as the Three Sovereigns and the Five Emperors. The first and second sovereigns were Fu Xi and his wife, Nuwa. Fu Xi taught people to hunt, fish, and trap. He created the institution of marriage and also developed the earliest portions of the *Yijing*, a work of divination that would come to have great significance in later Chinese cosmology. (The *Yijing*, or *Classic of Changes*, had scant influence on philosophy, per se, in the period this book covers, so we will have little to say about it.) Legends say that Nuwa was responsible for even more amazing feats than was her husband, such as keeping the Heavens from collapsing by repairing them when they were damaged. Nuwa thus became a symbol, in later Chinese history, for the power and importance of women. For example, the classic Chinese novel, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, noted for its strong female characters, recounts the legend of Nuwa in its opening.

Nuwa was not only Fu Xi's wife, she was also his sister. This is intriguing, because the highest of the Greek gods, Zeus, was also married to his sister, Hera. Furthermore, in the Bible, God is said to have made Eve from Adam's rib, so she is, in a sense, his twin sister. Because these cultures developed independently, the similarity in their myths may reflect some deep need or tension that humans share. A Freudian, using a hermeneutic of suspicion, might suggest that the myths are a projection of subconscious, incestuous desires. In contrast, using a hermeneutic of faith we might interpret the myths as an expression of the legitimate human longing to find that masculinity and femininity are distinct (symbolized by the fact that Fu Xi and Nuwa are male and female) yet complementary (symbolized by their marriage) and fundamentally unified, rather than dualistic (symbolized by the fact that they have the same parents).¹

The third sovereign was Shen Nong, whose name means "spiritual farmer." Shen Nong discovered how to plant crops and domesticate animals. He also was a pioneer of

Chinese medicine. One day, when he wasn't looking, a leaf fell into his cup of water. Drinking it, he noticed that it tasted different. In this way, he discovered tea. Experimenting by using different leaves for tea, he discovered their medicinal effects; using himself as a test subject, he tried different herbs, and noted what effects they had on his body.

The first of the Five Emperors was the Yellow Emperor, or in Chinese Huang Di. During his era, criminals and invading barbarian tribes terrorized the Chinese people. Although he preferred peace, the Yellow Emperor saw that it was necessary to institute armies and judicial punishments to protect the people. Huang Di's practices led to a decisive military victory over his enemies, a victory that is often considered to be the founding of the Chinese as an ethnic group.

Others in Huang Di's circle also made lasting contributions. The Yellow Emperor's wife, after inspecting a caterpillar infestation in the emperor's mulberry orchard, discovered how to spin and weave silk. Thereafter, weaving silk became a characteristically female task. Another distinctive cultural innovation, Chinese written characters, was supposedly invented by one of the Yellow Emperor's officials, Cang Jie.

So Fu Xi taught the people how to hunt, while Shen Nong taught them to farm. Modern archaeology teaches us that the earliest humans moved from place to place, hunting animals and gathering wild plants. Then, with the agricultural revolution, humans learned to plant crops and domesticate animals. This led to settled human communities. These communities allowed for the development of more complex forms of technology and civilization (including writing), but also created the need to protect one's territory and control crime. Consequently, the stories of Fu Xi, Shen Nong, and the Yellow Emperor, although mythical in their details, may represent a dim memory of the human transition from nomadic hunter-gatherers to farmers, and then to city dwellers.

The next three important emperors were Yao, Shun, and Yu. Yao, in addition to being a humane and wise ruler, is associated with discovering the rudiments of astronomy and the regularity of the seasons, important knowledge for any agricultural civilization. Thus, Kongzi (Confucius) said of him, "It is Heaven that is great, and it was Yao who modeled himself upon it" (*Analects* 8.19). As he approached the end of his life, Yao decided to find a virtuous successor to follow him as ruler. Searching his kingdom, Yao heard about Shun, a simple farmer who was known for his great filial piety.

Shun had what we would describe today as a dysfunctional family. His father, stepmother, and stepbrother repeatedly schemed to murder him and steal his wealth. According to one story, Shun's family asked him to dig a well. They planned to remove the ladder and cover over the well while Shun was still inside. Thinking that they had succeeded in their plot, Shun's brother told his parents that they could have Shun's livestock and his storehouses of grain. "But his spear and shield—mine! His zither—mine! His bow—mine! And his two wives shall service me in my bed!" However, Shun had survived the murder attempt. Despite their plots against him, Shun continued to love

and care for his family, until eventually he won them over with his devotion. Impressed by stories of his character and achievements, Yao made Shun his prime minister. He was so successful in this position that when Yao passed away the people made Shun the new emperor.

As ruler, Shun was concerned with the problems of flood control and irrigation. These had long been issues in China. The Yellow River Valley is the heartland of Chinese civilization because of its fertile soil and because the river provides easy transportation and water for crops. However, the Yellow River often floods, leading to devastation. Consequently, some have referred to China as a “hydraulic civilization” because of how important organizing water control is to society. One speculation is that this encouraged a strongly centralized government, with the resources to organize massive irrigation, flood control, and canal-building projects.

It is not surprising that Shun felt the need to appoint an able minister, Yu, to supervise flood control. Yu worked tirelessly, dredging silt out of rivers and building canals. Yu eventually became Shun’s prime minister and, in a parallel with the previous succession, his abilities led the people to treat him as the new emperor upon Shun’s death.

Yu was a great ruler in his own right, and when he grew old he followed the pattern set by Yao and Shun of choosing the person he found most worthy as his successor. However, this time the people did not accept the emperor’s choice. Instead, out of affection and respect for Yu, they treated Yu’s son as the emperor. Because of this, Yu became (posthumously) the founder of the first Chinese dynasty, the Xia. It is significant that the people’s preference for a ruler was taken to be of greater importance than even the great Yu’s decision. Traditional Chinese culture was never democratic but always emphasized the well-being and happiness of the people as the ultimate arbiter of political legitimacy.

The traditional Chinese view is that dynasties follow a cyclic pattern: a sagacious ruler founds a dynasty, bringing prosperity and order to society, but in a way that is noncoercive. The people willingly and joyfully follow him. Over the centuries there is a gradual decline in the quality of the rulers, with a corresponding increase in social disorder, dissatisfaction, and disaffection. The decline is typically not linear: great kings will arise during a period of mediocrity to temporarily restore a dynasty to its greatness. However, eventually a dynasty will reach its nadir, and an evil last king will inspire full-fledged revolt against his atrocities, leading to the arrival of a sage who will found the next dynasty.

So Yu was the sage who founded the Xia dynasty, which was brought to an end centuries later by the evil Tyrant Jie. The sage-king Tang overthrew Jie and went on to found the Shang dynasty. (The Shang dynasty is sometimes also called the Yin, after the name of the last capital city of the dynasty.)

Myth: “*The Chinese word for ‘crisis’ literally means ‘danger + opportunity.’*”

Fact: The Chinese word for “crisis” means, well, crisis. It is composed of two words, which mean “danger” and “crucial point.”

II. Early History

At some point during the Shang dynasty, written records begin and we emerge from the enchanting mists of myth into the clearer light of actual history. The story of how the Shang dynasty moved from myth to history is intriguing. Near the end of the nineteenth century, “dragon bones” could be bought for their alleged medicinal properties. They were thought to be dragon bones because of their great age and because of the odd markings on them. However, a pair of Chinese scholars who examined the bones realized that the markings were archaic forms of Chinese characters written on ancient “oracle bones.” These bones (often the flat bottom shell of a tortoise) were used in a ceremony whereby the Shang king would divine the future and make inquiries of the spirits of his ancestors. A bone was heated until it cracked, while the king made a pair of ritual pronouncements, “Our attack on the barbarians will be successful. Our attack on the barbarians will perhaps not be successful.” By interpreting the cracks, the king would divine which pronouncement was correct. What is perhaps most fascinating is that, *after* the ritual was completed, the questions asked were typically inscribed into the oracle bone. If we today are lucky, the answer divined was also inscribed into the bone. And if we are *really* lucky, the actual outcome was inscribed too. These brief and frequently difficult to interpret inscriptions give us a narrow window into Shang civilization.

When the source of the “dragon bones” was excavated, archaeologists found tombs of the Shang kings who ruled in the city of Yin. Here was hard physical evidence for the historicity of the Shang dynasty. (We lack evidence like this for the Xia dynasty, which is why it is still considered mythical.) The earliest surviving oracle bones date from around 1200 BCE, and we may be confident that the dynasty existed at least as far back as the sixteenth century BCE. This was a Bronze Age culture, using the metal for weapons and for ceremonial vessels to make offerings of food and wine to the spirits of the ancestors. The staple crop was millet, a kind of wheat still grown in China today. (Rice doesn’t grow well in comparatively dry northern China, so it is not until much later, when Chinese culture spread into the high-rainfall areas of the south, that rice became almost emblematic of China.)

The war chariot was the tank of the era: in it rode a driver, an archer, and a spearman. To see one approaching at full gallop must have been an intimidating sight. The size of a state was often expressed in terms of how many chariots its army could field (e.g., “a state of a thousand chariots”). But the Shang also used infantry, armed with spears, shields, and light body armor.

This Bronze Age culture was patriarchal, but some women held high status through some combination of noble birth and personal excellence. Most notably, Fu Hao was a noblewoman who commanded armies. After her death, ritual sacrifices were made to her, just as to noble male ancestors, and her burial tomb included goods almost equal in grandeur to that of a king.

The traditional view of history requires that the last king of the dynasty be evil: the (supposedly) evil last king of the Shang was Tyrant Zhou. The name of the dynasty that succeeded the Shang is also romanized as “Zhou.” In Chinese, you would never confuse the two, because they are written with different characters and pronounced with different tones: *Zhòu* 紂 is the tyrant and *Zhōu* 周 is the dynasty. To keep them straight in English, “Zhou” without qualification will mean the dynasty and “*Tyrant Zhou*” will always be the last ruler of the Shang.

Tyrant Zhou was clever, fearless, and physically powerful. However, he was also ruthless, cruel, and dissolute. The ancient historian Sima Qian reports that “by a pool filled with wine, through meat hanging like a forest, he made naked men and women chase one another and engage in drinking long into the night.”ⁱⁱ Tyrant Zhou had a loyal minister in his uncle, Bi Gan, who warned him that his actions would eventually turn his subjects against him. Tyrant Zhou replied that sages supposedly have larger hearts than others, and since Bi Gan spoke like a sage, he wished to see whether Bi Gan also had the heart of a sage. With that, he ordered his guards to cut the heart out of Bi Gan’s chest.

Tyrant Zhou was overthrown, and a new dynasty was begun by the Zhou people. The Zhou justified their conquest through the theory of dynastic cycles. I will let them speak for themselves, in documents that date back some three thousand years:

Examining the men of antiquity, there was the founder of the Xia dynasty [King Yu]. He guided his mind, allowing his descendants to succeed him and protecting them. He acquainted himself with Heaven and was obedient. But in the process of time the mandate in his favor fell to the ground. So also when we examine the case of Shang. Heaven guided its founder [King Tang], so that he corrected their errors and so it protected his descendants. He too acquainted himself with Heaven and was obedient. But now the mandate in favor of him has fallen to the ground.ⁱⁱⁱ

When Heaven rejected and made an end of the mandate in favor of the great state of Shang, there were many of the former intelligent kings of Shang in Heaven. However, the king who had succeeded them [Tyrant Zhou], the last of their line, from the time of his entering into their appointment, proceeded in such a way as at last to keep the wise in obscurity and the vicious in office. The poor people in such a case, carrying their children and leading their wives,

made their moan to Heaven. They even fled away, but were apprehended again. Oh, Heaven had compassion on the people of the four quarters. Its favoring mandate lighted on our earnest founders. Let our king feverishly revere Virtue!^{iv}

King Wen [of the Zhou people] was able to make bright his Virtue and be careful in the use of punishments. He did not dare to show any contempt to the widower and widows. He appointed those worthy of appointment and revered those worthy of reverence. He was terrible to those who needed to be awed, so getting distinction among the people. It was thus he laid the first beginnings of the sway of our small portion of the empire, and one or two neighboring countries were brought under his improving influence, until throughout our western regions all placed in him their reliance. His fame ascended up to the High Ancestor, who approved of him. Heaven then gave a great charge to King Wen to exterminate the great dynasty of Shang and receive its great mandate, so that the various states belonging to it and their peoples were brought to an orderly condition.^v

These passages don't just lay out a cyclic view of history, they specify a *philosophy of history* that explains those cycles. The founder of a dynasty is given a mandate (*mìng* 命) to rule by Heaven (*tiān* 天). Because of this intimate relationship between Heaven and the king, the ruler is often referred to as the “Son of Heaven.” “Heaven” can refer to the sky or the place where the spirits of the ancestors dwell, but in the period this book covers it most typically refers to a higher power that is thought of more or less anthropomorphically. The Mohists, a movement we shall examine in Chapter 4, conceived of Heaven as very much like a personal God, while the Confucians increasingly thought of Heaven as a more abstract higher power. Heaven bestows the mandate to rule based on a person's Virtue (*dé* 德). Virtue, here, is a sort of ethical charisma a person has because they possess attributes such as kindness, wisdom, and reverence for Heaven. If this notion of Virtue or ethical charisma seems naive to a modern reader, consider the extent to which the successful leadership of people such as Mahatma Gandhi and Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., depended upon their perceived virtues. The mandate bestowed based on Virtue is transmitted to one's descendants, but it will be revoked for viciousness and given to someone more worthy. Even in modern Chinese, the word for “revolution” (as in “Cultural Revolution”) is *gémìng* 革命, which is literally “stripping of the mandate.”

It is easy to apply a hermeneutic of suspicion to the doctrine of the mandate of Heaven. The Zhou people wanted to rationalize their conquest of the Shang and their story that they had a Heaven-given mandate to rule sounds as suspect as Western notions like manifest destiny or the divine right of kings. As the saying goes, “the winners get to

write history,” and it is possible that Tyrant Zhou was a good ruler who simply had the bad luck to be defeated by ambitious invaders. In general, the doctrine of the mandate of Heaven conveniently justifies the rule of the victors: if they won, it proves they had the mandate, which means that they are ethically superior to those they defeated.

A hermeneutic of faith reveals another side to the doctrine: it implies that a ruler is legitimate only as long as the people are happy. The king may have to use force against the occasional obdurate rebel or bandit, but by and large the people must acquiesce in being ruled. Thus, the king reminds a duke that “Heaven’s mandate is not constant.” He further warns him, “When you show a great discrimination, subduing men’s hearts”—as opposed to coercing them with force—“the people will admonish one another, and strive to be obedient. Deal with evil as if it were a sickness in your person.” In other words, do not be harsh in a way that causes unnecessary suffering and harm “and the people will entirely put away their faults. Deal with them like caring for a baby, and the people will be tranquil and orderly.”^{vi} We now understand what another duke means when he states, “Our king has received the mandate. Unbounded is the happiness connected with it, but unbounded is the anxiety. Oh, how can he be other than reverent?”^{vii}

So the suffering people of Tyrant Zhou “made their moan to Heaven,” which stripped him of the mandate and gave the mandate to King Wen, leader of the Zhou people, because he “was able to make bright his Virtue.” However, out of loyalty, deference, and love of peace, King Wen restrained himself from rebelling against Tyrant Zhou. It was King Wen’s son, King Wu, who finally led the conquest of the Shang. Wen (whose name means “cultured”) is praised for his gentle forbearance, while Wu (whose name means “martial”) is praised for his righteous use of force. They might be said to reflect two sides of Chinese culture.

King Wu’s victory was quick and decisive because Tyrant Zhou’s own soldiers turned against him. Tyrant Zhou retreated to his palace and, fearless and haughty to the last, set it afire and immolated himself in the palace rather than allowing himself to be captured.

When did the Zhou conquest of the Shang take place? The traditional date listed in many reference works is 1122 BCE, but current scholars believe this is wrong. We do know that in 1059 BCE there was a conjunction of all five of the planets visible with the unaided eye. As did the people of many ancient civilizations, the Chinese studied the Heavens carefully and believed that unusual celestial events provided portents of the future. Consequently, this conjunction would have led people to expect that a major change was about to take place, and this belief might have emboldened those anxious to rebel against Tyrant Zhou. In fact, the conjunction is mentioned in one ancient Chinese historical text, which states that the founding of the Zhou dynasty occurred twenty years later. This would seem to give us an exact date for the conquest. However, the dates given in this particular text seem to be off due to errors introduced by later scribes.

Correcting these dates is a matter of guesswork, but many scholars think that King Wu defeated the Shang and established the Zhou dynasty around 1040 BCE.

King Wu's rule was short-lived; he died of natural causes a few years after the conquest. His son, King Cheng, succeeded him on the throne, but Cheng was only a child. To have a minor on the throne immediately after the founding of a new dynasty, with potentially rebellious subjects to govern, was a precarious situation. King Cheng's regent was his uncle, the Duke of Zhou. It must have been tempting for the Duke of Zhou to seize the throne. He could certainly have made a plausible claim to it: he was the brother of recently deceased King Wu and a son of King Wen. However, the Duke of Zhou supported King Cheng with loyalty and wisdom throughout his life. Because of this, he became a paragon of Virtue among later Confucians.

The strategy the Zhou used to control their newly expanded territory was to divide it into states of various sizes. A noble, typically a duke, governed each state. Many of these dukes were relatives of the Zhou royal family. Each duke had his own army and was responsible for maintaining order and collecting taxes in his state. He answered to the king, and upon a duke's death the king would approve his successor. This system worked well for centuries. However, the dynasty gradually decayed as weak kings lost the respect of the dukes. Perhaps this was inevitable. Imagine that you and your ancestors have ruled a state for generations. Within your state, you levy and collect taxes, make and enforce laws, and command your own personal army. Obeying the so-called king might seem unnecessary and, if the other dukes were ignoring the king, positively foolish.

The dynasty reached a low point under King You. King You's legitimate son by his queen was heir apparent. However, You fell in love with a seductive concubine, who bore him a second son. He decided to replace the legitimate queen and heir with his concubine and his second son. Given that his former queen had powerful relatives, this was immensely imprudent. The former queen's relatives raised an army to depose King You and put his elder son on the throne. While this army was secretly assembling, King You had taken to entertaining his new queen by lighting the beacon fires used to summon the armies of the dukes in case of emergency. Having been fooled by this prank more than once, the dukes decided not to answer the king's next signal. As a result, when the army of the deposed queen and heir attacked and King You lit the beacon fires to summon help, no one came. King You, his concubine-turned-queen, and his second son were all killed. His elder son was installed as king in a new capital city, further to the east. This marks the transition between the Western Zhou dynasty (c.1040–771 BCE) and the Eastern Zhou dynasty (770–221 BCE).

III. The Period of the Philosophers

The philosophers we study in this book all lived during the Eastern Zhou dynasty, and it is especially important to understand the context in which they lived, argued, and wrote. The new, eastern capital was deeper in Chinese territory and hence easier to defend against barbarian raids. However, the events surrounding the deposing of King You demonstrated the weakness of the Zhou royal house and its dependence upon the power and support of lesser nobles. This crippled the Zhou dynasty, and the Zhou kings were mere figureheads from this point on. Real power lay in the hands of the dukes and other nobles who ran the various states into which China was divided. In the absence of centralized authority, the states schemed against one another, formed alliances, broke those alliances, and frequently engaged in interstate warfare. The common people suffered horribly: they were robbed and assaulted by brigands the governments could not control, they were taxed to exhaustion by rulers who wanted to supply their armies and feed their own greed, and the planting and harvesting of their crops was interrupted by invading armies or by forced government labor. In the bitter words of the *Daodejing* (53):

The court is resplendent,
Yet the fields are overgrown.
The granaries are empty,
Yet some wear elegant clothes.
Fine swords dangle at their sides;
They are stuffed with food and drink,
And possess wealth in gross abundance.
This is known as taking pride in robbery.
Far is this from the Way!

As is often the case, a chaotic and desperate situation stimulated philosophical thought as thinkers struggled to find a solution to the problems their society faced.

What these Chinese thinkers were looking for was the *dào* 道, which we render “Way.” This crucial philosophical term has five related senses. “*Dao*” can mean a path or road (as in the modern Chinese compound “*dàolù* 道路,” roadway). In both Chinese and English, there is a natural metaphorical extension from “way” in the sense of a literal *path* to “way” in the sense of *a way to do something*. Closely related to this is “Way” as *the linguistic account of a way* of doing something. From these senses, “Way” came to refer to *the right way to live one’s life and organize society*. Eventually the term also came to mean *the ultimate metaphysical entity* that was responsible for the way the world is and the way that it ought to be (see Chapter 8). Although it can have any of these five senses, the primary meaning of *dao* (for most Eastern Zhou thinkers) is the right way to live and organize society.

Two important eras within the Eastern Zhou are the Spring and Autumn Period (722–481 BCE) and the Warring States Period (403–221 BCE). The former is named after the

Spring and Autumn Annals, a cryptically terse historical chronicle of the years in question, written from the perspective of Kongzi's home state, Lu.² The *Zuo zhuan* is a commentary on the *Spring and Autumn Annals* that provides considerably more narrative detail about the period. Scholars disagree over how reliable it is as a historical account, but we shall have occasion to cite it at several points.

One of the opening stories in the *Zuo zhuan* gives a feel for what the Spring and Autumn Period was like. The ruler of a certain state had two sons. The mother disliked the older son, supposedly because she had a difficult labor with him, and favored the younger son. She asked the duke to declare the younger son his heir and pass over the older son, but the duke refused. When the father died and the older son became the new duke, his mother asked him to give his younger brother command over an important city. Eventually, the duke acceded to his mother's requests. Using the city as his new power base, the younger brother proceeded to usurp the prerogatives of the duke and prepare his soldiers for war. The duke refrained from taking action against his younger brother for as long as he could, despite the entreaties of his advisors. However, when the duke discovered that his mother had agreed to open the gate to his capital for his brother's invading army, the duke sent a force of two hundred war chariots against his brother. Support for the rebellious younger brother crumbled quickly, and he was forced to flee. The duke thereupon put his mother under permanent house arrest, vowing to not see her again "until we meet underground" (i.e., after death). After some time, the duke missed his mother, but felt that he could not break his vow. His dilemma was resolved when a clever servant suggested that the duke have a tunnel dug; there he could meet his mother underground. Thus, the duke and his mother were reconciled.

This inventive solution to the duke's quandary is typical of much Chinese ethical thought. In addition, this story illustrates the complex interrelationship between family and politics in this era. We can see why Confucians might stress the importance of loving and respecting members of one's own family, but we can also see why others (like the Mohists) would seek to minimize the role of familial relations in government.

In the power vacuum created by the impotence of the Zhou king, the institute of the Hegemon developed. The Hegemon (sometimes also called "Lord Protector") was a leader of one of the states who was able, through his individual military strength and judicious alliances, to become de facto ruler of China. The institution of the Hegemon officially existed to "support the king and repel the barbarians" that were raiding the Chinese states. However, the Hegemon actually ruled in the place of the king. The institution was intrinsically unstable, though, because the Hegemon was only one among several powerful rulers, alliances were fluid under even the best of circumstances, and any ruler who was too successful would incite the fear and envy of the others. Perhaps the most famous of the Hegemons were Duke Huan of the state of Qi and Duke Wen of Jin. Duke Huan's success was due in part to his brilliant minister, Guan Zhong. Many rulers and ministers wished to emulate Duke Huan and Guan Zhong, but Confucians

typically condemned them for usurping the authority of the Zhou king and ruling by force and guile rather than by Virtue. Nowadays, when the People's Republic of China condemns U.S. hegemony (*bàquán* 霸權) they are using a word derived from the ancient title “Hegemon” (*bà* 霸).

The Warring States is a period of even more intense inter- and intrastate conflict. During this period, rulers of some of the more powerful states were declaring themselves king, usurping the title that was still supposedly the sole prerogative of the Zhou dynasty. In addition, the most wealthy and powerful families in a state were sometimes usurping the power of the hereditary rulers, so that some dukes became mere figureheads, just like the Zhou king.

At the very beginning the Eastern Zhou period, one noble had been particularly distinguished in defending the surviving members of the royal family against attack by barbarian raiders, thereby ensuring the survival of the dynasty. As a reward, the new king made him ruler of a semi-barbarian territory in northwestern China. This became the state of Qin. Ironically, it was a descendant of this same noble who led Qin when, in 256 BCE, it accepted the surrender of the last Zhou king. A few years later, in 221 BCE, Qin succeeded in conquering all the other states and unifying China. This event brings the Warring States Period and the Zhou dynasty to a close. The ruler of Qin thereupon bestowed upon himself the title “First Emperor.” The grandiose title “emperor” (*huángdì* 皇帝) was constructed from the titles of the Three Sovereigns (“*huang*”) and the Five Emperors (“*dì*”). The Qin ruler obviously had no lack of confidence in his own abilities, and he predicted that he would be the First Emperor of ten thousand in his dynasty. What actually happened after his death ... well, to tell you would be getting ahead of our story. For now we are finally ready to consider the first great philosopher of the Chinese tradition, Kongzi.

IV. Timeline

- Yao becomes emperor, and chooses Shun as his prime minister.
- Yao dies. The people choose Shun as the new emperor. Shun puts Yu in charge of flood control. Yu's success in this leads Shun to choose him as his prime minister.
- Shun dies. The people choose Yu as the new emperor.
- Yu dies. The people choose his son as the new emperor, thereby creating the first Chinese dynasty: the Xia.
- Over many generations, the Virtue of the Xia kings declines, culminating in the vicious rule of Tyrant Jie.
- Tyrant Jie is overthrown by the sage Tang, who becomes king of the second Chinese dynasty: the Shang.

- Over many generations, the Virtue of the Shang kings declines, culminating in the vicious rule of Tyrant Zhou.
- King Wen patiently endures Tyrant Zhou, but his Virtue increasingly draws the support of the people and other nobles.
- Circa 1040–771 BCE: Western Zhou dynasty.
 - King Wen’s son, King Wu, leads the rebellion that overthrows Tyrant Zhou and founds the third Chinese dynasty: the Zhou.
 - A few years after the conquest, King Wu dies of natural causes, leaving his young son, King Cheng, on the throne. King Cheng’s regent is his uncle, the Duke of Zhou, who loyally advises and defends King Cheng, solidifying Zhou rule.
 - Over many generations, the Virtue of the Zhou kings declines.
 - 771 BCE: A group of disaffected nobles and “barbarians” attacks and murders King You.
- 770–221 BCE: Eastern Zhou dynasty.
 - A surviving member of the Zhou royal family is established as king in a new capital to the east, deeper in the Zhou territory.
 - 722–481 BCE: Spring and Autumn Period.
 - 680 BCE: Duke Huan of Qi, with the assistance of his Prime Minister Guan Zhong, becomes the first Hegemon.
 - 551–479 BCE: Lifetime of Kongzi (Confucius).
 - Fifth century BCE: Lifetime of Mozi, anti-Confucian philosopher who advocated “impartial caring.”
 - 403–221 BCE: Warring States Period.
 - Fourth century BCE:
 - Birth of Yang Zhu, egoist philosopher.
 - Birth of Mengzi (Mencius), Confucian who argued “human nature is good.”
 - Birth of Hui Shi, key figure in the “School of Names.”
 - Birth of Zhuangzi, Daoist philosopher who advocated emptying rather than cultivating one’s heart.
 - Birth of Xunzi, Confucian who argued “human nature is bad.”
 - Third century BCE:
 - Possible date of composition of the *Daodejing*, attributed to Laozi.
 - Birth of Han Feizi, Legalist philosopher.
- 221–207 BCE: The Qin dynasty, founded by the self-proclaimed “First Emperor,” unifies China, bringing the Warring States Period to a close.

Review Questions

1. According to the traditional Chinese philosophy of history, what cycle does each dynasty go through? Explain the role of Heaven, the mandate, and Virtue in this philosophy.
2. The figures in this chapter who will be referred to most frequently are Yao, Shun, Yu, Jie, Tang, Tyrant Zhou, Wen, Wu, and the Duke of Zhou. Give at least one sentence identifying something distinctive about each of these individuals.
3. Give the names of the Three Dynasties in the historical order in which they occurred. Name the first ruler of each dynasty and the last ruler of the first and second dynasties.
4. The last of the Three Dynasties is divided into two periods. What are these two periods called, and what event marks this historical division? The second half of this dynasty is divided into what two subperiods?
5. Briefly describe the governmental structure of the last of the Three Dynasties. In particular, what were the responsibilities of the dukes and the king?
6. In what century was the last of the Three Dynasties founded? What year is conventionally taken as the end of this dynasty?
7. What are the five senses of *dao*, “Way”?

1. See Appendix A on the difference between a hermeneutic of suspicion and a hermeneutic of faith.
2. According to tradition, Kongzi himself wrote the *Spring and Autumn Annals* and subtly encoded in its statements his judgments about the events described. However, most scholars today doubt this.