

Western Zhou Dynasty (1050 – 771 B.C.)

The Zhou were a group which originated from western China. In the eleventh century B.C. the Zhou gained power and in 1050 B.C. attacked the Shang who controlled adjacent lands to the east. The Zhou defeated the Shang and gained control over their lands. The first kings of the Zhou Dynasty, Wu, Cheng and Kang, established a capital at modern day Xi'an. This period (1050 – 771 B.C.) is commonly called 'Western Zhou' due to the western location of its capital. In 771 B.C. the Zhou had to flee from the west and set up a new capital at Luoyang, this period of Zhou dynasty rule has become known as 'Eastern Zhou'.

The Zhou dynasty spoke the same language as the Shang. They also shared many of their customs and beliefs. The practice of divination and ancestor worship continued unchanged in the first centuries of Zhou dynasty rule.

Despite the continuation of many Shang practices, Zhou literature continually mentions the depravity of the late Shang kings, and gives this as a reason for the Shang's defeat. The Zhou introduce the notion of the 'mandate of heaven', that heaven gives wise and virtuous leaders the right to rule and can also take it away from corrupt rulers. The Zhou claimed that the Shang had lost the mandate of heaven due to their corruption and depravity. This political concept was a very important one and one that would last throughout the later dynasties of the Chinese empire.