

Selections from the *Shujing*

The Classic of Documents (Shujing) is—along with the Classic of Poems (Shijing)—a major source of Zhou cultural memory. Although not completed in its final form until several centuries later (its textual history is a particularly thorny one), many of its documents clearly date from the Western Zhou period (1046–771 BCE). For Confucius and others, the accounts of the sage emperors and early Zhou kings contained herein were among the founding myths of the Chinese people and offered prescriptions for how society and the state should be ordered and administered.

The translations below were done by James Legge (1815–1897)—a Protestant missionary to China, Oxford don, and prolific translator of many major texts in the Chinese “canon”—in 1865. His archaic turn of phrase and use of an outdated transliteration system should offer no more than brief impediments to your enjoyment of the text. Apologies on his behalf.

THE CANON OF YAO

Fourth of the “Five Emperors” from the late Neolithic period (his traditional dates are 2358–2258), Yao is a culture hero, responsible for ordering the kingdom and instituting just governance throughout. When the Great Flood inundated China, Yao searched for someone to subdue the waters, as noted in the following passage.

[Note: In these passages, the word “Di” refers to the king.]

1. Examining into antiquity, (we find that) the Di Yáo was styled Fang-hsün. He was reverential, intelligent, accomplished, and thoughtful, naturally and without effort. He was sincerely courteous, and capable of (all) complaisance. The bright (influence of these qualities) was felt through the four quarters (of the land), and reached to (heaven) above and (earth) beneath.

He made the able and virtuous distinguished, and thence proceeded to the love of (all in) the nine classes of his kindred, who (thus) became harmonious. He (also) regulated and polished the people (of his domain), who all became brightly intelligent. (Finally), he united and harmonized the myriad states; and so the black-haired people were transformed. The result was (universal) concord.

2. He commanded the brothers Hsî and the brothers Ho in reverent accordance with (their observation of) the wide heavens, to calculate and delineate (the movements and appearances of) the sun, the moon, the stars, and the zodiacal spaces, and so to deliver respectfully the seasons to be observed by the people.

He separately commanded the second brother Hsî to reside at Yü-î, in what was called the Bright Valley, and (there) respectfully to receive as a guest the rising sun, and to adjust and arrange the labors of the spring. 'The day,' (said he), 'is of the medium length, and the star is in Nião; you may thus exactly determine mid-spring. The people are dispersed (in the fields), and birds and beasts breed and copulate.'

He further commanded the third brother Hsî to reside at Nan-kião Di (in what was called the Brilliant Capital) to adjust and arrange the transformations of the summer, and respectfully to observe the exact limit (of the shadow). 'The day,' (said he), 'is at its longest, and the star is in Hwo; you may thus exactly determine mid-summer. The people are more dispersed; and birds and beasts have their feathers and hair thin, and change their coats.'

He separately commanded the second brother Ho to reside at the west, in what was called the Dark Valley, and (there) respectfully to convoy the setting sun, and to adjust and arrange the completing labors of the autumn. 'The night' (said he), 'is of the medium length, and the star is In Hsü; you may thus exactly determine mid-autumn. The people feel at ease, and birds and beasts have, their coats in good condition.'

He further commanded the third brother Ho to reside in the northern region, in what was called the Sombre Capital, and (there) to adjust and examine the changes of the winter. 'The day,' (said he), 'is at its shortest, and the star is in Mão; you may thus exactly determine mid-winter. The people, keep in their houses, and the coats of birds and beasts are downy and thick.'

The Di said, 'Ah! you, Hsîs and Hos, a round year consists of three hundred, sixty, and six days. Do you, by means of the intercalary month, fix the four seasons, and complete (the period of) the year. (Thereafter), the various officers being regulated, in accordance with this, all the works (of the year) will be fully performed.'

The Di said, 'Ho! (President of) the Four Mountains, destructive in their overflow are the waters of the inundation. In their vast extent they embrace the hills and overtop the great heights, threatening the heavens with their floods, so that the lower people groan and murmur 'Is there a capable man to whom I can assign the correction (of this calamity)?' All (in the court) said, 'Ah! is there not Khwăn?' The Di said, 'Alas! how perverse is he! He is disobedient to orders, and tries to injure his peers.' (The President of) the Mountains said, 'Well but-- Try if he can (accomplish the work).' (Khwăn) was employed accordingly. The Di said (to him), 'Go; and be reverent!' For nine years he labored, but the work was unaccomplished.

3. The Di said, 'Ho! (President of) the Four Mountains, I have been on the throne seventy years. You can carry out my commands; I will resign my place to you.' The Chief said, 'I have not the virtue; I should disgrace your place.' (The Tî) said, 'Show me some one among the illustrious, or set forth one from among the poor and mean.' All (then) said to the Tî, 'There is an unmarried man among the lower people, called Shun of Yü'. The Di said, 'Yes, I have heard of him. What have you to say about him?' The Chief said, 'He is the son of a blind man. His father was obstinately unprincipled; his (step-)mother was insincere; his (half-) brother Hsiang was arrogant. He has been able (however), by his filial piety to live in harmony with them, and to lead them gradually to self-government, so that they (no longer) proceed to great wickedness.' The Di said, 'I will try him; I will wive him, and thereby see his behavior with my two daughters.' (Accordingly) he arranged and sent down his two daughters to the north of the Kwei, to be wives in (the family of) Yü. The Di said to them, 'Be reverent!'

THE CANON OF SHUN

Following the abdication of Yao (see the previous passage), Shun assumed the throne, becoming for later generations the fifth of the Five Emperors. Like his predecessor, he labored to align the kingdom with the earthly and celestial rhythms.

1. Examining into antiquity, (we find that) the Di Shun was styled *Khung-hwâ*. His character was entirely conformed to (that of): the (former) Di, he was profound, wise, accomplished, and intelligent. He was mild and courteous, and truly sincere. The report of his mysterious virtue was heard on high, and he was appointed to office.

2. (Shun) carefully set forth the beauty of the five cardinal duties, and they came to be (universally) observed. Being appointed to be General Regulator, the affairs of every (official) department were arranged in their proper seasons. (Being charged) to receive (the princes) from the four quarters of the land, they were all docilely submissive. Being sent to the great plains at the foot of the mountains, notwithstanding the tempests of wind, thunder, and rain, he did not go astray.

The Di said, 'Come, you Shun. I have consulted you on (all) affairs, and examined your words, and found that they can be carried into practice; (now) for three years. Do you ascend the seat of the Di.' Shun wished to decline in favor of some one more virtuous, and not to consent to be (Yâo's) successor. On the first day of the first month, (however), he received (Yâo's) retirement (from his duties) in the temple of the Accomplished Ancestor.

3. He examined the pearl-adorned turning sphere, with its transverse tube of jade, and reduced to a harmonious system (the movements of) the Seven Directors.

Thereafter, he sacrificed specially, but with the ordinary forms, to God; sacrificed with reverent purity to the Six Honored Ones; offered their appropriate sacrifices to the hills and rivers; and extended his worship to the host of spirits.

He instituted the division (of the land) into twelve provinces, raising altars upon twelve hills in them. He (also) deepened the rivers.

4. After twenty-eight years the Di deceased, when the people mourned for him as for a parent for three years. Within the four seas all the eight kinds of instruments of music were stopped and hushed. On the first day of the first month (of the) next year, Shun went to (the temple of) the Accomplished Ancestor.

5. He deliberated with (the President of) the Four Mountains how to throw open the doors (of communication between himself and the) four (quarters of the land), and how he could see with the eyes, and hear with the ears of all.

He consulted with the twelve Pastors, and said to them, 'The food! it depends on observing the seasons. Be kind to the distant, and cultivate the ability of the near. Give honor to the virtuous, and your confidence to the good, while you discountenance the artful; so shall the barbarous tribes lead on one another to make their submission.' . . .

Every three years there was an examination of merits, and after three examinations the undeserving were degraded, and the deserving advanced. (By this arrangement) the duties of all the departments were fully discharged; the (people of) San-miào (also) were discriminated and separated.

6. In the thirtieth year of his age, Shun was called to employment. Thirty years he was on the throne (with Yáo). Fifty years afterwards he went on high and died.

THE COUNSELS OF THE GREAT YÜ

Chosen by Shun to be his heir, Yü first labored for nine years to control the flood, returning home, it is said, only once yearly, so dedicated was he to his task. Among his many accomplishments, he divided the kingdom into nine provinces and cast the nine tripod cauldrons, symbols of the legitimacy of the royal house. Like Yao and Shun, he is regarded as an exemplar of righteous behavior and just governance. As Confucius himself said, "I can find no flaw in his character!"

Traditionally, Yü is regarded as the founder of the (legendary) Xia dynasty.

Examining into antiquity, (we find that) the Great Yü was styled Wǎn-ming. Having arranged and divided (the land), all to the four seas, in reverent response to the Di, he said, 'If the sovereign can realize the difficulty of his sovereignty, and the minister the difficulty of his ministry, the government will be well ordered, and the black-haired people will sedulously seek to be virtuous.'

The Di said, 'Yes; let this really be the case, and good words will nowhere lie hidden; no men of virtue and talents will be left neglected, away from court, and the myriad states will all enjoy repose. (But) to obtain the views of all; to give tip one's opinion and follow that of others; to keep from oppressing the helpless, and not to neglect the straitened and poor; it was only the (former) Di who could attain to this.'

Yî said, 'Oh! your virtue, O Di, is vast and incessant. It is sagely, spirit-like, awe-inspiring, and adorned with all accomplishments. Great Heaven regarded you with its favor, and bestowed on you its appointment. Suddenly you possessed all within the four seas, and became ruler of all under heaven.'

Yü said, 'Accordance with the right leads to good fortune; following what is opposed to it, to bad; the shadow and the echo.' Yî said, 'Alas! be cautious! Admonish yourself to caution, when there seems to be no occasion for anxiety. Do not fail to observe the laws and ordinances. Do not find your enjoyment in idleness. Do not go to excess in pleasure. In your employment of men of worth, let none come between you and them. Put away evil without hesitation. Do not carry out plans, of (the wisdom of) which you have doubts. Study that all your purposes may be with the light of reason. Do not go against what is right, to get the praise of the people. Do not oppose the people's (wishes), to follow your own desires. (Attend to these things) without idleness or omission, and the barbarous tribes all around will come and acknowledge your sovereignty.'

Yü said, 'Oh! think (of these things), O Tî. The virtue (of the ruler) is seen in (his) good government, and that government in the nourishing of the people. There are water, fire, metal, wood, the earth, and grain, -these must be duly regulated; there are the rectification of (the people's) virtue, (the tools and other things) that supply the conveniences of life, and the securing abundant means of sustenance, these must be harmoniously attended to. When the nine services (thus indicated) have been orderly accomplished, that accomplishment will be hailed by (the people's) songs. Caution them with gentle (words), correct them with the majesty (of law), stimulate them with the songs on those nine subjects, in order that (your success) may not suffer diminution.' The Di said, 'The earth has been reduced to order, and the (influences of) heaven produce their complete effect; those six magazines and three departments of (governmental) action are all truly regulated, and may be depended on for a myriad generations: this is your merit.'

2. The Di said, 'Come, you Yü. I have occupied my place for thirty and three years. I am between ninety and a hundred years old, and the laborious duties weary me. Do you, eschewing all indolence, take the

leading of my people.' Yü replied, 'My virtue is not equal (to the position), and the people will not repose in me. (But there is) Kâu-yão with vigorous activity sowing abroad his virtue, which has descended on the black-haired people, till they cherish him in their hearts. O Di, think of him! When I think of him, (my mind) rests on him (as the man fit for this place); when I would put him out of my thoughts, (my mind still) rests on him; when I name and speak of him, (my mind) rests on him (for this); the sincere outgoing of my thoughts about him is that he is the man. O Di, think of his merits.' . . .

The Di said, 'Come Yü. The inundating waters filled me with dread, when you accomplished truly (all that you had represented), and completed your service; thus showing your superiority to other men. Full of toilsome earnestness in the service of the country, and sparing in your expenditure on your family, and this without being full of yourself and elated, you (again.) show your superiority to other men. You are without any prideful assumption, but no one under heaven can contest with you the palm of ability; you make no boasting, but no one under heaven: can contest with you the palm of merit. I see how great is your virtue, how admirable your vast achievements. The determinate appointment of Heaven rests on your person; you must eventually ascend (the throne) of the great sovereign. The mind of man is restless, prone (to err); its affinity to what is right is small. Be discriminating, be uniform (in the pursuit of what is right), that you may sincerely hold fast the Mean, Do not listen to unsubstantiated words; do not follow plans about which you have not sought counsel. Of all who are to be loved, is not the ruler the chief? Of all who are to be feared, are not the people the chief? If the multitude were without their sovereign Head, whom should they sustain aloft? If the sovereign had not the multitude, there would be none to guard the country for him. Be reverential! Carefully maintain the throne which you are to occupy, cultivating (the virtues) that are to be desired in you. If within the four seas there be distress and poverty, your Heaven conferred revenues will come to a perpetual end. It is the mouth which sends forth what is good, and raises up war. I will not alter my words.'

Yü said, 'Submit the meritorious ministers one by one to the trial of divination, and let the favouring indication be followed.' The Di replied, '(According to the rules for) the regulation of divination, one should first make up his mind, and afterwards refer (his judgment) to the great tortoise-shell. My mind (in this matter) was determined in the first place; I consulted and deliberated with all (my ministers and people), and they were of one accord with me. The spirits signified their assent, and the tortoise-shell and divining stalks concurred. Divination, when fortunate, should not be repeated.' Yü did obeisance with his head to the ground, and firmly declined (the place). The Di said, 'You must not do so. It is you who can suitably (occupy my place).' On the first morning of the first month, (Yü) received the appointment in the temple (dedicated by Shun) to the spirits of his ancestors, and took [he leading of all the officers, as had been done by the Di at the commencement (of his government).

THE COUNT OF WEI SPEAKS

This Wei was a minister in the Shang government and a son of one of its former kings. Seeing the depravity into which the dynasty was falling, he asks two other nobles what he should do and is advised to flee. In this passage we see an adumbration of the doctrine of the "Mandate of Heaven," the notion that the king rules by the grace of the high deity and, in effect, acts as his proxy. But Heaven can and does withdraw this warrant to rule when the king is impious.

The Count of Wei spoke to the following effect: 'Grand-Master and Junior-Master, (the House of) Shang, we may conclude, can no longer exercise rule over the four quarters (of the kingdom). The great deeds of our founder were displayed in former ages, but by our maddened indulgence in spirits, we have destroyed (the effects of) his virtue in these after-times. (The people of) Shang, small and great, are given to highway robberies, villainies, and treachery. The nobles and officers imitate one another in violating the laws, and there is no certainty that criminals will be apprehended. The smaller people (consequently) rise up, and commit violent outrages on one another. Shang is now sinking in ruin; its condition is like that of one crossing a stream, who can find neither ford nor bank. That Shang should be hurrying to ruin at the present pace!'

He added, 'Grand-Master and junior-Master, we are manifesting insanity. The most venerable members of our families are withdrawn to the wilds; and you indicate no course (to be taken), but (only) tell me of the impending ruin—what is to be done?'

2. The Grand-Master made about the following reply: 'O son of our (former) king, Heaven in anger is sending down calamities, and wasting the country of Shang. Hence has arisen that mad indulgence in spirits. (The king) has no reverence for things which he ought to revere but does despite to the venerable aged, the men who have long been in office. The people of Shang will now steal even the pure and perfect victims devoted to the spirits of heaven and earth; and their conduct is connived at, and though they proceed to eat the victims, they suffer no punishment. (On the other hand), when I look down and survey the people of Shang, the methods by which they are governed are hateful exactions, which call forth outrages and hatred; and this without ceasing. Such crimes equally belong to all in authority, and multitudes are starving with none to whom to appeal. Now is the time of Shang's calamity; I will arise and share in its ruin. When ruin overtakes Shang, I will not be the servant (of another House). (But) I tell you, O king's son, to go away, as being the, course (for you). Formerly I injured you by what I said; if you do not (now) go away, our (sacrifices) will entirely perish. Let us rest quietly (in our several parts), and each present himself to the former kings (as having done so). I do not think of making my escape.'

THE GREAT DECLARATION

In this address to the nobles and his troops on the eve of his attack on the Shang armies, Wu, founder of the Zhou dynasty, justifies his action by recounting the depravity of the Shang emperor Shou (Zhou) and claiming, as in the passage above, that Heaven favors the removal of the impious Shang ruler. Significantly for later Chinese thinkers, Wu further claims that in doing so he is only doing what the Shang itself had done in defeating the wicked Jie, the last king of the Xia dynasty. His own seizure of power, Wu implies, is part of a larger pattern of political legitimation, sanctioned by Heaven, favoring just rule.

In the spring of the thirteenth year there was a great assembly at the ford of Meng. The king said, 'Ah! ye hereditary rulers of my friendly states, and all ye my officers, managers of my affairs, hearken clearly to my declaration.

'Heaven and earth is the parent of all creatures; and of all creatures man is the most highly endowed. The sincerely intelligent (among men) becomes the great sovereign; and the great sovereign is the parent of the people. But now, Shou, the king of Shang, does not reverence Heaven above, and inflicts calamities on the people below. Abandoned to drunkenness and reckless in lust, he has dared to exercise cruel oppression. He has extended the punishment of offenders to all their relatives. He has put men into offices on the hereditary principle. He has made it his pursuit to have palaces, towers, pavilions, embankments, ponds, and all other extravagances, to the most painful injury of you, the myriads of the people. He has burned and roasted the loyal and good. He has ripped up pregnant women. Great Heaven was moved with indignation, and charged my deceased father Wen to display its terrors; but (he died) before the work was completed.

'On this account, I, Wu, the Little Child, have by means of you, the hereditary rulers of my friendly states, contemplated the government of Shang; but Shou has no repentant heart. He sits squatting on his heels, not serving God nor the spirits of heaven and earth, neglecting also the temple of his ancestors, and not sacrificing in it. The victims and the vessels of millet all become the prey of wicked robbers, and still he says, "The people are mine; the (heavenly) appointment is mine," never trying to correct his contemptuous mind.

'Heaven, for the help of the inferior people, made for them rulers, and made for them instructors, that they might be able to be aiding to God, and secure the tranquility of the four quarters (of the kingdom). In regard to who are criminals and who are not, how dare I give any allowance to my own wishes? "Where the strength is the same, measure the virtue of the parties; where the virtue is the same, measure their righteousness."

Shou has hundreds of thousands and myriads of officers, but they have hundreds of thousands and myriads of minds; I have (but) three thousand officers, but they have one mind. The iniquity of Shang is full. Heaven gives command to destroy it. If I did not obey Heaven, my iniquity would be as great.

'I, the Little Child, early and late am filled with apprehensions. I have received the command of my deceased father Wen; I have offered special sacrifice to God; I have performed the due services to the great earth; and I lead the multitude of you to execute the punishment appointed by Heaven. Heaven compassionates the people. What the people desire, Heaven will be found to give effect to. Do you aid me, the One man, to cleanse forever (all within) the four seas. Now is the time! It should not be lost.'

On (the day) Wû-wû, the king halted on the north of the Ho. Men all the princes with their hosts were assembled, the king reviewed the hosts, and made the following declaration: 'Oh! ye multitudes of the west, hearken all to my words.

'Heaven loves the people, and the sovereign should reverently carry out (this mind of) Heaven. Kieh, the sovereign of Xia, would not follow the example of Heaven, but sent forth his poisonous injuries through the states of the kingdom: Heaven therefore gave its aid to Tang the Successful, and charged him to make an end of the appointment of Xia. But the crimes of Shou exceed those of Kieh. He has degraded from office the greatly good man; he has behaved with cruel tyranny to his reprover and helper. He says that with him is the appointment of Heaven; he says that a reverent care of his conduct is not worth observing; he says that sacrifice is of no use; he says that tyranny is no harm. The beacon for him to look to was not far off; it was that king of Xia. It would seem that Heaven is going by means of me to rule the people. My dreams coincide with my divinations; the auspicious omen is double. My attack on Shang must succeed. . . .

'Oh! (the virtue of) my deceased father Wen was like the shining of the sun and moon. His brightness extended over the four quarters of the land, and shone signally in the western region. Hence it is that our Zhou has received (the allegiance of) many states. If I subdue Shou, it will not be from my prowess but from the faultless (virtue of) my deceased father Wan. If Shou subdue me, it will not be from any fault of my deceased father Wen, but because I, the Little Child, am not good.'

THE ANNOUNCEMENT TO THE PRINCE OF KANG

But in defeating the Shang, the Zhou claimed to have conquered not as alien invaders but as its successor. Unlike invaders, successors do not seek to subvert or overthrow the institutions of the previous regime but to improve upon them as far as possible. In this passage the Zhou king advises his younger brother to examine the ways of the Shang and employ from among them those beneficial to the people.

The king speaks to this effect: 'Head of the princes, and my younger brother, Little One, Feng: it was your greatly distinguished father, King Wen, who was able to illustrate his virtue and be careful in the use of punishments. He did not dare to treat with contempt (even) wifeless men and widows. He employed the employable and revered the reverent; he was terrible to those who needed to be awed: so getting distinction among the people. It was thus he laid the foundations of (the sway of) our small portion of the kingdom, and the one or two (neighboring) regions were brought under his improving influence, until throughout our western land all placed in him their reliance. The fame of him ascended up to the high God, and God approved. Heaven accordingly gave a grand charge to King Wen, to exterminate the great (dynasty of) Shang and grandly receive its appointment, so that the various countries belonging to it and their peoples were brought to an orderly condition. Then your unworthy elder brother exerted himself, and thus it is that you, Feng, the Little One, are here in this eastern region.'

The king says, 'Oh! Feng, bear these things in mind. Now (your success in the management of) the people will depend on your reverently following your father Wen; do you carry out his virtuous words which you have heard, and clothe yourself with them. (Moreover), where you go, seek out among (the traces of) the former wise kings of Shang what you may use in protecting and regulating their people. (Again), you must in the remote distance study the (ways of) the old accomplished men of Shang, that you may establish your heart, and know how to instruct (the people). (Further still), you must search out besides what is to be learned of the wise kings of antiquity, and employ it in tranquillizing and protecting the people. (Finally), enlarge (your thoughts) to (the comprehension of all) heavenly (principles), and virtue will be richly displayed in your person, so that you will not render nugatory the king's charge.'