

Chapter 5: Ancient China to 221 B.C.E.: 5-2 The Zhou Dynasty (1045–256 B.C.E.)

Book Title: World Civilizations

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From time to time, pastoralist groups from the north or west succeeded in conquering China's ruling warlords and seating their own tribal leaders in power. The Zhou was the first of a series of ruling dynasties of nomadic origins that came from China's borderlands to the west.

During the eight hundred years that they ruled (at least in name), the Zhou Dynasty greatly extended China's borders. Where the Shang had been content to rule a relatively restricted segment of north-central China on either side of the Yellow River, the Zhou reached out almost to the sea in the east and well into Inner Mongolia in the west. We know much more about the Zhou era than the Shang because an extensive literature survives. Much history was written, and records of all types—from tax rolls to lists of imports and exports—have been found. The dynasty falls into two distinct phases: the unified empire, from 1045 to about 771 B.C.E., and the Later Zhou, from about 771 to 256 B.C.E. The earlier period was the more important. The Later Zhou Dynasty experienced a series of constant provincial revolts until the central government finally broke down altogether, and the last Zhou king was deposed (see [Map 5.1](#)).

One of the novelties of the Zhou Period was the idea of the [Mandate of Heaven \(A theory of rule, originated by the Zhou Dynasty in China, emphasizing the connection between imperial government's rectitude and its right to govern.\)](#). While the Shang kings had made their ancestral cult the focus of state religion, the Zhou worshiped an unchanging, cosmic entity called "Heaven," or [Tian \(The Chinese name for a heavenly force that governed the entire universe.\)](#). In certain respects, Tian resembled the Hindu *karma*—that is, a universal principle of ethical cause and effect. Like karma, Tian functioned as an organic whole that was linked to earthly people and events. It was the "heavenly" vault that covered all things and all peoples of the world. To justify their forcible overthrow of the Shang, the first Zhou rulers developed the idea that heaven gave earthly rulers a mandate to rule justly and well. As long as they did so, they retained the mandate, but it would be taken from them if they betrayed the deities' trust. [A king who ruled inefficiently, failed to protect his people from injustice or invaders, or failed to contain internal revolt had betrayed this trust. Thus, if a Chinese ruler fell to a superior force or a successful conspiracy, as did the Shang ruler, it was a sign that he had "lost the mandate" and had to be replaced.](#) This marvelously self-serving theory was highly influential throughout Chinese history.

The first Zhou kings were powerful rulers who depended mainly on their swords. The royal court employed hundreds of skilled administrators, and here in the Zhou era we see the faint beginning of a professional bureaucracy. China led the world in this development, as in so many others. As the centuries passed, however, power slipped from the monarch's hands

and a feudal society developed as the kings delegated more and more of their military and administrative duties to local strongmen. These men stood to gain from the acquisition of new territory, and they did so at every chance. As a result, China expanded, but at the same time the control of the royal government weakened.

By the 500s B.C.E., the local strongmen were in command of much of the empire, and by 400 the central power had broken down completely—one of the few times that has happened in China.

Battle Chariot.

Horses were domesticated in Central Asia and chariots probably were invented there as well. Both came into use in China during the Shang period, greatly revolutionizing warfare. Chinese archaeologists at Anyang recently excavated burial sites that included both chariots and horses.



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