

The Zhou Dynasty

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Establishment of the Zhou

•In 1046 BCE, *Zhou Wu* overthrew the Shang king who, according to accounts, was a corrupt tyrant. In order to justify the rebellion against the king, the new Zhou kings began to put forth a new ruling concept known as the **Mandate of Heaven**.

•Kings were seen as the intermediary between heaven and the people. As such, they had a responsibility to govern with competence and kindness. Since the final Shang king was a cruel tyrant, the Zhou argued that he had lost Heaven's support. Heaven now favored the Zhou – they had the Mandate of Heaven.

•This idea led to the **Dynastic Cycle** in Chinese history. The rise and fall of dynasties was attributed to the degree of order (or lack thereof) created by those dynasties.



The Feudal System

•The Zhou set up a *feudal* political, social and economic system.

•In this system, the Zhou kings divided the kingdom into numerous territories, and placed a member of the aristocracy in charge of running each territory. In theory, these rulers were to be loyal to the king.

•Economically, the aristocracy owned large tracts of land, and the peasants were required to work that land. Peasants also had land of their own, but they were required to work on the land of their lord.

•Below the peasants was a class of slaves (generally prisoners of war or criminals) who performed menial labor based tasks.

•This system focused on an agricultural economy and created a social structure with no mobility. Politically, it was a decentralized system. Although the Zhou kings were theoretically in charge, local lords often were very powerful.



Warring States

•The Zhou Dynasty was the longest lasting Dynasty in Chinese history, lasting for nearly 800 years. By the 6th century BCE, the Zhou kings were virtually powerless.

•Regional lords proclaimed themselves kings and fought with each other constantly. This time period is known as the warring states phase.

•At this same time, the *Hundred Schools of Thought* emerged and turned into the *Golden Age of Chinese philosophy*. Many new philosophies were developed, including *Legalism*, *Daoism* and *Confucianism*. Each of these philosophies addressed the role of the individual and the state, and the best way to maintain order in society.



Accomplishments

•Toward the end of the Zhou period, a real monetary (money based) economy had started to develop. The Zhou built numerous roads and canals to facilitate trade and improve agriculture. They also minted standard coins which further helped improve trade.

•The Zhou also developed blast furnaces in which they were able to make cast iron. (The rest of the world was still making wrought iron – iron heated and worked by a blacksmith.) Cast iron is made by melting the iron (heat between 2,000–2,500°F), then pouring it into a designed cast or mold.

