The Zhou Dynasty

The Zhou dynasty was China’s longest-ruling dynasty. The dynasty began in 1122 B.C. and ended in 256 B.C. Under the Zhou and the dynasties that followed, China became powerful.

Most historians believe that the Zhou culture began in the Wei River Valley, west of the Shang kingdom. In time, the Zhou moved east until they finally met the Shang.

The Zhou worshipped a god they called Tian, or “Heaven.” In about 1122 B.C., the Zhou ruler, King Wu, won victory over the Shang. This conquest led to the beginning of the Zhou dynasty. According to the Zhou, the god Tian allowed King Wu to conquer the Shang kingdom. Tian did this, the Zhou said, because the Shang kings were cruel.

The Zhou believed that Tian gave certain people an order, known as the Mandate of Heaven, to rule over China. Zhou kings thought that they would be able to keep the mandate as long as they continued to show virtue, or good qualities.

During Zhou rule, the kings set up a social structure with three classes—the king and his family, noble families, and peasant families. Families of each class were expected to show their virtues by offering services to the other classes.

The nobles got their land from the king. In return, they gave the king military support and other services. This political system of exchanging land for loyalty is known as feudalism.

The peasants worked the nobles’ land and paid them for its use with goods and services. The lives of peasants were full of hardships. Not only did the peasants farm, they also served in Zhou armies. In return, the nobles protected the peasants from the enemies of the Zhou people.

The Duke of Zhou played a major role in consolidating the newly founded Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BC). He was the brother of King Wu of Zhou, the first king of the ancient Chinese Zhou.
ANCIENT CHINA

DECLINE OF THE ZHOU

In time, the power of the Zhou kings weakened. By 800 b.c., warlike nomads from the north and the west had begun invading Zhou lands. In about 771 b.c., the enemies attacked the Zhou capital of Hao. They killed the Zhou king and took control of the whole Wei River Valley. Because of this, the Zhou moved their capital city east to the North China Plain.

After the move, the Zhou dynasty was weakened even more by a threat from within. Over time, the power of local nobles had grown. Many nobles began ruling their own lands, claiming independence. Some even called themselves kings.

Those kings fought the Zhou and one another for control over China. During the last two hundred years of the dynasty, the fighting grew worse. For this reason, this time—beginning in 403 b.c.—is sometimes called the Warring Kingdoms Period or the Warring States Period.

The decline of the Zhou dynasty was also a time of cultural growth. The Zhou introduced the use of cavalry, iron tools and weapons, plows pulled by animals, and money in the form of coins.

As the Zhou declined, rulers came up with new forms of government as a way to restore law and order. As early as the 600s b.c., the kingdom of Chu had replaced feudalism with a new kind of government. The Chu kings divided their kingdom into counties. They selected people to run the counties based on their skill.

In 535 b.c., the king of Zheng, a kingdom in the North China Plain, decided that virtue alone was not enough to keep order. Instead, he ordered that written laws be created to make sure people could tell right from wrong. These were the first written laws in China.

Reading Check

MAIN IDEA AND DETAILS: How did the Zheng king try to maintain order in his kingdom?

Archaeologists carefully excavate a carriage dating to the Zhou dynasty.