

5 | Heaven's Mandate

ONE OF THE GREATEST ideological accomplishments of the Zhou dynasty is the concept of Heaven's Mandate (Tianming). After having vanquished the powerful state of Shang in the mid-1040s B.C.E., the Zhou suzerains were faced with a significant problem of legitimation, which they solved by appealing to an innovative notion of "Heaven." The idea was that Heaven, an irresistible ethical force, would choose a virtuous individual on earth as its vicegerent and install him and his descendants to rule on earth as the so-called "Heaven's Son" (Tianzi). If, however, the Son of Heaven were to fail in his obligation to rule with virtue, Heaven would swiftly choose another champion to overthrow him. This was the reasoning that the lords of Zhou put forward when explaining their astonishing success (we must remember that the nation of Shang seemed to all observers far mightier than its conqueror): the last king of Shang was evil; he mistreated his subjects; and Heaven appointed the Zhou to punish him and take his place. The avowed intention of the Zhou, in other words, was not brute conquest, but beneficent and Heaven-ordained rule. (Incidentally, the term for "overturning the Mandate"—*geming*—is used in Modern Chinese to mean "revolution.")

This idea of Heaven's Mandate went on to become one of the dominant elements of Chinese political culture. Later emperors may not have believed earnestly that an august and terrifying Heaven would strike them down if they were to misgovern their domain—but it was still typical for rulers and political advisers to discuss exhaustively the consequences that any proposed legislation might have for even the lowliest members of the population. This genuine concern for the welfare of the people can be traced back directly to the ancient ideal of Heaven's Mandate.

The following text, known as "The Many Officers" (Duoshi), is taken from the canonical *Exalted Documents* (*Shangshu*; i.e., the *Book of Documents*) and is generally accepted as a document from very early Zhou times. It is a speech allegedly delivered by the Duke of Zhou (a brother of King Wu, the Conqueror) soon after quelling a Shang uprising. A new city, known as Luo, was built in the east, and the remnants of the Shang population were collected and moved there, so that they could be more efficiently governed and controlled. The Duke of Zhou arrived in Luo to rule over the Shang subjects, and addressed "the many officers" of Shang. The translation is complete, with the exception of the very last line of the original, which is garbled and hence deleted here.—PRG

The Many Officers

In the third month, the Duke of Zhou first came to the new city of Luo. He used [this opportunity] to address the officers of the Shang king.

The king says to this effect,¹ "You many remaining officers of Shang! It is a misfortune; autumnal Heaven has greatly sent down destruction on Yin.² We, possessors of Zhou, assisted in the mandate; led by Heaven's brilliant authority, we brought about the king's punishment, setting the mandate of Yin aright and [thereby] fulfilling [the will of] Di.³ Thus, you many officers, it was not that our small nation dared to take aim at the mandate of Yin; it was that Heaven, not

cooperating with those who are deceitful, prevaricatory, ignorant, and disorderly, supported us. Would we dare seek this status [ourselves]? It was that Di would not cooperate [with you]. What our lowly people uphold and act upon is the brilliant dreadfulness of Heaven.

“I have heard it said, ‘Di Above leads one to tranquility.’ The possessor of Xia⁴ did not recognize the patterns of tranquility, so Di sent down visitations to provide guidance to the times. The Xia had no use for Di; they were greatly licentious and dissolute, for which [behavior] they invented pretexts. Thereupon Heaven no longer cared for them or heard them, but discontinued their primal mandate, sending down punishments. So your former ancestor Tang the Successful was commanded to overturn Xia; with your capable people he governed the four quarters. From Tang the Successful down to Emperor Yi, none [of your rulers] failed to make his virtue brilliant and attend to the sacrifices. Thus Heaven grandly established you, and protected and gave order to the possessors of Yin. The kings of Yin, for their part, did not dare to lose [the support of] Di, and did not fail to be adequate to Heaven and [receive] its emoluments. But more recently, their descendant and successor has been vastly unenlightened with respect to Heaven. How could it be said of him that he would comply with and care about the diligent heritage of the former kings? He was vastly licentious and dissolute; he did not look upon Heaven’s manifest [presence] or the misery of the people. At this time, Di Above did not protect him, and sent down such great destruction as this. Heaven does not cooperate with those who do not make their virtue brilliant. Every territory that was destroyed within the four quarters, whether great or small—in no case is its punishment unjustified.”

The king says to this effect, “You many officers of Yin! Recently, our kings of Zhou have been very god-fearing; they have been charged with the service of Di. There was a Mandate: ‘Cut off Yin!’ We announce to Di that we have corrected [the licentious ruler of Yin]. In our business, we have no duplicitous objectives: your royal house is our [only] enemy. Let me say that you have been unrestrained like a flood. We did not move you [to be impious]; it came from your own city. Moreover, I keep in mind that Heaven has brought [punishments] upon [the king of] Yin for his great crimes; therefore, I do not punish [you, who are not guilty].”

The king says, “Yea! I announce to you, the many officers: it is because of this that I move your residence and bring you to the west.⁵ It is not that I, the One Man, bear a disquiet character; this [affair] is Heaven’s Mandate. If you do not disobey me, I will not dare make any further [demands]. Do not resent me. You know that the former people of Yin possessed books and canons [telling how] Yin overturned the Mandate of Xia. So now you say, ‘[After we defeated them,] the Xia were promoted and chosen [as attendants] in the royal court; they served among the hundred officials.’ I, the One Man, comply with and employ only the virtuous; thus I dared to seek you out in your great city of Shang. I am led to pardon and pity you. This is not a crime on my part; this is Heaven’s Mandate.”

The king says, “You many officers! In the past, when I came from Yan, I sent my illustrious Mandate down to your territories in all directions. Then I clearly executed the punishment [ordained by] Heaven. I have removed you to a distant place, bringing you near the ministers serving in our capital with much obedience.”

The king says, “I announce to you, the many officers of Yin! Now, since I will not lay you low, I repeat this commandment [to you]. I have now built a great city here in Luo, since I had no other place in the four quarters where I might host you. It was also so that you, many officers, would have a place where you might serve, in haste and running, as ministers to us with much obedience. So you still have your [own] grounds, and you still rest in your [own] dwellings. If you can be respectful, Heaven will cooperate with you and have pity on you. If you cannot be respectful, then not only will you lose your grounds, but I will also render Heaven’s punishment on you

to the utmost. Now you may dwell here in your city; you may perpetuate your houses; you will have your affairs and [live out] your years in this Luo. Then your children will flourish. This is the consequence of your being moved.”

—PRG

Notes

1. The text sometimes reads “The king says to this effect,” because the speaker is really the Duke of Zhou acting as the king’s representative. The reigning king at the time was probably King Wu’s son (and thus the Duke of Zhou’s nephew), King Cheng.

2. “Yin” is the name of the Shang capital and is used interchangeably with the dynastic name “Shang.”

3. “Di” is the name of the chief divinity of the Shang, but the speaker here merely uses it as another appellation of Heaven—implying deftly that the Zhou notion of Heaven is greater than the old Shang religion, because it can incorporate the faith of the defeated.

4. The Duke of Zhou refers to the Xia dynasty, which was destroyed by the Shang centuries earlier, as another example of Heaven’s Mandate at work: the Shang founder was a virtuous ruler, like the present king of Zhou; it was only the last king of Shang who deserved punishment.

5. The new city lay to the west of the old Shang capital and to the east of the Zhou capital.