

## **Mandate of Heaven**

The "Mandate of Heaven" is an ancient Chinese philosophical concept, which originated during the Zhou Dynasty (1046-256 BCE). The Mandate determines whether an emperor of China is sufficiently virtuous to rule; if he does not fulfill his obligations as emperor, then he loses the Mandate and thus the right to be emperor.

There are four principles to the Mandate:

- 1) Heaven grants the emperor the right to rule,
- 2) Since there is only one Heaven, there can only be one emperor at any given time,
- 3) The emperor's virtue determines his right to rule, and,
- 4) No one dynasty has a permanent right to rule.

Signs that a particular ruler had lost the Mandate of Heaven included peasant uprisings, invasions by foreign troops, drought, famine, floods and earthquakes. Of course, drought or floods often led to famine, which in turn caused peasant uprisings, so these factors were often interrelated.

Although the Mandate of Heaven sounds superficially similar to the European concept of the "Divine Right of Kings," in fact it operated quite differently.

In the European model, God granted a particular family the right to rule a country for all time, regardless of the rulers' behavior. The Divine Right was an assertion that God essentially forbade rebellions - it was a sin to oppose the king.

In contrast, the Mandate of Heaven justified rebellion against an unjust, tyrannical, or incompetent ruler. If a rebellion was successful in overthrowing the emperor, then it was a sign that he had lost the Mandate of Heaven and the rebel leader had gained it. In addition, unlike the hereditary Divine Right of Kings, the Mandate of Heaven did not depend upon royal or even noble birth.

Any successful rebel leader could become emperor with Heaven's approval, even if he was born a peasant.

### **The Mandate of Heaven in Action:**

The Zhou Dynasty used the idea of the Mandate of Heaven to justify the overthrow of the Shang Dynasty (c. 1600-1046 BCE). Zhou leaders claimed that the Shang emperors had become corrupt and unfit, so Heaven demanded their removal.

When Zhou authority crumbled in turn, there was no strong opposition leader to seize control, so China descended into the Warring States Period (c. 475-221 BCE). It was reunified and expanded by Qin Shihuangdi beginning in 221, but his descendants quickly lost the Mandate. The Qin Dynasty ended in 206 BCE, brought down by popular uprisings led by the peasant rebel leader Liu Bang, who found Han Dynasty. This cycle continued through the history of China, as in 1644 when the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) lost the Mandate and was overthrown by Li Zicheng's rebel forces. A shepherd by trade, Li Zicheng ruled for just two years before he was in turn ousted by the Manchus, who founded the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), China's final imperial dynasty.

### **Effects of the Mandate of Heaven Idea**

The concept of the Mandate of Heaven had several important effects on China and on other countries such as Korea and Annam (northern Vietnam) that were within the sphere of China's cultural influence. Fear of losing the Mandate prompted rulers to act responsibly in carrying out their duties towards their subjects.

The Mandate also allowed for incredible social mobility for a handful of peasant rebellion leaders who became emperors. Finally, it gave the people a reasonable explanation and a scapegoat for otherwise inexplicable events, such as droughts, floods, famines, earthquakes and disease epidemics. This last effect may have been the most important of all.