

F. The Rise and Fall of Dynasties

1. The story of the Xia dynasty reveals another important idea involved in Chinese thinking about monarchy. Eventually, after Yu passed on power to his son, and the dynasty continued generation after generation, the Xia rulers became tyrants.
2. Why could they not continue to be benevolent despots? Because, as the Chinese know as well as anyone: *power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.*
3. The Xia dynasty succumbed to corruption, and eventually the Chinese rebelled against them and chose a new leading family, the Shang, to take over the monarchy.
4. Eventually, the Shang dynasty, like the Xia before it, became tyrannical as well. The Zhou family led a rebellion against the Shang, and defeated them at the Battle of Muye c.1045 BC—a date often preferred by historians as a better place to start Chinese history than the origin of the Xia dynasty because the Shang and Zhou dynasties have more written sources to back up their historical claims about what happened than the Xia.
5. The eventual collapse of the Zhou dynasty, and its replacement by the combined Qin and Han dynasties, who later fell, and then were replaced, in a fairly regular pattern, reinforced the Chinese belief in the idea that history moves in cycles.
6. The dynastic cycle, though not necessarily thought of by that name among Chinese, is the idea they accepted throughout Chinese history that dynasties would rise and fall according to the natural process of some family gaining, keeping, and eventually losing the right of kingship according to their ability to exhibit the needed virtue. In Chinese thinking, when rulers exhibited the proper virtues, and were thus benevolent despots, they received the blessing of the Chinese peoples' ancestors in the afterlife, and this supernatural blessing came them what is called the “mandate of heaven.”
7. The pattern that came to be expected, with the gaining and losing of the mandate of heaven by each subsequent family was:
 - a) the establishment of a benevolent, enlightened monarchy
 - b) gradual decline over many generations, due to corruption
 - c) tyranny
 - d) the rise of a challenging power, civil war and the overthrow of the tyranny
 - e) a period of disorder of varying length, which the Chinese call a “warring states period”
 - f) the reestablishment of the monarchy by a new (enlightened) despot

G. Confucianism

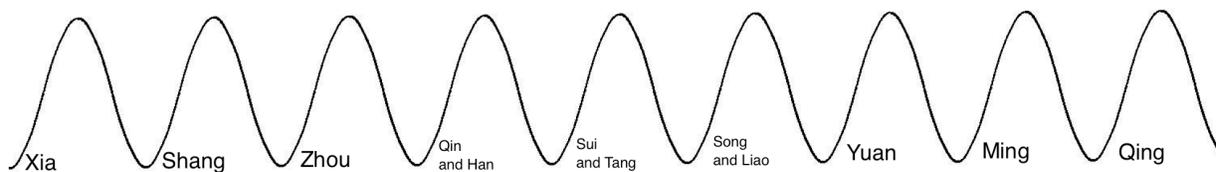
1. Since the pattern of the dynastic cycle was believed to be embedded in the very nature of the universe, most Chinese people have never questioned it.
2. To the extent that it involved the concept of virtue, however, it seemed to some Chinese thinkers that the keys to success could be taught and transmitted from one generation to the next, thus ensuring greater stability and harmony.
3. Confucius (born **c.551 BC**) is the most famous of such thinkers.
 - a) He believed that human beings are basically good, and deserve a government that is guided by virtuous leaders.
 - b) Confucius thought that rulers should strive to provide a paternal influence to the nation (which he should view as his extended family) and live by the “five bonds of piety” (principles of social morality and responsibility).
 - c) A ruler who understood his paternal duties and organized his government

according to them would rule well.

- d) Confucius warned that rulers who relied solely on power would not succeed.
- e) Confucius also held that anyone could learn the virtues necessary to become a ruler. Just as in the example of Shun giving power to Yu, Confucius believed that power could be passed on to anyone, and anyone could be a good ruler—not just a member of a royal family with supposedly royal blood—as long as they were properly taught the rules for being a good person.

H. Navigating Through the Dynastic Plethora

1. The first dynastic cycle after the “warring states period” accompanying the fall of the Zhou consists of two dynasties back to back. The first of these does not really qualify as a dynastic cycle by itself, since it only lasted 15 years, but it is still called the “Qin dynasty.”
2. Even though the Qin only briefly ruled China as a single empire, they were very active and accomplished. The Qin are credited with building the first set of “great walls”. There is one especially famous “Great Wall of China” outside Beijing, but there are actually many such walls in northern China altogether to separate China from the less civilized people that lived to the north.
3. Finally, though only briefly in power, emperor Qin Shi Huangdi has become especially famous, for his massive tomb, which contains a huge army of terra-cotta warriors, designed to protect him in the afterlife.
4. The first great Confucian dynasty in Chinese history, which became the model for later dynasties, was the Han Dynasty.
5. During Han times, the first round of ancient “globalization” occurred as trade occurred indirectly between the Roman Empire and China, as evidence of ancient Roman coins and goods in China confirms.
6. During this period, China started to see itself as being the heart and the very definition of civilization. To the north were barbarians; to the south, lesser kingdoms; to the east, the isolated island nation of Japan, to the west, Persia and Rome. China was in the “middle,” so its people extended the idea of a “*Zhongguo*” (a central state, like the central territory of any dynasty) to think of China as the “Middle Kingdom.”
7. When the Han dynasty collapsed, China experienced another anarchical period, and was again rebuilt by a new leading family this time called the Sui.
8. This short-lived and harsh dynasty was tasked with restoring order, and was followed by a long-lived Confucian dynasty ruled by the Tang family, and finally, after a long decline, a period of chaos.
9. It is clear that despite the presence of Confucian guidance for the rulers that the pattern of Chinese history was repeating itself, and it would continue to do so.
10. In order to avoid becoming entangled in the complexities of each dynasty, which is of very little significance in making sense of China as it is today, we are better off focusing on the pattern of the dynastic cycle itself, and the logic of why history would unfold that way for century after century, and prepare for understanding the world we live in by asking the question: what would break this pattern? Why is China no longer ruled by its benevolent Confucian despots?



The cyclical pattern of Chinese history is driven by the limitations of benevolent despotism as a form of government. Even with a set of guiding principles such as Confucianism to help the rulers of each dynasty, corruption inevitably sets in, leading to rebellion and collapse. The pattern holds for *four thousand years* from the establishment of the Xia dynasty **c.2200 BC** all the way to the end of the last dynasty: the Qing. But why was there a *last* dynasty? Why isn't China governed as it was for so long?