

# Beliefs and Philosophies of Early China

## Scene One - Mandate of Heaven Press Conference

Characters – Narrator, Zhou King, 2 Reporters, Shang King, Xia King, 2 Soldiers

**NARRATOR:** During the **Shang Dyansty** in China, the Shang rulers believed in a supreme God named **Shangdi**, which means “High Lord.” They prayed to their royal ancestors, asking them to communicate with Shangdi to seek the protection of their dynasty. Around 1027 BCE, however, a people called the **Zhou** [Joh] overthrew the Shang Dynasty and started their own dynasty. The Zhou claimed that Shangdi, or as they would say, **Heaven**, had now chosen them to be the new rulers.

**ZHOU KING:** (*Standing stage right, behind the lectern*) O people of China! We, the Zhou (joh), greet you as your new rulers! We are very excited to get started making China the greatest kingdom in the world! At this time, we would like to open the floor for questions.

(*Reporter 1 raises hand, Zhou King picks Reporter 1 to speak*)

**REPORTER 1:** (*Sitting in chair facing Zhou King*) Good afternoon King. I think a lot of us are wondering, why exactly does your family feel they have the right to rule China? Didn't the Shang family have the special protection of the High Lord Shangdi?

**ZHOU KING:** That's a really great question. Let me explain. You see, Heaven does not protect one dynasty forever. If a dynasty wants to stay in power, they have to earn the **Mandate of Heaven**, or Heaven's approval. Otherwise Heaven will choose a new family to rule. Just look at the example of the Xia [Shyah] Dynasty.

**REPORTER 1:** (*Confused*) The Xia Dynasty? Who were they?

(*Xia King stands stage left acting out what the Zhou King is saying*)

**ZHOU KING:** The **Xia Dynasty** was the first dynasty of China. They ruled many centuries ago. At first, they were very good rulers, protecting the people from floods, and they received the **Mandate of Heaven**. However, over time, they became corrupt and cruel to the people. The last Xia King crossed the line. He was bad to the people, drank constantly, and engaged in some very morally questionable group activities (*Xia King covers face with embarrassment*), and they lost the Mandate of Heaven. Sure enough, Heaven began to send signs to the people to show disapproval of the Xia. Heaven sent earthquakes, Heaven sent landslides, Heaven caused ice to appear in summer which killed the crops, all because of the Xia. (*Soldiers enter stage right, capture the Xia King, and take him off stage left*) Finally, the soldiers of the Shang captured the Xia King, and Heaven chose the Shang to be the new dynasty.

**REPORTER 2:** So if Heaven chose the Shang to rule, why are the Zhou ruling now?

(*Shang King stands stage left acting out what the Zhou King is saying*)

**ZHOU KING:** Another fantastic question! The Shang too were once great rulers, and Heaven smiled on them. But like the Xia before them, the Shang eventually became corrupt and cruel to the people.

The last Shang King crossed the line. He focused more on alcohol and women than his job as a ruler, he tortured people, had a swimming pool full of wine, and it is said by some that he roasted and ate his enemies! (***Shang King covers face with embarrassment***), and they lost the Mandate of Heaven. Heaven sent floods and famines as signs, and finally we, the Zhou, came to defeat him with our armies. (***Soldiers enter stage right, capture the Shang King, and take him off stage left***)

**REPORTER 2**: So now you, the Zhou dynasty, have the Mandate of Heaven?

**ZHOU KING**: That's correct! This what we call the **Dynastic Cycle**, by which one dynasty is replaced by the next, one after another.

**REPORTER 1**: So King, what if, one day, your dynasty becomes corrupt, and we see signs from heaven like floods or earthquakes or invasions by nomads, then will that mean that you have lost the Mandate of Heaven?

**REPORTER 2**: And if that happens, should we then rise up to overthrow YOU?

**ZHOU KING**: (***nervously***) Uh... uh... NO MORE QUESTIONS! (***runs away***)

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## Scene Two- Two Wise Philosophers

Characters – Narrator, Laozi, Confucius, Buddha, Buddhist followers

**NARRATOR:** The fall of the Zhou dynasty in 403 BCE led to the **Warring States Period**, during which different clans competed for power. This time of disorder and chaos led Chinese thinkers to question the nature of society and of people's roles in it, developing new **philosophies**, or ways of looking at the world. The two philosophies that became most influential were **Confucianism**, founded by **Confucius**, and **Daoism** [Dow-ism], founded by **Laozi** [Loud-Suh].

*(The elderly Laozi sits stage left. Young Confucius enters stage right and walks to Laozi)*

**CONFUCIUS:** Excuse me sir, forgive me but, are you Laozi?

**LOAZI:** Yes my son, I am Laozi.

**CONFUCIUS:** Wow, it is such an honor to meet you. I have heard that you are a great philosopher. I am a philosopher myself, actually.

**LOAZI:** Is that right? Well, why don't you tell me about your philosophy my boy? Have a seat.

**CONFUCIUS:** Thank you sir. Well, I believe that all the violence and disorder we see today is due to a lack of respect in society, and the only way to solve it is to restore respect for each other. See, I have this idea called the **Five Relationships**.

**LOAZI:** What are the Five Relationships?

**CONFUCIUS:** They are all about **Filial Piety**, or respect for ones elders or superiors. For instance, a ruler is superior to a subject, a parent is superior to a child, a husband is superior to a wife, an elder brother is superior to a younger brother, and friend, well, a friend is equal to friend, but they still must respect each other. I think if people learn to respect and obey their superiors, and in turn superiors care for and set an example for those beneath them, there will be harmony in society.

**LOAZI:** These are some very nice ideas. You should think about getting a job with the government.

**CONFUCIUS:** Well, I tried that, but when I spoke about how important it is to get rid of corrupt officials, and to make sure people get jobs based on qualifications rather than inside connections, well, that didn't make me too popular. So I decided to stick to teaching. My students are actually writing a book of my teachings called the **Analects**. Really hoping it takes off.

**LOAZI:** This is all very well, young Confucius, but I fear there is much you have overlooked.

**CONFUCIUS:** Really? How so?

**LOAZI:** Let me tell you about my philosophy of **Daoism**. You see, while harmony with society is important, it is not as important as harmony with the natural forces of the universe itself. Have you heard of the ancient Chinese concept of the Yin and Yang?

**CONFUCIUS:** Of course! It is very famous.

**LOAZI:** You see, the Yin and the Yang represent the balance of all things: light and dark, hot and cold, male and female, good and evil, life and death. We must always strive to achieve that balance in everything, so we can truly follow the Dao.

**CONFUCIUS:** What is the Dao?

**LOAZI:** The Dao means “The Way.” It is the universal force that guides the natural world. If everyone, especially the rulers, would live their life seeking the Dao, living a balanced life in harmony with nature, all violence and disorder would cease. If you read my teachings in the book, the Dao De Jing, you will understand more deeply, my son.

**CONFUCIUS:** Um, thanks, but that’s ok. Your ideas are interesting, but my philosophy is what China really needs.

**LOAZI:** Listen my boy, if you do not follow the Dao, you will never achieve balance!

**CONFUCIUS:** Whatever old man!

**LOAZI:** What happened to respecting your elders?!

***(Buddha walks in stage left and crosses downstage right. Buddhist followers sit on the floor in front of him, ready to learn)***

**CONFUCIUS:** ***(to Loazi)*** Hey, who’s that guy?

**BUDDHA:** You see, all life is suffering, but you can free yourself from suffering by abandoning desires. If you can do that, you will reach Nirvana and be free from the cycle of rebirth, free from all suffering forever.

**LOAZI:** ***(to Confucius)*** I’ll tell you who that is. That’s the competition! ***(Both look at Buddha, and then at each other nervously)***

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## Scene Three- Short-Lived Legalism

Characters – Narrator, Qin Emperor Shi Huangdi, 2 Civil Servants, 2 Confucian Scholars

**NARRATOR:** In 221 BCE, one power rose up and dominated all the Warring States, become the rulers of China. That power was the **Qin** [Chin] Dynasty, and its ruler was **Shi Huangdi** [Shihr Hwong-Dee] became the first Emperor of China. He ruled according to the philosophy of **Legalism**, which taught that order could only be restored by a powerful government with strict laws and harsh punishments.

*(Shi Huangdi stands center-stage, tapping his foot and looking impatient, Civil servants walk in from stage right)*

**SHI HUANGDI:** There you are! Where have you been?! What kind of bureaucrats are you that you can't be here when you are needed by the emperor of China?!

**CIVIL SERVANT 1:** Are we late, your Majesty?

**CIVIL SERVANT 1:** You asked us to meet here at noon. Is it not noon now?

**SHI HUANGDI:** Well... next time, be here early!

**CIVIL SERVANT 1:** Yes your majesty!

**CIVIL SERVANT 2:** A thousand apologies your majesty

**SHI HUANGDI:** Never mind that. What matters are there that I must deal with today?

**CIVIL SERVANT 1:** Sir, reports have come in that nomads are raiding in the north again.

**CIVIL SERVANT 2:** They come in quickly on their horses shooting arrows like PEW PEW PEW!

**SHI HUANGDI:** Alright enough of this! I've had it with these barbarians. Those tiny walls built here and there by the Zhou dynasty can't get the job done. I order the building of a Great Wall that will stretch across the entire northern border of China and keep out those nomads once and for all! Assemble the peasant farmers and put them to work immediately.

**CIVIL SERVANT 2:** A wonderful idea sir! So how much will they be paid for their labor?

**SHI HUANGDI:** Pay? HAH! They don't need to be paid! The people will build the wall out of love for China and for their great emperor.

**CIVIL SERVANT 1:** Your majesty, certainly you are a great emperor, but I do not think the people will work for that reason alone. After all, they must feed their families.

**SHI HUANGDI:** Nonsense! If they won't work for love of country, tell them that any man who refuses to work on my Great Wall will be put to death!

**CIVIL SERVANT 2:** That ought to do it...

**SHI HUANGDI:** What else is there.

**CIVIL SERVANT 1:** Well, you asked us to remind you to deal with the nobles?

**SHI HUANGDI:** Ah yes! Those pesky nobles, those lords of local lands, they think they are so powerful, they dare to challenge me?! I decree that from this day forward, all the nobles must leave their lands and come to live here at the capital where I can keep an eye on them. I'll have no funny business on my watch!

**CIVIL SERVANT 2:** But sir, who will run the different territories of China if the nobles are no longer lords of their lands?

**SHI HUANGDI:** I will choose my own governors to run each territory, and they will answer to me.

**CIVIL SERVANT 1:** Brilliant your majesty! So we must strengthen the trunk by weakening the branches?

**SHI HUANGDI:** What the heck does that mean?

**CIVIL SERVANT 1:** What I meant was, we make the central government stronger by getting rid of other competing powers.

**SHI HUANGDI:** Oh that's good, I like that! Write that down, and say that I came up with it! (***Civil Servant writes it down***) Anything else?

**CIVIL SERVANT 2:** All that is left is to deal with the Confucian scholars.

**SHI HUANGDI:** Ugh I HATE Confucianism! What a STUPID philosophy. Those Confucian scholars love to criticize me. They say that rulers should be virtuous and respectful and provide a good example. But my philosophy of Legalism is much better! Legalists understand that rulers should be strong and govern through force because people are naturally bad and must be kept in line. If they step out of line... BAM! Harsh punishments are what they get. How else could I have turned China into a true empire and centralized power.

**CIVIL SERVANT 1:** So how should we silence the Confucian scholars?

**SHI HUANGDI:** I have confiscated all of their useless books. I order you to throw them into the fire so no one can read them and get any funny ideas. (***Civil Servants throw books into the fire***) And you know? While you're at it, throw the Confucian scholars in their too. Who needs them?! (***Civil Servants grab Confucian scholars from offstage left and throw them into the fire, Confucian scholars cry out in pain as they burn***). BAM! Hashtag Legalism!

**CIVIL SERVANT 1:** (***to Civil Servant 2***) There goes the Mandate of Heaven.

**SHI HUANGDI:** What was that?

**CIVIL SERVANT 1:** Huh? What? Nothing.

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SCENE FOUR- How to Succeed in Bureaucracy by Really Trying  
Characters – Narrator, Zhang Wei, Li Qiang, Han Emperor Wudi, 2 Confucian Scholars

**NARRATOR:** Soon after Shi Huangdi's death, the Qin dynasty collapsed and China fell into civil war. But out of the chaos emerged a new ruling family, the Han Dynasty, which ruled from 206 BCE to 220 CE, about 400 years. They set the example for the rest of the dynasties to come.

(Zhang Wei and Li Qiang are sitting in desks next to each other, finishing their exams. Narrator walks by and collects their tests.)

**ZHANG WEI:** Phew! That was some exam!

**LI QIANG:** I know man, I had to guess on a lot of those.

**ZHANG WEI:** I was up all night studying. How about you? Did you study a lot?

**LI QIANG:** Um, you know, I studied. So your trying to get a Civil Service job, a job working for the government? What kind of work are you hoping to do?

**ZHANG WEI:** Well, I've been hearing great things about the trade networks of the Silk Road, and I'd love to get involved monitoring trade for the government. Our silk merchants are doing great business ever since the Han Emperor Wudi expanded the trade routes. Apparently we're even doing business with a place called Rome.

**LI QIANG:** Never heard of it. That's cool, but I really want to get a government job where I can work on keeping China safe from those annoying nomads in the north. So far they've just been paying them off to keep them from invading us, but I heard they're about to start fighting, and that sounds super awesome.

**ZHANG WEI:** Cool story bro. So how do you think you did on the test? Do you think you'll get a job?

**LI QIANG:** Oh, I'm not worried at all. See, I have an inside connection. My uncle works for the government, and he said he's going to talk to some of his friends to get me a good position. Honestly I guessed on most of that Civil Service Exam.

**ZHANG WEI:** Oh man, I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this, but your uncle wont be able to help you.

**LI QIANG:** What are you talking about?

**ZHANG WEI:** See, ever since the Han Dynasty took over, they've gotten rid of Legalism and adopted Confucianism as the philosophy for the government. **(Stage left, Wudi and Confucian scholars greet and shake hands)** See, Emperor Wudi goes to the Confucian scholars for advice, and they told him that, if he wants to have a strong and effective government...

**CONFUCIAN SCHOLAR 1: (to Wudi)** ...you must make sure everyone who works in the government gets a job because they are educated and qualified for their positions, not just because they know someone.

**CONFUCIAN SCHOLAR 2: (to Wudi)** So anyone who applies to work in the Civil Service, they should take a Civil Service Exam to test their knowledge of lots of things, especially Confucian ideas!

**CONFUCIAN SCHOLAR 1:** *(to Wudi)* Then you can be sure that you have the best people in government!

(Wudi and Scholars walk off stage left happy and shaking hands)

**ZHANG WEI:** So you see, that's the way they do things now. If you want the job, you have to be qualified. It's called a meritocracy, meaning people get ahead and move up based on merit, or how good they are, how much they deserve it.

**LI QIANG:** Man, this stinks. I liked things better when they were corrupt. Hey, if I pay you, will you retake the test for me?

*(Zhang Wei puts his palm to his face in frustration)*