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1.9 The birth of Chinese philosophical thought

The first historical Chinese philosophical doctrine was a theory of political legitimacy:

天命 tiān mìng

This doctrine is attributed to the **Duke of Zhou** of the Zhou Dynasty (1046 B.C. - 256 B.C.) and is often translated as "**Mandate of Heaven**". In the next segment (1.10) we will see that with this doctrine the Duke of Zhou draws a contrast between the appointment of a **human** creature and enthronement by the powers of **nature**; already we will see the tension between **humanism** and **naturalism** in Chinese philosophy.

In this segment we'll take a look at the background context for the Duke of Zhou's doctrine.

The background context for the doctrine of 天命 tiān mìng:

We have no explicit account of legitimacy theory from the previous regime, the Shang dynasty (1600 B.C. - 1046 B.C.). However, we can reconstruct a speculative account from the Shang dynasty **Oracle Bones**, which contain the first examples of Chinese written characters.

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Characters would be written on the bones, and the bones would then be **heated**, and the resulting cracks amongst the characters would be taken as **guidance**, as a kind of 道 **dào** (path).

From these bones we can reconstruct the Shang conception of an ancestor of the religion of **ancestor veneration**.

Ancestor veneration and political legitimacy

Central to their type of ancestor veneration is a **social hierarchy of ancestors**, in the afterlife. At its **apex** is 上帝 **shàng dì** (emperor above).

上帝 **shàng dì** is *not* a supernatural creator of the natural world like God, but more like a **common ancestor of us all**. However, Protestant European translators came to use 上帝 **shàng dì** to translate"God". For example, James Legge (1815-1897), a Scottish Protestant Sinologist, whose translations are on ctext.org.

For the Shang, then, a plausible basis of **political legitimacy** was **family authority**, respecting and honouring your ancestors. The right of the Shang to rule may have been understood in terms of this **ancestral hierarchy**.