*Mandate of Heaven from the Book of Documents*

*Introduction: The Book of Documents, or Shujing, is the oldest of the Five Confucian Classics of ancient China. It is a collection of documents covering 1700 years of Chinese history, from the 24th to 7th centuries BCE. The document here, describing the so-called “mandate of heaven” was written during the Zhou Dynasty (1046-256 BCE), the longest lasting of all Chinese dynasties. But it describes (though probably infused with legend more than fact) the advice a sage named Yi Yin offered to Zheng Tang, the legendary founder of the Shang Dynasty, China’s first dynasty and predecessor of the Zhou.*

“In the twelfth month of the first year, the heir-king reverently appeared before the shrine of his grandfather. All the princes from the domain of the nobles and the royal domain were present; all the officers also, each continuing to discharge his particular duties, were there to receive the orders of the chief minister.

Yi Yin then clearly described the complete virtue of the meritorious ancestor for the instruction of the young king. He said, “The former kings of Xia cultivated earnestly their virtue, and then there were no calamities from Heaven. The spirits of the hills and rivers alike were all in tranquility; and the birds and beasts, the fishes and tortoises, all enjoyed their existence according to their nature. But their descendant did not follow their example, and great Heaven sent down calamities, employing the agency of our ruler – who was in possession of its favouring appointment.

The attack on Xia may be traced to the orgies in Ming Tiao. Our king of Shang brilliantly displayed his sagely prowess; for oppression he substituted his generous gentleness; and the millions of the people gave him their hearts. Now your Majesty is entering on the inheritance of his virtue. All depends on how you commence your reign. To set up love, it is for you to love your relations; to set up respect, it is for you to respect your elders. The commencement is in the family and the state…

The new king sought out wise men, who should be helpful to him and his heirs. He laid down the punishments for officers, and warned those who were in authority, saying, ‘If you dare to have constant dancing in your palaces, and drunken singing in your chambers, this is the fashion of sorcerers; if you dare to see your hearts on wealth and women, and abandon yourselves to wandering about or to the chase, this is the fashion of extravagance; if you dare to despise sage words, to resist the loyal and upright, to put far from you the aged and virtuous, and to seek the company of youths, this is the fashion of disorder. Now if a high noble or officer be addicted to one of these three fashions with their ten evil ways, his family will surely come to ruin; if the prince of a country be so addicted, his state will surely come to ruin. The minister who does not try to correct such vices in the sovereign shall be punished with branding.

You, who now succeed to the throne, revere these warnings in your person. Think of them: sacred counsels of vast importance, admirable words forcibly set forth! The ways of Heaven are not invariable. On the good-doer it sends down all blessings, and on the evil-doer it sends down all miseries. Do you but be virtuous, be it in small things or in large, and the myriad regions will have cause for rejoicing. If you not be virtuous, be it in large things or in small, it will bring the ruin of your ancestral temple.”

Questions:

What exactly is the mandate of heaven? What role does it play in establishing the legitimacy of a ruler or ruling dynasty? How does a ruler earn the mandate?

What virtues and values does Yi Yin advise a ruler to have?

How does a ruler lose the mandate of heaven and what are the consequences of that?