

Activity 3. Advice to Emperors

Source: <http://www.thenagain.info/Classes/Sources/ClassicHistory.html> (Accessed April 11, 2010).

Confucius (551-479 BC) or Master Kong is considered the most influential thinker in Chinese history. He believed the early days of Zhou rule provided a model for an ideal social and political order where people accepted their roles in society. According to Confucius, authoritarian government and social stratification were facts of life to be accepted because they supported the proper functioning of society. People should obey rulers just as sons were obligated to obey fathers. However, he stressed that government and family should be based on virtue. *The Classic of History* is one of the five texts that contain the basic tenets of Confucian teaching. These excerpts describe successful and unsuccessful Chinese monarchs. The stories offer advice to future emperors on ways to secure the mandate of heaven. Read passages A – C and answer questions 1– 4.

A. 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.

B. 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.

C. 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

1. What happened when the kings of the Xia were no longer “virtuous”?
2. Why were Shang emperors successful rulers?
3. According to these passages, how can an emperor ensure a successful reign?
4. In your opinion, what is the key advice offered to rulers in these passages? Explain.