The Instructions of Yi, The Mandate from Heaven, c. 1700 B.C.E.

The Instructions of Yi is drawn from the Shu Jing (the Classic of History), the oldest of the five Confucian texts that formed the basis of the Chinese education system during the classical period. This selection recounts the advice of a loyal adviser, Yi Yin, to a young ruler who recently inherited the imperial throne of China. Yi explains the Mandate of Heaven, a political-social philosophy that details why some rulers succeeded and others failed, and informs him about the necessary customs and duties of rulers during that period.


In the twelfth month of the first year . . ., Yi Yin sacrificed to the former king and presented the heir-king reverently 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, “Oh! of old 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 favoring appointment. The attack on Xia may be traced to . . . [their] orgies . . ., but our rise began in Po. 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 . . .

Oh! the former king began with careful attention to the bonds that hold men together. He listened to expostulation, and did not seek to resist it; he conformed to the wisdom of the ancients; occupying the highest position, he displayed intelligence; occupying an inferior position, he displayed his loyalty; he allowed the good qualities of the men whom he employed and did not seek that they should have every talent. . . . It was thus he arrived at the possession of the myriad regions. How painstaking was he in these things!

He extensively sought out wise men, who should be helpful to you, his descendant and heir. 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—that is called the fashion of sorcerers; if you dare or to the chase,—that is called 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 precocious youth—that is called 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.” These rules were minutely inculcated also in the son of officers and nobles in their lessons.

“Oh! do 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 be not virtuous, be it in large things or in small, it will bring the ruin of your ancestral temple.”