



CHINA

2,000 Years of Chinese History! The Mandate of Heaven and Confucius: Crash Course World History #7

A series of dynasties ruled China from about 150 BCE to 1911 CE. The influential Han dynasty united China for 400 years. But there were many others throughout China's long history. In this video, John Green explores how the concept of the Mandate of Heaven affected the dynastic cycle in China. He also examines the impact of one of the main philosophies that guided centuries of Chinese leaders: Confucianism.



00:01

Video footage of a printing press; a boy distributes newspapers on his bike

Crash Course theme music plays

Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course World History, and today, we're going to talk about China, which these days is discussed almost constantly on television and in newspapers—wait, are they still a thing? So, we used to print information on thinly sliced trees and then you would pay someone to take these thinly sliced trees and throw them onto your front lawn, and that's how we received information. No one thought this was weird, by the way.

00:28

A timeline with a donkey's head – (“long-ass time”)

Right, but anyway, you hear a lot about how China is going to overtake the U.S. and bury us under a pile of inexpensive electronics, but I don't want to address those fears today. Instead, I want to talk about how the way you tell a story shapes the story.

China was really the first modern state, by which I mean it had a centralized government and a corps of bureaucrats who could execute the wishes of that government. And it lasted, in pretty much the same form, from 150 BCE until 1911 C.E., which is technically known as a long-ass time. The Chinese were also among the first people to write history. In fact, one of the Confucian Classics is called the “Shujing,” or “Classic of History.” This is great for us, because we can now see the things the Chinese recorded as they were happening, but it's also problematic because of the way the story is told.

So even Me-From-The-Past, with his five minutes of World History, knows that Chinese history is conveniently divided into periods called dynasties.

Past John Green

Mr. Green, I didn't even say anything. That doesn't seem very fair...

Present John Green

Shh! What makes a dynasty a dynasty is that it's ruled by a king, or as the Chinese know him, an emperor, who comes from a continuous ruling family. As long as that family produces emperors—and they are always dudes...

01:28

Record scratches

Portraits of Chinese Empresses including Empress Wu, who “founded her own dynasty, ‘WUled’ first as regent in 683 CE, became Empress in 690 CE, deposed in 705 CE”

No, they aren't. First off, there were several empress dowagers, who wielded tremendous power throughout Chinese history, and there was one very important full-fledged empress, Empress Wu, who ruled China for more than 20 years and founded her own freaking dynasty!

And those emperors keep ruling, the dynasty gets to be a dynasty.

So the dynasty can end for two reasons: either they run out of dudes, which never happened thanks to the hard work of many, many concubines, or the emperor's overthrown after a rebellion or a war. This is more or less what happened to all the dynasties, which makes it easy for me to go over to camera two and describe them in a single run-on sentence. Hi there, camera two.

01:59

Artworks depicting the (fictional) Xia; Shang, and Zhou dynasties;

Leaving aside the Xia dynasty, which was, sadly, fictional, the first Chinese dynasty was the Shang, who were overthrown by the Zhou, which disintegrated into political chaos called the Warring States period, in which states warred over periods—oh, no, wait, it was a period in which states warred—which ended when the Qin emperor was able to extend his power over most of the heretofore warring

a map during the warring states period; Painting of the Qin emperor, drawing of the Han dynasty
Painted depictions of each dynasty
Drawing of the Mongols with a speech bubble "we're the exception!"; video of Mongols riding on horseback, dragging bodies behind them
Images of rebellion around the world

03:07

Subheading – "probably fictional"

states, but the Qin were replaced by the Han, which was the dynasty that really set the pattern for most of China's history and lasted for almost 400 years, after which China fell again into political chaos—which only means there was no dynasty that ruled over all of China—and out of this chaos rose the Sui, who were followed quickly by the Tang, who in turn were replaced, after a short period of no dynasty, by the Song, who saw a huge growth in China's commerce that was still not enough to prevent them from being conquered by the Yuan, who were both unpopular and unusual because they were Mongols... which sparked rebellions resulting in the rise of the Ming, which was the dynasty that built the Great Wall and made amazing vases, but didn't save them from falling to the Manchus, who founded a dynasty that was called the Qing, which was the last dynasty, because in 1911, there was a rebellion like the ones in, say, America, France, or Russia, and the whole dynastic system, which at that point had lasted for a long-ass time, came to an end.

And breathe. So that's what happened, but what's interesting, as far as capital-H History is concerned, is why it happened, and especially why the people who were writing history at the time said it happened. Which leads us to the Mandate of Heaven. So the concept of the Mandate of Heaven dates from the Zhou Dynasty, and current historians think that they invented it to get rid of the Shang. Before the Zhou, China didn't even have a concept of Heaven, or T'ian, but they did have a high god called Shangdi. But the Zhou believed in T'ian, and they were eager to portray the idea of heaven as eternal, so they ascribed the concept of the Mandate of Heaven back to a time even before the Shang, explaining that the Shang were able to conquer the Xia only because the Xia kings had lost the Mandate of Heaven. This, of course, would have been impossible, partly because the Xia kings had no concept of heaven, and partly because, as previously noted, they didn't exist, but let's just leave that aside.

03:55

The "Shujing" is pretty specific about what caused the Xia kings to lose the Mandate, by the way, explaining: "The attack on Xia may be traced to the orgies in Ming Tiao." Sadly, the "Shujing" is woefully short on details of these orgies, but orgies are the kind of behavior that is not expected of a ruler, and therefore Heaven saw fit to come in, remove the Mandate, and allow the Shang to take power.

But then the Shang lost the Mandate. Why? Well, the last Shang emperor is reported to have roasted and eaten his opponents, which, you know, bit of a deal breaker as far as the Mandate of Heaven is concerned. Of course, that might not actually have happened, but it would explain why Heaven would allow the Zhou to come to power.

04:30

So basically, the fact that one dynasty falls and is replaced by another in a cycle that lasts for 3,000 years is explained, in the eyes of early Chinese historians, by divine intervention based on whether the ruler behaves in a proper, upright manner. It's after-the-fact analysis that has the virtue of being completely impossible to disprove, as well as offering a tidy explanation for some very messy political history.

And even more importantly, it reinforces a vision of moral behavior that is a cornerstone of Confucianism, which I will get to momentarily.

The video camera moves from John Green over to the written word “China” on the blackboard behind him

05:20

Portrait of the Qin emperor

A drawing of people putting on a puppet show

06:00

Colorized drawing of Wen of Han

06:35

Animation: a man (Confucius) stands among fighting warriors

*Confucius stands amongst kings; a school and Chinese government building land in the scene
The sage emperors floating above the clouds*

07:16

People stand on crates to represent their places in the hierarchy

But first, let’s see an example of the Mandate of Heaven in action. So, the Qin dynasty only lasted 38 years, but it’s one of the most important dynasties in Chinese history—so important, in fact, that it gave the place its name: Qin... A. Can I just tell you guys that we literally just spent 20 minutes on that shot? We shot it, like, 40 times. Stan, you are in love with puns.

The accomplishment of the Qin was to reunify China under a single emperor for the first time in 500 years, ending the Warring States period. As you can imagine, the making of that particular omelet required the cracking of quite a few eggs, and the great Qin emperor Qin Shihuangdi and his descendants developed a reputation for brutality that was justified. But it was also exaggerated for effect so that the successor dynasty, the Han, would look more legitimate in the eyes of Heaven. So when recounting the fall of the Qin, historians focused on how a bunch of murderous eunuchs turned the Qin emperors into puppets—not literal puppets, although that would have been awesome. And these crazy eunuchs, like, tricked emperors into committing suicide when they started thinking for themselves, et cetera.

So the Mandate of Heaven turned away from these suicidal puppet emperors, which set up a nice contrast with the early Han emperors, such as Wen, who came to power in 180 BCE and ruled benevolently, avoiding extravagance in personal behavior and ruling largely according to Confucian principles. Under Wen, there were no more harsh punishments for criticizing the government, executions declined, and most importantly for the Confucian scholars who were writing the history, the government stopped burning books. Thus, according to the ancient Chinese version of history, Emperor Wen, by behaving as a wise Confucian, maintains the Mandate of Heaven. So who is this Confucius I won’t shut up about? Let’s go to the Thought Bubble.

Confucius was a minor official who lived during the Warring States period and developed a philosophical and political system he hoped would lead to a more stable state and society. He spent a great deal of his time trying to convince one of the powerful kings to embrace his system, but while none ever did, Confucius got the last laugh, because his recipe for creating a functioning society was ultimately adopted and became the basis for Chinese government, education, and, well, most things.

So Confucius was conservative. He argued that the key to bringing about a strong and peaceful state was to look to the past and the model of the sage emperors. By following their example of upright, moral behavior, the Chinese emperor could bring order to China.

Confucius’ idea of morally upright behavior boils down to a person’s knowing his or her place in a series of hierarchical relationships and acting accordingly. Everyone lives his life—or her life, but like most ancient philosophical traditions, women were marginalized—in relationship to other people, and is either a superior or an inferior.

*Confucius standing
alongside a family*

There are five key relationships, but the most important is the one between father and son, and one of the keys to understanding Confucius is filial piety—a son treating his father with reverential respect.

*A father and son, the
father then packs up and
leaves.
The son is respectful, the
father returns
Men standing on tall
towers of crates*

The father is supposed to earn this respect by caring for the son and educating him, but this doesn't mean that a son has the right to disrespect a neglectful father. Ideally, though, both the father and the son will act accordingly: The son will respect the father and the father will act respectably. Ultimately, the goal of both father and son is to be a superior man, junzi in Chinese. If all men strive to be junzi, the society as a whole will run smoothly. This idea applies especially to the emperor, who is like the father to the whole country.

08:18

*A gold chair and fireplace
roll into view. John Green
sits in the gold chair and
opens the compartment
above the fireplace.*

Oh, it's time for the Open Letter? All right. God, that's good. But first, let's see what's in the Secret Compartment today. Oh, an iPhone? Stan, this doesn't factor into Chinese history until much later. An Open Letter to the Xia Dynasty.

*Animations of Peter,
Danica, and Stan; crowns
float above their heads*

Dear Xia Dynasty, Why you got to be so fictional? You contain all of the most awesome emperors, including my favorite emperor of all time, Yu the Engineer. There are so many the Greats and the Terribles among royalty and so few the Engineers. We need more kings like Yu the Engineer: Peter the Mortgage Broker; Danica the Script Supervisor; Stan the Video Editing and Producer Guy. Those should be our kings! I freaking love you, Yu the Engineer. And the fact that you're not real, it breaks my heart, in a way that could only be fixed by Yu the Engineer. The circularity actually reminds me of the Mandate of Heaven. Best wishes, John Green.

09:16

*Ancient Chinese writings
and paintings*

But back to the junzi: So how do you know how to behave? Well, first, you have to look to historical antecedents, particularly the sage emperors. The study of history, as well as poetry and paintings, in order to understand and appreciate beauty, is indispensable for a junzi. The other important aspects of junzi-ness are contained in the Confucian ideas of ren and li.

*The Five Relationships:
Ruled to ruled
Father to son
Husband to wife
Elder brother to younger
brother
Friend to friend*

Ren and li are both incredibly complex concepts that are difficult to translate, but we're going to do our best. Ren is usually translated as propriety. It means understanding and practicing proper behavior in every possible situation, which of course depends on who you're interacting with, hence the importance of the five relationships. Li is usually translated as ritual, and refers to rituals associated with Chinese religion, most of which involve the veneration of ancestors. Which brings us back, in a very roundabout way, to the fundamental problem of how early Chinese historians wrote their history.

10:02

Traditional Chinese historians were all trained in the Confucian Classics, which emphasized the idea that good emperors behaved like good Confucians. Would-be historians had to know these Classics by heart and they'd imbibed their lessons—chief among which was the idea that in order to maintain the Mandate of Heaven, you had to behave properly and not engage in orgies or eat your enemies, or eat your enemies while engaging in orgies. In this history, the political fortunes of a dynasty ultimately rest on one man and his actions—whether he behaves properly.

10:34

*A photo of a storm,
a flood; a painting of
Chinese peasants rebelling*

The Mandate of Heaven is remarkably flexible as an explanation of historical causation. It explains why, as dynasties fell, there were often terrible storms and floods and peasant uprisings... If the emperor had been behaving properly, none of that stuff would have happened. Now, a more modern historian might point out that the negative effects of terrible storms and floods, which include peasant uprisings, sometimes lead to changes in leadership. But that would take the moral aspect out of history and it would also diminish the importance of Confucian scholars. Because the scholars can tell you that one of the best ways to learn how to be a good emperor, and thereby maintain the Mandate of Heaven, is to read the Confucian Classics, which were written by scholars.

11:13

*Image: a box of
"Alexander the Grape
artificially flavored candy"*

In short, the complicated circularity of Chinese history is mirrored by the complicated circularity of the relationship between those who write it and those who make it. Which is something to think about no matter what history you're learning, even if it's from Crash Course.

Next week, we'll be talking about Alexander the Grape. Really, Stan, for an entire episode? That seems excessive to me. They're just, like, less sour, grapier, Lemonheads.

Credits roll

Oh, Alexander the Great. That makes more sense. Until then, thanks for watching. Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller. Our script supervisor is Danica Johnson. Our graphics team is Thought Bubble. And the show is written by my high school history teacher, Raoul Meyer, and myself. Last week's phrase of the week was "right here in River City." If you want to guess this week's phrase of the week or suggest future ones, you may do so in comments, where you can also ask questions about today's video that will be answered by our team of historians. Thanks for watching. As we say in my hometown, don't forget to be awesome!