Study Questions: “Mandate of Heaven: The Numerous Officers”

The Mandate of Heaven is a key concept of Chinese political culture. Thought to have been formulated during the Western Zhou Dynasty, the notion of tianming (“heavenly will” or “heavenly mandate”) has been used across the centuries to legitimate power, whether in imperial, republican, or Communist China, from 221 BCE to the present day. According to Chinese tradition, the concept of the Mandate of Heaven was laid out for the first time in the Shang shu (traditionally dated between 1766 and 1122 BCE). This text, whose title rendered into English is “Venerated Documents” (or “Ancient Documents”), is one of the earliest Chinese collections of historical fragments—writings spanning seven centuries but with considerable lapses in the chronology. The work is also known as Shu jing (Classic of Documents), commonly rendered in English as the “Book of History” or “Classic of History.” It is recognized as perhaps the most important extant work for the study of ancient Chinese political thought—thought that still has wide influence on contemporary political structure in China.

1. Compare and contrast “Mandate of Heaven” with the Canon of Filial Piety. To what extent do the two documents present similar and differing visions of leadership and rule?

2. Compare and contrast “Mandate of Heaven” with a Western document such as Charlemagne’s Capitulary of 802. How do the documents represent similar and differing visions of rule? Specifically, how did the authors of the two documents envision the moral and ethical requirements of leaders?

3. Why would an early Chinese emperor have had to claim divine origins for his rule? What advantage did he gain by doing so?

4. Throughout the history of the world, people have often risen up against governments that they perceived to be unjust. “Mandate of Heaven” provides an intellectual foundation for doing so in ancient China. How did John Locke, in Second Treatise of Civil Government, examine this same issue? How did the authors of Freedom Charter of South Africa examine the issue?

5. When modern politicians win an election, they often claim to have a mandate from the voters to enact their agendas. How does the modern concept of “mandate” differ from that of ancient China?