

Chapter Forty-Six

From Western to Eastern Zhou

*In China, between 918 and 771 BC,
trouble both inside and out
forces the Zhou king to move east*

IN THE YEARS SINCE good King Wen's grandson had sent his brothers out to establish Zhou centers of power, the outposts had grown and spread into small kingdoms. The men who now ruled them, descendants of those original royal siblings, were the second and third and fourth cousins of the monarch; a blood tie so distant as to be merely formal.¹ The lands were now governed not by family relations, but by administrators (at best) and petty kings (at worst) who paid their dues of loyalty to the king not out of blood obligation, but out of duty.

Inevitably, the "Lords of the Nine Lands," centered around the old colonies, acted with more and more independence. In the remains of their capital cities, archaeologists have uncovered bronze vessels cast and inscribed by the lords of the lands themselves; the Zhou emperor had lost his control over the bronze casting which had once been a royal monopoly.² The inscriptions show that these same local governors were also beginning to celebrate their own feasts and rituals. They were not waiting for the king to act as the spokesman for heaven.

In response, the Zhou administration itself seems to have become slowly more and more structured, less dependent on personal loyalties, hedging its officials in with increasingly strict rules. Courtiers once simply called "lords," who had carried out the general function of enforcing the king's authority, now were awarded more specific titles: the Supervisor of the Land had one set of duties, the Supervisor of the Horse another set, the Supervisor of Works yet another. This growing bureaucracy, like the Mandate of Heaven itself, was

intended to protect the king's power; yet it simultaneously reduced it, spelling out the truth that he could not compel all-encompassing, heartfelt obedience simply through the force of his character.³

Soon, trouble between king and "lords" (called "dukes" in many translations) began to rear its head. Mu's son Kung, according to Sima Qian, took a royal trip to visit the lord of a small state called Mi. The Duke of Mi had collected, for his harem, three beautiful girls from one family. Even his mother found this excessive: "A threesome of girls from one clan is too splendid a thing!" she scolded him. "Even a king does not consider himself deserving of this, much less should you, a petty lout!"

She suggested that he give the girls to the king instead. The duke refused, and King Kung apparently went home in peace. But a year later, he marched in and exterminated Mi.⁴ He was not going to allow any of the lords of *his* lands the chance to wallow in greater luxury than that of the king.

During the reign of his successor, King Yih, the king's power was under threat from the outside as well. The Bamboo Annals tell us that barbarian tribes from outside the Zhou land mounted attacks on the capital itself. They had never accepted either Shang or Zhou rule, and did not intend to.⁵

The barbarians were beaten away, but the outside threat was compounded by treachery on the inside. Yih's brother, Hsiao, managed to seize his throne. The accounts of the overthrow are vague, but the Bamboo Annals say that King Yih departed from his capital abruptly, while his brother Hsiao succeeded him rather than his son and living heir, Yi.

Yih died in exile; eventually the usurper Hsiao died as well, and Yi managed to recapture his throne with the help of a coalition of lords who (in Sima Qian's words) "enthroned" him. But after this brief cooperation, he too had his difficulties with the lords of the lands. His particular *bête noire* turned out to be the Duke of Qi, up on the north Yellow river, which had grown into a stronger and stronger state in its own right. Bickering escalated to defiance; according to an inscription, Yi finally turned out the royal army and mounted a campaign against Qi. The Bamboo Annals add that he captured the Duke of Qi and boiled him in a bronze cauldron.⁶

Yi died the year after, and left the throne to his son Li. The quarrels between king and noblemen continued, and more than once erupted into actual fighting. Li, forced to battle constantly against challenges to his authority, grew more and more tyrannical. Sima Qian writes that his own people began to criticize him, and that in desperation the king ordered a Grand Inquisitor of sorts (a "shaman") to go out and listen for disloyal speech. Culprits were arrested and executed. "The criticism subsided," Sima Qian says, "but the feudal lords stopped coming to court. . . . The king became even

more stern. No one in the capital dared to say a word, but only glanced at each other on the roads.”⁷

Misfortune soon joined the king’s repressive policies to make the people of China more miserable than ever: periods of famine and drought, punctuated by flooding rains, destroyed the harvests. An ode from Li’s reign laments the state of the kingdom:

Death rains and chaos from heaven down
swamping the king and throne,
worms gnaw thru root and joint of the grain,
woe to the Middle Land, murrain and mould.⁸

Other songs passed down from these years talk of hunger, discontent, and rebellion.⁹

The lords who were still loyal to the king warned Li that an explosion was coming: “To block people’s mouths is worse than blocking a river,” the Duke of Shao told his king. “When an obstructed river bursts its banks, it will surely hurt a great number of people.”¹⁰

Li, unconvinced, refused to recall his Grand Inquisitor. Rebellion broke out; a mob gathered around the palace and shook the gates, but Li managed to get away, out of the capital and into the countryside. His young heir was less fortunate. Trapped in the city, the boy took refuge with his father’s faithful advisor, the Duke of Shao. To save the life of the heir to the throne, the Duke of Shao “replaced the Heir . . . with his own son.”¹¹

Presumably the replacement “king” was killed; and the faithful advisor, who had sacrificed his own family for his king, raised the prince in his household. The rule of the Zhou kingdom passed into the hands of regents, until Li died in exile and the heir, King Hsuan, took the throne.

As far as Sima Qian is concerned, the cycle is progressing through its usual round. From Mu onwards, the Zhou rulers are becoming slowly more decadent. In all likelihood, drought, famine, and the constant encroachments of the lords on royal power were more than enough to make the capital city an unhappy place; but Sima Qian finds it absolutely essential that Li be self-indulgent and cruel, and his son and heir Hsuan be headstrong and blind to the wise advice of his counselors.

Headstrong or not, Hsuan also faced a massive invasion of barbarians.

These invasions had become a constant annoyance. Across the northern and western mountain ranges, tribes of nomads ranged. They were probably Indo-European, and so unlike the descendants of those first Yellow river settlers; they lived a horse-oriented nomadic life, travelling across the high

stepped on horseback, hunting game with bows. When they grew hungry, they came down to raid the fields and granaries of the Zhou farmers.

During Hsuan's reign, the most threatening tribes were to the west.¹² The Zhou called them "Xianyun," which was probably not a tribal name; it was simply their designation for a coalition of different nomadic groups who had joined together to try to gain some of the Zhou prosperity for themselves.¹³

From the fifth to the twelfth year of his reign, the armies of King Hsuan marched out against the Xianyun, defending the center of his realm from those on the outside. They were a more troublesome tribe than the earlier invaders, in part because they used chariots in battle, and the wars against them dragged on and on. One of the poems from the Minor Odes ("Xianyun") section of the *Shi jing* laments the invasion; a soldier posted on the frontier complains,

We have no house, no home
Because of the Xianyun;
We cannot rest or bide
Because of the Xianyun . . .
The year is running out.
But the king's business never ends;
We cannot rise or bide,
Our hearts are very bitter.

Eventually the Xianyun dropped back, in the face of Zhou resistance, and for a time disappeared from the historical record. But Hsuan's victory over the barbarians did nothing to improve his authority with his own countrymen. Not long afterwards he was back to fighting his own feudal lords, and his fortunes grew bleaker and bleaker: "The many lords mostly rebelled against royal commands," remarks one chronicle.¹⁴

In the forty-sixth year of his reign, Hsuan died. His son Yu inherited, and the fall of the Zhou grew inexorably closer. An earthquake shook the capital almost as soon as Yu took power, and the resulting landslides apparently choked the river channels that supplied fresh water to the city: "When the source of the rivers is blocked," laments one of the court advisors, "the state will surely perish."

If there is no way to imbue the soil and the people want for daily needs, then the state will perish all the sooner! . . . Now Zhou's deeds are like those of [the Xia and the Shang] in their final years, and the rivers and their

sources are . . . blocked. . . . Landslides and dried up rivers are the signs a state will perish. And when the rivers dry up, landslides will surely follow.¹⁵

Sure enough, Sima Qian writes, “during that year, the three rivers dried up, and there were landslides.”

The parallel between the action of Yu’s grandfather Li, who had blocked the mouths of his people as a river is blocked, and the earth which slides down into the mouths of the rivers and cuts the capital city off from water, is unmistakable. The evils of the Zhou have overflowed into the earth itself; and in return Heaven will remove its Mandate from the Zhou, so that they no longer give life to their people.

Yu himself turned out to be a licentious, pleasure-seeking ruler. Having sired a son and heir on his senior wife, Yu then became infatuated with a harem woman and tried to depose the queen and crown prince on behalf of the concubine and her bastard son. His advisors resisted the suggestion, but Yu insisted; and finally the advisors stood aside. “The calamity has taken form,” the Grand Historian observed, in despair, “and there is nothing we can do about it.”¹⁶

This concubine, now queen, had ripped apart the royal family; not surprisingly, her chief pleasures were destructive. She liked best to hear silk tearing, and so she ordered enormous pieces of the expensive fabric brought to the palace to be torn up in order to amuse her.¹⁷ Despite the wasteful occupation, she seldom smiled and never laughed.

Yu cast around in his mind for some way to amuse her, and decided that he would light all the beacon fires, and beat the alarm drums. This was a signal reserved to warn of barbarian invasion; at the uproar, the nearby lords turned out their armies and charged to the walls of the city. On their arrival, they found no barbarians. Their startled faces were so comical that the concubine laughed out loud (perhaps for the first time).¹⁸

But barbarian invaders did arrive, not too long later. They were known as the Quan Rong; their homeland was north and west of the Zhou lands. They poured over the borders and laid siege to the city. And they were joined in this by non-barbarians: relatives of King Yu’s first wife, angry that she had been set aside. The outside and inside threats had coalesced into one dynasty-shaking attack.

King Yu ordered the beacon fires lit, but the feudal lords simply shrugged and went back to their own duties. They had no intention of being made fools of twice in order to entertain the emperor’s fancy piece. Yu himself, fighting against the invaders, was killed in battle. The barbarians looted the palace, kidnapped the concubine, and returned home.

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THE FALL OF the Zhou house, which took place in 771, was the end of the Western Zhou dominance. It was not, however, the end of the Zhou Dynasty. A few of the lords were still loyal to Yu's oldest son P'ing, the heir who had been disinherited in favor of the concubine's bastard son. Together, they declared him to be king.

But the capital city of Hao was clearly no place for P'ing. The barbarians may have gone home, but the western border was insecure, and Hao was too close to it. King P'ing decided to withdraw to the east, to a safer location: to

WESTERN SEMITIC LANDS		CHINA
		Zhou Dynasty (1087–256)
	Samson	Western Zhou (1087–771)
		Wen
		Wu
	Saul	Tan (regent)
	David	Ch'eng
	Solomon	K'ang (c. 996–977)
Rehoboam (Judah)	(931) Jereboam (Israel)	Zhao
		Mu
		Kung
		Yih (Hsiao)
		Yi
		Li
		Hsuan
		Xianyun invasion
		Yu
		Eastern Zhou (771–221)
		P'ing

the city of Loyang, which had been established centuries before by the Duke of Zhou.

So that he could march safely towards his new capital, the chief of the Ch'in—a minor state whose lord had not been officially recognized by the throne—sent soldiers to escort P'ing. In gratitude, according to the *Shu ching*, P'ing made the chief a lord, the Duke of Ch'in, and “also gave him sufficient land to sustain his new position, the chief city of which was the old capital which had just been abandoned.”¹⁹ The Zhou homeland was now in the hands of lesser lords; from his new eastern capital, leaning on the support of the dukes who would be loyal as long as it was in their best interest, King P'ing ruled over a newly shrunken kingdom.²⁰ The era of the Western Zhou had ended; the time of the Eastern Zhou had begun.

Chapter Forty-Seven

The Assyrian Renaissance

*Between 934 and 841 BC,
Assyria makes itself a new empire,
and the Western Semites begin to lose their independence*

THE ARAMAEANS, the tribes whose wandering invasion of Mesopotamia had disrupted business-as-usual in Assyria and Babylonia, had now settled down in a patchwork of tiny independent states. The strongest of these was centered at the city of Damascus, in the middle of the plain that lay across the Euphrates from Assyria. King David had managed to bring the Aramaeans of Damascus at least partly under his control: his chronicler boasts that the Israelite army under David “struck down twenty-two thousand of them,” and afterwards received regular tribute from them.¹

During the same years, the Assyrians called the entire area west of the Euphrates “Aram,” a blanket term for the cities governed by Aramaean chiefs, and were almost helpless against them. Not until the reign of David’s grandson Rehoboam and the fracture of Israel into two states did an Assyrian ruler manage to rally his troops and push back against Aramaean encroachment. His name was Ashur-dan II, and he was the first of the great Assyrian kings who would bring Assyria back out of its dark age, into its new and final renaissance.

Ashur-dan’s inscriptions boast that he took vengeance on the wandering peoples who “committed destruction and murder” by burning the Aramaean cities which had been built on land that had once been Assyrian. In fact he came nowhere near re-establishing the boundaries of the old Assyrian empire. He did manage to ring the Assyrian heartland around with his troops, and make it secure; he brought back from the mountains the Assyrian villagers who had been driven from their towns by “want, hunger and famine,” resettling them in their own land.² But he did not push any farther to the north or the east, where the Aramaeans still held the most power.