â€Ž2,000 Years of Chinese History! The Mandate of Heaven and Confucius: World History #7

Crash Course: World History
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=====Intro (00:00)=====

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.

[Crash Course intro reel]

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 CE, 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 that the Chinese recorded as they were happening, but it is 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: Mr. Green, I didn't even say anything. That doesn't seem very fair-

Present John: 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- (cutting noise as it cuts to a voice-over from John)

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 WU-led China for more than 20 years and founded her own freaking dynasty! (cuts back to John in the studio)

-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.

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 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- [mongoltage] - 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 this 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.

=====The mandate of Heaven (3:20)=====

So the concept of the Mandate of Heaven dates from the Zhou Dynasty, and current historians think that they created 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.

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 was 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.

So basically the fact that one dynasty falls and is replaced by another in a cycle that lasts for 3000 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.

But first, let's see an example of the Mandate of Heaven in action. The Qin dynasty on lasted only 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, "Chin- uh." (laughing) 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 re-unify 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 omelette

required the cracking of quite a few eggs, and the great Qin emperor Qin Shi Huangdi 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.

=====Thought Bubble (6:35)=====

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. 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.

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. Oh, it's time for the Open Letter? Alright.

=====Open letter (8:20)=====

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.

Dear Xia Dynasty,

Why you gotta 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 freakin' 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

=====The circularity of Chinese history (9:16)=====

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. 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. 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. 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 includes 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.

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 talk about Alexander the Grape— really, Stan, for an entire episode? That seems excessive to me. They're just like less sour, grapey-er Lemonheads - ohhh Alexander the GREAT. That makes more sense. Until then, thanks for watching.

=====Credits (11:39)=====

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 wanna guess at 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'll be answered by our team of historians.

Thanks for watching. As we say in my hometown, don't forget to be awesome!