

THE MANDATE OF HEAVEN: THEN AND NOW

Backgrounder 07



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Summary

- In China, performance legitimacy has been an integral aspect of Chinese history as well as its politics. This can be traced back to the 11th century BC when the Mandate of Heaven was invoked by the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BC) in their justification of overthrowing the previous Shang dynasty (1600–1069 BC).
- According to the Mandate of Heaven, an ancient Chinese political philosophy, there could only be one valid ruler who was believed to have received the approval of an ancient divine force known as 'Heaven'. This “Son of Heaven” was considered the only ruler of China.
- The Zhou also believed that the only way to retain the mandate was through just governance and efficient performance by the ruler. Since, according to the mandate, no particular ruler has a permanent right to rule, rebellions were justified against tyrannical or incompetent rulers. Natural disasters such as droughts, famines, and events like foreign invasions and internal uprisings also indicated the loss of the Mandate of Heaven by the ruler.
- Post the disastrous 3-year famine (1959-1961) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), China faced a severe legitimacy crisis. Gradually, the revolutionary communist regime paved way for the establishment of an authoritarian system which based its legitimacy on performance (specifically economic) in Chinese society.
- In essence, public perception of the Party needed to be favourable to maintain the social contract between the CPC and the Chinese people — economic prosperity in exchange for Party rule.
- The Party has linked its rule as essential for the survival of its authority and the rise of China. Based on this, it has sought to muffle any discontent with the regime and has exalted Xi Jinping’s position as the harbinger of ‘common prosperity’ in China. This notion of Xi being indispensable to maintaining peace and order within China and navigating through external threats emanates from the Mandate of Heaven.

Introduction

On October 22, 2022, with the conclusion of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), Xi Jinping’s third term as Chinese President has been cemented. The CPC has installed ideological, constitutional and constraining mechanisms to legitimise Xi’s position of power for the foreseeable future. This ‘mandate’ to rule has been conferred to Xi, based on his performance as the helmsman leading China into the “New Era”. Although the present system in place in China is not guided by the Mandate of Heaven, the influence of the mandate can be discerned on the psyche of the Chinese people and the workings of the party-state system, which continues to derive its legitimacy from it. In this regard, understanding this mandate is critical to enhancing one’s understanding of the power and support the CPC and General Secretary enjoy in China, to the day.

In China, performance legitimacy has been an integral aspect of Chinese history as well as its politics. This can be traced back to the 11th century BC when the Mandate of Heaven was invoked by the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BC) in their justification of overthrowing the previous Shang dynasty (1600–1069 BC). Subsequently, throughout Chinese history, this mandate has been used to legitimise the defeat and accession of new emperors and rulers.

What is the Mandate of Heaven?

In 1046 BCE, the Battle of Muye was fought between the Zhou and the Shang clans, with the Zhou overthrowing the ruling Shang dynasty. Under the Zhou, ancient China shifted toward the worship of Tian (Heaven) and the Mandate of Heaven (tianming 天命) came into existence. The Mandate of Heaven was employed by the Zhou clan to justify the eradication of the Shang and strengthen the legitimacy of its own rule in China. The Zhou claimed that despite being a smaller grouping, they were able to vanquish the bigger Shang state because they had the backing of the Mandate of Heaven.

According to the Mandate of Heaven, an ancient

Chinese political philosophy, there could only be one valid ruler who was believed to have received the approval of an ancient divine force known as 'Heaven'. In ancient China, 'Heaven' or Tian (天) was considered the supreme power above all other gods and humans, likened to the concepts of nature or fate. Amongst the humans however, 'Heaven' had the closest relationship with the "Son of Heaven". This "Son of Heaven" was considered the only ruler of China. The Zhou argued that the Shang rulers' corruption and malfeasance had led to social unrest and instability; this created the circumstances of their downfall at the hands of the Zhou. Similarly, they explained that the Shang dynasty had also held the Mandate of Heaven in 1500 BCE when they succeeded the Xia dynasty. As a result, dynastic change in China began to be conferred with the Mandate of Heaven which granted the emperor the right to rule.

King Wen of Zhou, who eventually came to be known as the "Son of Heaven", was the first Chinese ruler to claim that his authority was derived from Heaven. Additionally, given that ancestor worship was a well-established tradition in China at that point, Wen and his successors were highly venerated. However, the Zhou also believed that the only way to retain the mandate was through just governance and efficient performance by the ruler. Since, according to the mandate, no particular ruler has a permanent right to rule, rebellions were justified — even glorified and romanticised — against tyrannical or incompetent rulers. Natural disasters such as droughts, famines, and events like foreign invasions and internal uprisings also indicated the loss of the Mandate of Heaven by the ruler. Moreover, the Mandate of Heaven did not necessitate a ruler or emperor to be of noble birth; instead, it was the virtues and the fulfilment of their obligations which bestowed the mandate upon rulers. Consequently, the early Zhou rulers became model rulers and a symbol of benevolent and just authority for subsequent rulers.

The Mandate of Heaven, while similar to the Western concept of the 'divine right of kings' on the face of it, differed from it vastly. For instance, unlike the principle of the divine right of kings, the mandate was

not granted by one God nor did it provide an unconditional hereditary right to rule; instead, the mandate provided for immense social mobility. Despite the clear purpose of propaganda at the time of its creation which delivered divine justification to the Zhou rule, the mandate ultimately emphasised the moral and just conduct of rulers. This moral and virtuous rule made it possible for the Zhou dynasty to overthrow the Shang dynasty, which had previously lost the mandate. On the other hand, good governance provided rulers with a divine justification for their continued rule. In light of this, rulers took great strides to act according to Confucian teachings; maintain the functioning of government machinery; defend territory from foreign invasion; promote public welfare and preserve public order. In the event of natural disasters; famines; social disorder; and faults in governance, the king had to take responsibility.

The Evolution of the Mandate of Heaven

When the Zhou dynasty was overthrown by the Qin state during the Warring States period (475–221 BC), the Qin claimed that they had received the mandate from Heaven. Nonetheless, these later rulers and emperors shifted their focus from the moral element of their legitimacy towards that of performance legitimacy. The Qin and the Han rulers instead considered their comprehensive military and economic strength as the reason for having the backing of the mandate. This was also partly due to the fact that they were able to establish rule by vanquishing their rivals.

The mandate was deified as the foundational basis for a state's legitimacy in imperial China. The doctrine finds mention in ancient Chinese classics such as the Book of Documents and the Book of Songs. Furthermore, during the Warring States period, ancient Chinese philosophers like Confucius and Mencius idealised and reinforced the Mandate of Heaven in Tianxia (天下), literally meaning "(all) under Heaven". As a consequence, the mandate continued to be used as a legitimising defence by rulers up until the 19th century. Nonetheless, despite the evolving nature of the source of authority upon the ruler, it is not to say that the

mandate did not come with any constraining elements.

Although the king set in place codified political and social norms, the dominant notion of the king's role and state-society relations was influenced by Confucian scholars. For example, Mencius wrote about how the people are the most important, the next is the state and the least is the king. As such, it is clear that the king only had a duty to fulfil and not the right to rule. To fulfil his role as a king fit to rule, the king had to receive years of extensive education, especially in Confucian values, to capably perform his duties toward the state and society. Additionally, the king could not do as he pleased; he had to take account of the state and its bureaucracy, his advisors and most notably, the policies installed by his predecessors, who had previously been mandated by Heaven.

In this regard, performance legitimacy not only had an important place in Chinese history but also shaped and continues to shape Chinese politics today. To illustrate, the Chinese penchant for preferring a strong centralised political authority inspired several peasant uprisings throughout China's history whenever a ruler was deemed unfit to rule. Rebellions, per se, held a customary position in Chinese political culture and rebels were revered in society.

Xi, CPC and the Mandate of Heaven in the 'New Era'

Post the advent of Western imperialism and the disintegration of imperial China, China underwent several socio-political transfigurations from the late 19th to the early 20th century in the leadup to the communist rule established by Mao Zedong in 1949. During this period, the Chinese state's legitimacy gradually started shifting from performance-based to ideological and personality-based legitimacy. Post the disastrous 3-year famine (1959-1961) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), China faced a severe legitimacy crisis. Gradually, the revolutionary communist regime paved way for the establishment of an authoritarian regime which based its legitimacy on performance (specifically economic) in Chinese

society. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the CPC political elites still believed in communism as the most important yardstick for the Chinese state's legitimacy. Consequently, there was an inconsistency in the way the state and society understood the state's validity. The conservative factions of the CPC spearheaded political crusades like the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign in 1983 and anti-bourgeois liberalisation propaganda. This legitimacy crisis in China served as a catalyst for the reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978.

In the 1980s, although Chinese society had progressively opened up, state-society relations worsened. This was illustrated by the 1989 pro-democracy protests in Tiananmen Square, which were violently squashed by the state and its declaration of martial law. In order to retain its authority in the eyes of the public, the CPC focused its attention on performing effectively, especially in the economic domain. Along with providing ideological and moral justification, the CPC also attempted to institutionalise a performance-based legitimacy to its rule. Accordingly, constitutional amendments were made, such as the inclusion of Jiang Zemin's Theory of Three Represents. However, despite immense economic growth, Chinese society was faced with challenges like growing inequality, corruption, and environmental degradation

To allay challenges faced by the Chinese, Hu Jintao, in the 4th Plenary Session of the 16th Congress of the CPC Central Committee, made a call for setting up a "harmonious society", which became a key component of his concept of Scientific Outlook on Development. In essence, public perception of the Party needed to be favourable to maintain the social contract between the CPC and the Chinese people —economic prosperity in exchange for Party rule. The Party cannot bank on its ideological and moral grandstanding anymore; the government must be able to meet people's expectations of its performance, execution of policies and fulfilment of duties. Without the backing of moral and divine justifications, as was previously provided to the mandate through Confucianism, the CPC has only the

popular appraisal of its governance to fall back on. This eventually led to the Party beginning to demonstrate paternalistic behaviour.

After Xi's ascension to power, the Party committed itself to a set of economic and political goals, known as the "Two Centenaries", which forms the basis for achieving the 'Chinese Dream'. Xi, in his 2013 speech emphasised corruption as the top challenge faced by the CPC and doubled down on his sweeping anti-corruption drive encompassing the Party, state and private bodies. Not only was this an attempt to clean up the system, but it also helped Xi eradicate potential rivals from the system altogether. Furthermore, in his 2017 speech, Xi spoke about the new "principal contradiction" of inadequate development and the need for a renewed social contract to reinvigorate the state-society relationship. China's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, its claim on Hong Kong and attempts at reunification with Taiwan also showcase Xi's, and by extension the CPC's, hardline posturing when it comes to defending any vulnerabilities, perceived or not.

Having abolished term limits for the positions of China's President and Vice President, Xi has emerged as the paramount leader of China. The addition of "Xi Jinping Thought for New Era Socialism with Chinese Special Characteristics" in the Party Constitution has elevated Xi's position, reminiscent to that once held by Mao. As a result, an attack on Xi or his policies is considered an attack on the Party and the system itself. In general, the Party has linked its rule as essential for the survival of its authority and the rise of China. Based on this, it has sought to muffle any discontent with the regime and has exalted Xi Jinping's position as the harbinger of 'common prosperity' in China. This notion of Xi being indispensable to maintaining peace and order within China and navigating through external threats emanates from the Mandate of Heaven.

Conclusion

The Mandate of Heaven is arguably the "single most important political concept" to have emerged from the Zhou dynasty and has continued to influence Chinese

thinking. If China wants to recreate the "Middle Kingdom", having the Mandate of Heaven is a prerequisite. Since the Party relies on its performance to retain the mandate, any challenges to its policies or the underperformance of any top officials pose a danger to the regime losing its credibility. Thus, the Party will have to continue to be able to remain accountable and generate prosperity to assure the Chinese people that they still hold the Mandate of Heaven and will continue to do so, with Xi steering the country through the transformative 'New Era'.

About the Author

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