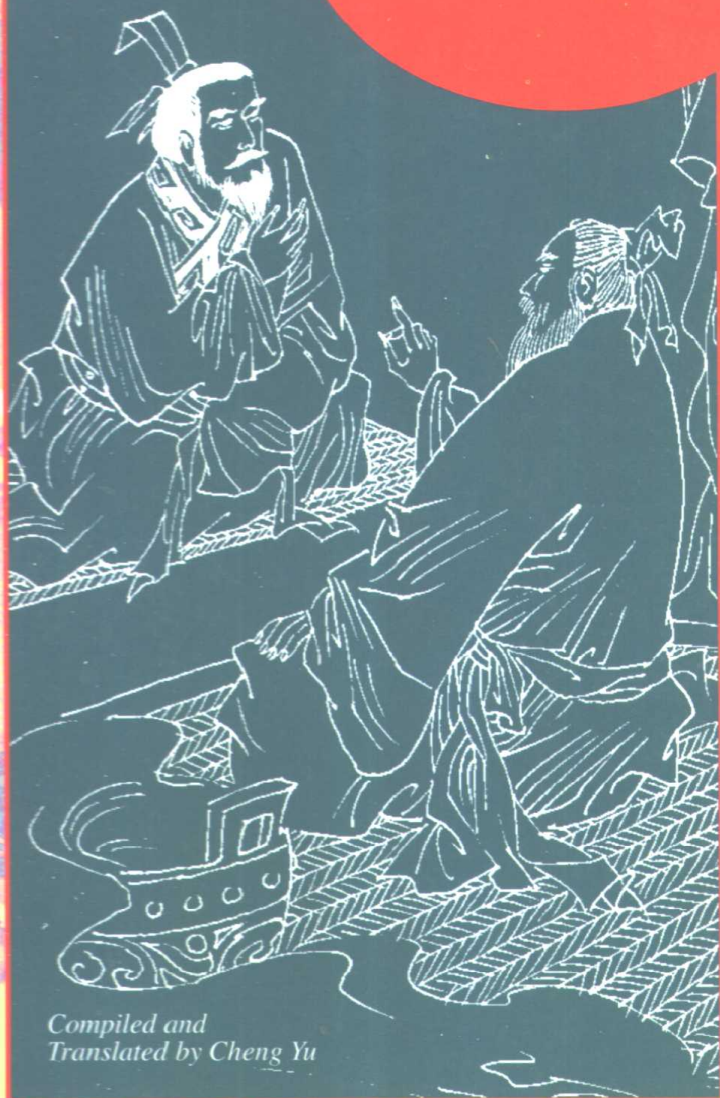


Tales of Prime Ministers in Ancient China



*Compiled and
Translated by Cheng Yu*

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Foreword

Prime ministers are not rare on today's international political stage, yet the prime ministers of ancient China perhaps tell a different tale.

Through the Shang Dynasty of over three thousand years ago to the Qing Dynasty of not even a century past, hundreds of Chinese prime ministers rose and fell. And throughout these ages, although the names of the prime ministers may have changed, the momentous role they all played remained much the same: the number one administrator in the country. They were, after all, selected by absolute rulers, and thus also were their destinies controlled by these overlords. Therefore, however talented and powerful they might have been, they ultimately could never be their own masters. This may be the most significant difference between those prime ministers of ancient China and those of today.

The clever and the cruel, the loyal and the deceiving, the efficient and the inept: prime ministers of all such descriptions take their place in the long history that formed China. As the highest-ranking administrator, a prime minister had only one individual over him yet he had millions of people under him. Thus a prime

minister could powerfully influence the court, thereby not just changing the course of history but also defining the age for all time. All of this notwithstanding, in a feudal society it was the supreme ruler who determined the life and death of all subjects, including the prime minister. As the ancient Chinese saying goes: "To consort with a king is tantamount to living with a tiger." To be a prime minister at certain times was to occupy a most precarious position—which is no doubt why many a prime minister in ancient China did not die of natural causes.

The 30 prime ministers in this book span almost all of the dynasties of Chinese history. Those selected, from among the hundreds more, were chosen for their being representative of their time. Many of their stories are a part of the common heritage of China even to this day; and their achievements and failings, their rights and their wrongs, have been and will be discussed forever.

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Shang Dynasty
(c.16 th-11th century BC)

Yi Yin, the First Prime Minister Recorded in Chinese History

Who was the very first prime minister in China? No one knows. The Chinese people of five thousand years ago left no records about their prime ministers. Even if they had, no traces have yet been found. Fortunately, in the later years of the Qing Dynasty, peasants in present-day Henan Province unearthed some bones and tortoise shells inscribed with an unusual calligraphy. It was established later that these characters dated way back to the Shang Dynasty (c. 16th-11th century BC).

From these deciphered artifacts, researchers deduced that a man by the name of Yi Yin was the first prime minister of the Shang Dynasty, making him the earliest recorded prime minister in Chinese history during the 16th century BC.

The tale of Yi Yin's birth makes for fascinating legend. It is recounted that in the latter years of the Xia Dynasty (which preceded the Shang), a young lady in Shen, a vassal state of the Xia empire, one day found a naked baby

lying under a large tree. The girl presented the baby to the ruler, who then ordered his cooks to raise this child.

Yi Yin grew up to become a celebrated chef. There is a saying in China that goes: "Running a country is like cooking a banquet." Yi Yin's story might best exemplify this famous aphorism.

When the ruler found Yi Yin to be a person of talent, he employed him as his daughter's teacher. Even though he lived within the palace, Yi Yin made a point of carefully observing the developments beyond the palace walls. He soon discovered that the ruler of the Xia Dynasty, Jie, was a tyrant detested by people all over the country. This made Yi Yin resolve to assist a virtuous ruler to eliminate the Xia so as to establish a more just dynasty.

Yi Yin's renown meanwhile had spread to the neighboring vassal state of Shang, whose ruler, Tang, asked the ruler of Shen to send this personage to him. The ruler of Shen, however, rejected Tang's request, and Yi Yin was forced to bide his time.

One day, Yi Yin learned that Tang was betrothed to the daughter of the ruler of Shen. He beseeched the Shen ruler to let him go to the State of Shang as a part of his daughter's dowry, as a kind of bonded slave. This time the ruler of

Shen allowed him to go.

Having heard of Yi Yin as an excellent chef, Tang let Yi Yin prepare his meals in the Shang palace each day. Thus, taking every meal as an opportunity to sound his ideas, Yi Yin described the prevailing political situation and convinced Tang that he should replace the unjust Jie. Being a chef, Yi Yin compared affairs of state to the art of cooking. It was not long before Tang realized that Yi Yin possessed exceptional ability. He pronounced Yi Yin to be freed from his bondage, and appointed him his most senior minister.

Under Yi Yin's steady guidance, the State of Shang grew stronger day by day. However, Tang grew worried that Jie's overweening ambitions could endanger his own state before he could act. He sent Yi Yin to Jie's palace to find out the actual situation in the Xia empire.

Jie, on his part, had also grown fearful of the expanding power and territory of the State of Shang, so he confronted Yi Yin in his court. The astute Yi Yin calmed Jie and won his trust. Beyond this, Jie was not too interested in affairs of state at all. His main objective was to delight in a life of luxury. Fine wines and beautiful women were all he needed. So as to divert any suspicions, as well as to entice Jie, Yi Yin

presented him with two beautiful women.

Yi Yin remained in Xia for three years carefully studying Jie's rule. Having learned what he wished to know, he felt it time to return to Shang.

Tang strongly felt they should attack Xia immediately, after hearing Yi Yin's report. Yi Yin, however, thought this premature since Xia's strength was still greater than that of Shang. He instead advised Tang not to pay tribute to Xia in the coming year, for the purpose of flying Jie's kite.

When he heard that Tang would not pay tribute, Jie was enraged. He gathered together troops from nine states and marched on the capital city of Shang. Yi Yin then told Tang: "The facts tell us that the Xia Dynasty still holds power and appeal. Sire, acknowledge your mistake and ask for punishment." Whereupon Tang went himself to see Jie.

The moment Tang arrived at the capital city of Xia, Jie had Tang arrested. But Yi Yin had already calculated on this. On the one hand, he presented Jie enormous riches from the treasury as well as the most beautiful women of the land, and on the other hand, he bribed the more cunning officials of Xia. Jie was delighted when he obtained so many treasures from Shang, and

he soon ordered that Tang be freed.

Tang and Yi Yin then plotted to eliminate Xia's principal allied states one by one. After several battles, Shang achieved this objective, and the balance of power soon shifted between Xia and Shang.

Yi Yin then said to Tang, "Sire, do not pay tribute this year, then just wait and watch."

As soon as Jie heard the news, he again called for troops from his allied states. This time nobody obeyed him. Jie, it seemed, had dissipated most of his support. Yi Yin then told Tang, "The time is ripe to attack Xia."

In the year 1711 BC, Shang and Xia fought a decisive battle in the wilds of Mingtiao. This was a one-sided war: Xia soldiers did not want to sacrifice their lives for an unjust Jie, while Shang troops advanced courageously. Jie had lost this war from the very outset. In the end, Jie was captured by Tang, and died three years later.

After the Mingtiao battle, Shang troops lost no time occupying the capital city of Xia. Pacifying the officials and common people of Xia, Tang declared the eradication of the Xia Dynasty and the establishment of the Shang Dynasty.

After Tang witnessed how the Xia Dynasty had fallen, in order not to repeat Xia's mistake,

he instituted policies opposite to Xia's. His kindness to vassal state rulers and the common people led to a stable society.

As Tang's prime minister, Yi Yin was the most suitable adviser and administrator of Tang's policy of benevolence.

Tang died after 13 years as the ruler of the Shang Dynasty, and as his first son had died even earlier, it fell to the second son to ascend the throne. However, this son also died after two years. Yi Yin then helped Tang's youngest son become king. It seemed that Tang's sons were all to die young, and this one was to be no exception. He died four years later, and it became the turn of the next generation. Thus it was that Tang's first grandson, Tai Jia, ascended the throne.

Through the exertions of the three rulers before Tai Jia, Shang had developed into a stable country with greater and greater grain harvests. Unfortunately, Tai Jia, unlike his grandfather and father, was not familiar with the failings of the Xia Dynasty. Like Jie, he too slipped into a decadent lifestyle and ignored national affairs. Tai Jia also arbitrarily punished or even killed any officials who disobeyed his orders.

At first, Yi Yin tried his best to teach Tai Jia, relating him stories about Xia's downfall and