This essay traces the evolution of portraits of the Duke of Zhou (Zhou gong 周公) in the period before the elevation of the Rituals of Zhou (Zhouli 周禮) to secure it canonical status in late Eastern Han (25–220 CE) via the systematizing works of Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200 CE), which portray the duke as a moral exemplar second only to Confucius (Kongzi 孔子) himself. Early in their training, nearly all readers of classical Chinese come to regard the duke as the ultimate in inspiration for Confucius, thanks to Analects 7/5, in which the sage laments his recent failures to meet the duke in his dreams. Readers of classical Chinese soon learn also about the duke’s reputed authorship of a number of canonical works, including the Line Texts of the Classic of Changes (Yijing 易經), at least two odes, and possibly even the Approaching Elegance (Erya 爾雅) word list and a mathematical classic. Fewer readers, however, are familiar with the contradictory portraits of the duke offered to account for the consolidation of the “great peace” (taiping 太平) in early Western Zhou (ca. 1046–771 BCE) via the institution of rites, music, and punishments—portraits that query the actual motives of this legendary figure. Some Zhanguo (475–222

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1 According to tradition, a version of the Zhouguan first appeared at the court of Liu De 劉德, King Xian of Hejian (r. 155–129 BCE), stepbrother of Han Wudi 漢武帝 (r. 141–87) and a famous bibliophile. The Zhouli was briefly awarded the status of an imperially sanctioned Classic (jing 經) at the end of Western Han, and three scholars—Du Zichun 杜子春 (early Eastern Han), Zheng Xing 鄭興 (fl. 30 CE), and Jia Kui 賈逵 (30–101)—wrote commentaries for it, but its status was finally secure only after Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200) treated the Three Ritual Classics (sanli 三禮) as a single Classic. See Nylan 2001, chap. 4. The figure of the duke was also readily available for jests: students who mocked their dozing teacher were told that he was in wordless communication with the duke. See Hou Hanshu 80A.2623. (NB: As all translations used in this chapter are my own, references to translations are for the convenience of readers.)

2 Odes 155, a plaint, and 235, a hymn written in praise of King Wen 文王. For the Duke of Zhou as author of the Erya, see Loewe 1993, 33, 95; the mathematical classic is the Mathematical Classic of the Zhou Gnomon (Zhou bi suan jing 周髀算絃).
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BCE) and Western Han (206 BCE–8 CE) texts reveal a great ambivalence toward the Duke of Zhou, with Han texts regularly citing the duke’s attempts to arrogate imperial prerogatives. Such disparate pasts invoked in competing traditions command our attention—and not only because these rival visions of the past inevitably informed the early reception of both the language and content of the Rituals of Zhou itself. The broader questions that this essay raises include the following: What role did the figure of the Duke of Zhou play in rhetorical constructions, why, and for whom? What effect was conveyed by the various representations of the duke’s performative speeches? Did the various portraits of the duke make some things happen while preventing others? Even at this remove, it is obvious that the words attributed to the duke were at least as important in the early centralizing states as any deeds the duke supposedly performed.

A mid–to late Western Han compilation, the Records of Ritual (Liji 禮記) provides a window onto these complexities in an opening passage from a chapter devoted to the Spirit Hall (mingtang 明堂) supposedly built by the Duke of Zhou shortly after the dynastic founding ca. 1046 BCE:

Formerly, when the Duke of Zhou gave audience to the vassal princes in their various places in the Spirit Hall, the Son of Heaven stood with his back to the axe-embroidered screen, facing south. The “Three Lords” were in front of the steps, in the middle, facing east, as this was the most honorable position [for subjects]. The lords one rank below took their places in the eastern part of the east steps, and they faced west… [and so on down three more ranks, before the passage describes the leaders of the Nine Yi and the Eight Man].

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3 For the stories of Huo Guang 霍光 (d. 68 BCE) and others who arrogated similar powers, see below and also Loewe 2000, 170–174; Loewe 2004, chap. 10, esp. 340ff. Conceivably, the duke’s example was invoked even before Han by ministers who assumed the ruler’s powers. See Wenxuan 52.16b, citing links between the duke’s actions and the usurpation of power by Tian Chang 田常 (fl. 481 BCE) in Lu. For the tradition that Zhou gong is responsible for the Nine Punishments (jiu xing 九刑), see Shangshu guwen shuzheng 尚書古文疏證 1.29b.

4 Considerable overlap, for example, exists between the portrait of the Duke of Zhou provided by the Remnant Zhou Documents (Yi Zhoushu 逸周書) and the implied portrait of the duke as compiler of the Zhouli, not only in relation to general content but also in specific vocabulary items, including “Eight Fundamentals of Governing” (ba zheng 八政) and “Six Protections” (liu wei 六衛).