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0521468280 - *Mysticism and Kingship in China: The Heart of Chinese Wisdom*

Julia Ching

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CHAPTER I

*Son of Heaven: shamanic kingship*INTRODUCTION¹

The earliest known religion is a belief in the divinity of kings . . . [In] the earliest records known, man appears to us worshipping gods and their earthly representatives, namely kings.

Perhaps there never were any gods without kings, or kings without gods. When we have discovered the origin of divine kingship we shall know. But at present we only know that when history begins there are kings, the representatives of gods.²

In his well-known book, Arthur M. Hocart speaks of kingship as a gift of the gods, which is often inherited through a special lineage. Thus, the new king's accession to the throne, on the death of his predecessor, signifies continuity and stability, through a kind of religious logic that is tantamount to a deification of the deceased king, and, by extension, of his heir. This is also symbolised by the passing on of the royal regalia, whether these be the crown, sceptre, sword, seal or anything else. And then, frequently, sacrificial offerings accompany or follow the accession, serving as the sources of royal power.³

The sacred character of kingship in China is little studied, when compared to the subject of kingship, or the emperor system, in Japan or Egypt, where the divine character of the royal person – whatever that means – has been highlighted. Especially during World War II, the Japanese emperor was known to be considered by his subjects as

¹ A modified version of this chapter, under the title, 'Son of Heaven: Sacral Kingship in Ancient China', was presented at the State and Ritual conference organised by Prof. Pierre-Étienne Will of the Collège de France, 27 June–1 July 1995.

² A. M. Hocart, *Kingship* (London: Watts, 1941), p. 1.

³ Consult also Robert S. Ellwood, *The Feast of Kingship: Accession Ceremonies in Ancient Japan*, a *Monumenta Nipponica* Monograph (Tokyo: Sophia University, 1973), pp. 34–5.

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‘divine’, even a ‘god’ (*kami*), and much has since been written on the subject. The Chinese king or emperor has usually been regarded as a secular ruler, with no claim to divinity. But were things that simple?

In posing this question, and in seeking to give some answers, I am focusing in this chapter on ancient China – mainly the Shang (c. 1766–c. 1122 BCE) and the Chou (c. 1122–256 BCE) – within the context of its own religious history. But I also believe, first, that the study of antiquity is enhanced by some attention to later events; and second, that understanding of the Chinese religious tradition should not be in isolation from other traditions. Indeed, much can be gained when we regard religious phenomena across cultural barriers.

The discovery of antiquity

The mythical dragon is a flying reptile with feet and claws and a mouth that breathes fire. It was believed to be life-giving and rain-giving, and at the same time capable of bringing destruction. It became eventually the symbol of imperial majesty and power. During the past hundred years, the chase after the origins of certain fossil fragments called ‘dragon bones’ led to the discovery both of China’s earliest writing system and of the human fossil called *Sinanthropus pekinensis*, the subsequently missing Peking Man. These were two separate incidents, the human fossil being unearthed some decades after the discovery of ancient writing now known as ‘oracle bone writing’.

These discoveries, revealing a Pleistocene past earlier than Neanderthal Man, attracted world attention from specialists and the public alike. However, for a long time, scholars were not certain whether they belonged to the ancestors of the Chinese race. The opinion has since been voiced that the jaw bones and teeth indicate genetic relations to the Mongolian peoples in general, and the Chinese in particular.⁴ Unfortunately, the remains of Peking Man disappeared mysteriously during China’s war with Japan (1937–45).

We now know much more about prehistoric China, even the period before the Hsia (approximately 2205–1766 BCE). For the late

⁴ Herrlee G. Creel, *The Birth of China* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1937), pp. 40–2.

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fifth and early fourth millennia BCE, we have evidence of potters' marks, resembling an earlier form of writing, of divination by scapulimancy (shoulder-bone divination), with the use of a variety of animal bones, and of clay phallus objects apparently involved in ancestral worship.⁵ In any case, scholars now have expanded the age of known Chinese history to about five thousand years. And one can no longer speak of ancient civilisation as having arisen only in the Yellow River Basin, since many very early finds have been unearthed far away from that area, such as in present-day Szechuan (Sichuan), in the country's west, or nearer the Yangtze basin, in the southeast.⁶ Most probably, Chinese civilisation had multiple origins and is the composite of many regional cultures, each with its special features.

I am speaking of China in two senses: as a civilisation, as I have been doing, and as a state under historic and dynastic names. In the latter sense, and for the period going back to four thousand years ago and later, I am speaking about the area in today's northern China, with a 'floating' boundary marked in the west by the Ordos desert (called 'moving sand' or *liu-sha*), in the north by some mountains north of the Yellow River, in the east by the sea, and in the south by the Yangtze River. This is probably a generous demarcation of Chou (1122–256 BCE) boundaries. Within this, the heartland was the Yellow River Basin east of the Ordos, including the present provinces of Shensi, Shansi and Honan, belonging to the earlier Shang China (c. 1766–1122 BCE).

To know the past is important, not only for its own sake, but also in order to appreciate the present better. For there is much of remote antiquity, especially its religion, that still remains, albeit in altered and fragmentary forms, in today's popular religion. And Chinese civilisation in general – Chinese religion in particular – is better understood when we see the *whole* picture, against five thousand years of historical background, including both the so-called 'great tradition' of the philosophers and the 'little traditions' of the ordinary people. This kind of holistic panorama would permit us to

⁵ Li Hsiao-ting, *Han-tzu te ch'i-yüan yü yen-pien lun-ts'ung* (On the origin and evolution of Chinese writing) (Taipei: Linking, 1986), pp. 44–73; Kwang-chih Chang, *Art, Myth and Ritual* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 112–14.

⁶ See Jao Tsung-i, 'Foreword: Speaking of "Sages": The Bronze Figures of San-hsing-tui', in Julia Ching and R. W. L. Guisso (eds), *Sages and Filial Sons* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1991), pp. xiv–xx.

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understand better as well the ethical humanism that developed so early – by putting it in the right perspective.

Unlike the ancient Greeks, the Chinese built in wood, and the structures, as well as their contents, have perished. They have also suffered catastrophic destructions of texts and other historical remains. Some knowledge of bronze inscriptions, studied especially since the eleventh century CE, has served as a beacon, especially for the period of the Chou. But for the period before the Chou, such as the Shang, extant texts only offer a royal genealogy with the barest mention of facts.

The Chinese people, as they are known today, are much less homogeneous than they appear. They descended from a multitude of ethnic groups, pushing into the heartland, from the west (as did the Chou), from the east (as did the Shang), and later, from the south (as attempted the Ch'u). The intermingling of these peoples made the ancient history and civilisation of the country we now know as China.⁷

Nevertheless, the ancient inhabitants of China's heartland thought of themselves – much as did the ancient Greeks – as the only civilised people on earth, inhabiting an *oikoumene*. And they were surrounded by barbaric tribes who lived on less hospitable terrains, called the Western *jung* / *rung*, the Northern *ti*^a / *di*, the Eastern *hu* (derived from the word Tungu), and the Southern *man*. Many of these peoples were presumably covetous of the heartland, and often pushing to get there. Interestingly, the terms indicating these barbarians usually have components that refer to animals. The word for *ti*^a has a 'dog' component, and the word for *man* has a 'reptile' component, thus indicating some kind of pejorative reference for the populations of the north and south, while the word for the Western *jung* has a 'spear' component, evoking war and battle.

We should also keep in mind the distinctions between nobility and commoner in ancient society. Here, we rely mainly on records left behind by the nobility, or at least on the orders of the kings and the high-born. There are exceptions, such as the folk songs in the Book of Songs, collected by the rulers' emissaries eager to find out the state of 'public opinion'. In the case of religion and ritual, what we know tends to be the religion and ritual of the kings and nobles, in which the commoners of antiquity had little part. With time, things

⁷ Consult Hsü Cho-yün, *Hsi-Chou shih* (A History of Western Chou) (Taipei: Linking, 1984).

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changed, especially on account of the disintegration of the feudal order by the third century BCE. But that is another story.

ORIGIN OF THE PARADIGM: SHAMANIC KINGSHIP

For some time, the ancient Chinese religion has been called a religion of the *wu*^a, or *wu-chu* / *wu-zhu*. But who were these persons? Is it possible to draw a meaningful differentiation between the religious specialists of ancient China, between diviners (*pu* / *bu*), invocators (*chu* / *zhu*) and *wu*^a, often called shamans? Was there an equivalent to the priestly class, as this was found in other ancient societies, especially in the Near East? Who were the men called *chu*, dedicated to the state cult in ancient China?⁸

The problem here is that, whereas we find a differentiation of sacrifices depending on the persons – gods, spirits and ancestors – to whom they were offered, we do not have a term which is exactly parallel to the English word ‘priest’. The *Chou-li* or Institutes of Chou actually begins, not with religious, but with civil officials engaged in central administration. Interestingly, one term used to designate the Chou chief minister (*chung-tsai* / *zhongzai*) relates his office to grave mounds. And this office is also charged with ultimate supervision over the work of offering sacrifice, as well as over the ruler’s meals. The division between the sacred and secular remains therefore blurred.

The wisdom of divination

The Chinese word for ‘knowing’ is *chih* / *zhi*. In its modern form, it has two components: a symbol representing an arrow on the left side, and another representing the mouth on the right. Possibly, a military etymology is suggested. Today, the usual explanation is that knowledge has a directionality like an arrow, and relies on the mouth for communication. The first-century-BCE Tung Chung-shu says, ‘[To know] is to predict accurately . . . The person who knows can see fortune and misfortune a long way off, and can anticipate benefit and harm.’⁹

⁸ Consult Chang, *Art, Myth and Ritual*, ch. 3.

⁹ *Ch’un-ch’iu fan-lu* (Luxuriant Gems of the Spring–Autumn Annals), Ssu-pu pei-yao (abbreviated as SPPY) ed., 8:10b. Consult David H. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), pp. 50–6.

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To know is also to be wise. We usually think of wisdom in terms of holistic knowledge – understanding the world and life in the world in a profound sense, and in terms of practice – knowing how to live in the world, how to be a good human being, relating, helping, and even teaching others to be the same. But for many people in the past, wisdom meant especially knowing the future. The *Book of Changes*, a divination manual that became also a Confucian classic, speaks of the sage as the person who has foreknowledge of fortune and misfortune. To ‘divine’ is actually to seek the wisdom of foreknowledge of events, a wisdom belonging appropriately to the gods.

The Neolithic inhabitants of northern China – starting from the late fourth millennium BCE – appear to have been the first people anywhere to use animal shoulder blades for divination, by heating them and interpreting the cracks which ensue. The practice reached its height by Shang times, with the widespread use of tortoise shells in addition to shoulder blades. Tortoises were considered sacred animals, because of their long lives. They were supposed to have special power in contacting others in the spiritual world, especially ancestor figures, even after their deaths.¹⁰ There is also evidence that divination manuals were followed, that are no longer extant. But did these also explain the logic of prognostication, or was that perhaps left to a higher form of reasoning?

In its earliest forms, the wisdom that divination brought might have come with the help of spirits or gods during the diviner’s moments of trance. In the oracle records, a word is often placed between the name of the ancestor and the word for king, a word which means ‘guest’ (*pin* / *bin*) in modern Chinese. There is speculation that it refers to the king ‘receiving as guest’ a specific ancestor, or the Lord-on-High himself, to a kind of *séance* in which the two met. How it happened remains unclear. It has been suggested that the ‘guest’ might have been a shamanic figure, the prototype for the later (but ancient) institution of the spirit’s impersonator or medium (*shih*^a / *shi*, literally, ‘corpse’), in whom the spirit descended, and to whom ritual offerings were made.¹¹ As the

¹⁰ Kwang-chih Chang, *The Archaeology of Ancient China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 4th ed., pp. 316, 364; and his *Shang Civilization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 32–3.

¹¹ Shima Kunio, *Inkyo bokuji kenkyū* (A study of the oracle letters rescued from the ruins of Yin’s capital) (Tokyo: Kyuko shoin, 1958), p. 201; Chang, *Art, Myth and Ritual*, pp. 54–5; Ikeda Suetoshi, *Chūgoku kodai shūkyōshi kenkyū* (Ancient Chinese religion) (Tokyo: Tokai University Press, 1981), pp. 623–44.

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ritual of divination became more and more systematised and rationalised, trance became less frequent and, in time, irrelevant.

The intimate relationship between divination and the ruling family may serve to explain why the Shang diviners were not heard of after the fall of the dynasty. Besides, the dynastic fall probably mitigated the enthusiasm for court divination, which was unable to prevent the catastrophe. After this, the Chou continued for a while ritual divination by shells and bones. But the practice itself remained important, and spread from the nobility to the commoners.¹²

The Book of Rites reports a somewhat amusing story of the results of a sixth-century-BCE divinatory ritual to decide the succession to a grand official in the state of Wei. The oracle had pronounced that the omen would come from the way the six sons bathed themselves and wore their jade pendants. Five of them hurried to bathe and put on the ornaments. The sixth refused, saying, 'Is there anyone who would bathe himself and wear jade on the occasion of a parent's death?' He was promptly singled out as heir, and the people of the state reportedly marvelled at the tortoise's wisdom.¹³ Today, we might as well admire the diviners' psychological insight and personal wisdom.

Besides knowledge of the oracles, divination also relies on the knowledge of stars, and the knowledge of the symbolic meaning of human dreams. Indeed, the officials in charge of dream interpretation *chan-jen / zhanren*, apparently performed their duties with the help of their knowledge of stars. But there was another class of astrologers with the duty of interpreting celestial phenomena, including the eclipses of the sun and the moon.¹⁴ These appeared to be usually experts at star-gazing, or proto-astronomers, and bureaucrats.

In divination, questions regarding eclipses of the sun and the moon were especially posed to the Lord-on-High, such natural events being then regarded as manifestations of heavenly displeasure with earthly conduct.¹⁵

¹² See Michael Loewe, *Chinese Ideas of Life and Death: Faith, Myth and Reason in the Han Period* (202 BCE–220 CE) (London: Allen & Unwin, 1982), pp. 92–103.

¹³ *Li-chi Cheng-chu* (Book of Rites with Cheng Hsüan's commentary) SPPY ed., 3:106–112; James Legge, *Li Ki*, vol. 27 of F. Max Müller (ed.), *Sacred Books of the East* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1885), p. 181.

¹⁴ *Chou-li Cheng-chu* (Institutes of Chou with Cheng Hsüan's commentary), SPPY ed., 25:1–3.

¹⁵ Werner Eichhorn, *Die Religionen Chinas*, vol. 21 of C. M. Schröder (ed.), *Die Religionen der Menschheit* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1973), pp. 9–31; Chang Tsung-tung, *Der Kult der Shang-Dynastie im Spiegel der Orakelschriften* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1970), 211–24; C. C. Shih, 'A Study of Ancestor Worship in Ancient China', in W. S. McCullough (ed.), *The Seed of Wisdom: Essays in Honour of T. J. Meek* (University of Toronto Press, 1964), pp. 186–8.

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Possibly, the institution of divination began with a greater role for trance or ecstasy, but evolved into a mechanical exercise handled by a bureaucracy.¹⁶ In divining with the help of the Book of Changes, today's diviners still have recourse to yarrow stalks, but acting somewhat as playing with a deck of cards. The fifty stalks are divided into two piles, in such a way that one would be of an even, the other uneven number. Then the diviner would set aside one pile, working only on the other, by removing four stalks at a time, until what remains offers a response: when the number left is even, a divided line is represented, when the number is odd, an undivided line is represented. This action is repeated three times, in order to arrive at each of the six lines, which means eighteen times.¹⁷

An idealised bureaucracy

We look into the Institutes of Chou for clues regarding the religious specialists of antiquity. Granted, of course, that the text presents an idealised bureaucracy more than a real one. We might yet presume that the ideal is based on some historical realities, supported as this is by other sources, and also that it gives expression to important cultural and social yearnings. In this case, the priority given by this text to religious functions is quite clear, in spite of the great historical divide we all know existed between the Shang times, when the rulers served the spirits and ghosts with utmost diligence, and the Chou times, when religious fervour had greatly diminished. Indeed, it appears that while the change in the cultural climate was real, resulting in the decline of divination and shamanism, the religious character of kingship remained indelible. It persisted during the centuries to come, bound up, as it was, with the question of a Mandate from a higher power and the legitimation this bestowed.

In ancient China, the official specifically charged with religious affairs was the Minister of Rites, the 'Great Senior Lineage Official', who was always under royal supervision. In the Institutes of Chou, the king's role is emphasised not only at the beginning of the book, but also just before the office of the Minister of Rites is introduced. Under royal supervision, this minister's office was in charge of 'the

¹⁶ *Chou-li Cheng-chu*, 24:11–12.

¹⁷ Consult *Chou-yi cheng-yi* (Correct meaning of the Book of Changes), SPPY ed., 7:17–18; see James Legge, *Yi King*, vol. 16 of F. Max Müller (ed.), *Sacred Books of the East* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1885), p. 365.

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rituals toward heavenly deities, human ghosts, and earthly spirits, on which the state was founded, and for the sake of assisting the king in his task of building and protecting the country'.¹⁸ Among other things, this man was in charge of sacrifices and sacrificial officials. He served the spirits and ghosts of the state with 'rituals of good fortune'. He offered burnt sacrifices with smoke, to the 'Supreme Heaven and Lord-on-High'; he offered bullocks on firewood to (the spirits of) the sun, moon and stars.¹⁹ In the absence of the ruler, he presided over the great sacrifices. In this capacity, he was associated with the king in the royal priestly duties. Presumably, in ancient times, this man was a senior royal relative.

According to the same Institutes of Chou, the Ministry of Rites was a huge bureaucracy. It included specialists of banquet seating, of ritual apparel, of music, as well as of diviners, dream interpreters, *chu* and *wu*^a. There was thus a place for each and all in the state bureaucracy.

The religion of antiquity

Divination always points to something else; it may be a helpful device, but it is not a substitute for more important rituals. It presupposes a belief in spirits and in their power to protect the living. Besides, as the abundant oracle records have shown, divination in antiquity was associated with sacrifice, and frequently served as a preparation for sacrifice. In other words, sacrifice was a much more important ritual.

In Western languages, the word 'priest', derived from the Greek *presbuteros*, refers primarily to an elder. It has come to denote a religious specialist devoted especially to cultic worship, and belonging to a profession as well as – in some cultures – a class. As such, the priest may occasionally appropriate the function of other specialists, whether medicine men, diviners, or magicians, but functions usually as someone with specialist knowledge of the deity and expert skills permitting the performance of cultic, especially sacrificial, duties. The priest's mediating powers depend upon his ability to influence the supernatural powers or the deity, whereas the magician's powers to manipulate nature rest upon *techniques* properly

¹⁸ *Chou-li Cheng-chu*, 18:1a.¹⁹ *Ibid*, 18:1b.

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applied, such as spells and incantations.²⁰ Moreover, the priest differs from the prophet, who is a messenger from on high, usually without cultic training or responsibilities.

Let us explore the meaning of *chu*, to decide whether the role is at all a functional equivalent of 'priest', and eventually, to distinguish between the *chu* and the *wu*^a, whom we also call a shaman.

According to the Han lexicon, *Shuo-wen chieh-tzu*, the word *chu* signifies a person who communicates through the mouth with the divine.²¹ The Institutes of Chou gives various categories of *chu*, each a specialist class. First of all, there was the Great *chu*, a position parallel to that of the Great Diviner. He was in charge of six kinds of ritual formulas in the service of the deities, ghosts and spirits;²² and six kinds of petitions.²³ He was also responsible for the composing of six kinds of ritual announcements;²⁴ the differentiation of six kinds of cultic titles and addresses;²⁵ nine kinds of sacrifices;²⁶ and of nine kinds of rubrics, including bows and prostrations. During the great suburban *chiao / jiao* sacrifices offered annually to the Lord-on-High, he was the chief supervisor and master of ceremonies, giving orders to junior ritualists, to the musicians, and to various subordinates.²⁷

Thus the *chu* as a class were devoted to cultic services, that is, to sacrifices and prayer rituals – including ritual announcements, petitions, invocations and incantations. And I would assert, with Henri Maspéro, that the *chu* made up a class of official clergy. Their chiefs came from the upper nobility. We know, from a bronze inscription, that the eldest son of the Duke of Chou, Po-ch'in by name, served as a *Ta-chu / Dazhu* ('Great Shaman').²⁸ And if, as it

²⁰ Léopold Sabourin, *Priesthood: A Comparative Study*, Studies in the History of Religions, Supplements to *Numen*, vol. 25 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973), 1–12.

²¹ Consult the edition with Tuan Yü-ts'ai's commentary in *Shuo-wen chieh-tzu Tuan-chu*, SPPY ed., vol. 5, pt 1, 18a–b.

²² In view of having good harvests, a good year, blessings and good fortune, avoidance of calamities and pestilences, and needed rains.

²³ Especially for use during calamities and pestilences.

²⁴ Including orders, announcements, eulogies of ancestors, oaths and various petitions and prayers to the deities and ancestral spirits.

²⁵ I.e., of gods, spirits, victims, grains and other sacrificial objects.

²⁶ I.e., whether offered to specific gods or without such specification, whether burnt sacrifices, or the sacrifice of the victim's internal organs, salted, spiced and cooked, whether including a meal of communion, and so on.

²⁷ For the above information, see *Chou-li Cheng-chu*, 25:3–8; French trans. in Édouard Biot, *Le Tcheou li ou rites de Tcheou* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1851), vol. 2, pp. 27–58.

²⁸ Consult Henri Maspéro, *China in Antiquity* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1978), p. 112; Shirakawa Shizuka, *Chung-kuo ku-tai wen-hua* (Ancient Chinese civilisation), trans. into Chinese by Fan Yüeh-chiao et al. (Taipei: Wen-ching, 1983), pp. 142–3, 145.