In this book, Julia Ching offers a magisterial survey of over four thousand years of Chinese civilisation through an examination of the relationship between kingship and mysticism. She investigates the sage-king myth and ideal, and analyses the various skills that have been required as qualifications of leadership. She argues that institutions of kingship were bound up with cultivation of trance states and communication with spirits. Over time, these associations were retained, though sidelined, as the sage-king myth became a model for the actual ruler, with a messianic appeal for the ruled. As a paradigm, it also became appropriated by private individuals who strove for wisdom without becoming kings. As the Confucian tradition interacted with the Taoist and the Buddhist, the religious character of spiritual and mystical cultivation became more pronounced. But the sage-king idea continued, promoting expectation of benevolent despotism rather than democratisation in Chinese civilisation.

Lucidly written, the book will be of interest to anyone seeking to understand how today's China continues to draw on its past.

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MYSTICISM AND KINGSHIP IN CHINA

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MYSTICISM AND KINGSHIP IN CHINA

The heart of Chinese wisdom

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PPRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011–4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

First published 1997

Typeset in Baskerville 11/12.5 pt. [CE]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloging in publication data

Ching, Julia.
Mysticism and kingship in China:the heart of Chinese wisdom / by Julia Ching.
p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in religious traditions; 11)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0 521 46828 0 hardback
1. China – Politics and government. 2. China – Kings and rulers.
3. Kings and rulers – Religious aspects. 4. Philosophy, Confucian.
I. Title. II. Series.
JQ1510.C493 1997
303.3'0951–dc21 96–51602 CIP

ISBN 0 521 46293 2 hardback
ISBN 0 521 46828 0 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2004

For Will Oxtoby,
without whom . .

Contents

Preface

Wisdom. *Sapientia*. To know with insight and to act accordingly. When Europeans have been at a loss to describe Chinese civilisation, when they are not certain that it has either philosophy or religion, they fall back on the word 'wisdom'. There is something about the concept 'wisdom' that makes it the representation of an integrated whole, an all-encompassing unity that cannot be divided, a seamless web, if we wish to use the metaphor. And there is also something about wisdom that gives it as well a practical dimension, making it more than theory.

China appears to accept this designation. Throughout its history, Chinese civilisation has shown utmost veneration for the wise man, the sage (*sheng-jen* / *shengren*). Indeed, the one Chinese best known to the world is the figure of Confucius, to his own people the sage *par excellence*. And the Chinese mind has been characterised more by intuition than by analysis. There has always been the desire to know the *whole* of things, such as the meaning of life (Confucianism) and of the universe (Taoism), and to act accordingly. Even when Buddhism entered China, the Chinese reacted to its manifold variety of doctrines by harmonising the contradictions. They thereby created what has been called Chinese Buddhism, with its strength lying in its harmony of opposites, and its concern for praxis.

I plan to probe the origins of the Chinese tradition, to examine the matrix of its wisdom, and to see how the various parts have grown and become merged into a complex whole. And we shall do this with the help of certain hypotheses. Among other things, I know that Chinese civilisation had multiple origins rather than a single root. However, it grew and became what it was, *the wisdom that was China*, by the many parts with diverse origins blending together, adding to the layers of cultural heritage. Thus, the whole that this

process produced was hardly a single tree, and more like a forest of trees, a huge bamboo grove, if we wish, but one where the roots are intertwined and the branches crossed. It has not necessarily become a maze, but it is a forest where one might easily lose one's way, if one enters there without charting a path after a careful study of the terrain.

By going back to the remote origins, I wish to find support for another hypothesis: that the many parts have become a whole because they have all remained faithful to a common inspiration – that the human being is open to the divine and the spiritual, attuned to the divine and the spiritual, and desirous of becoming one with the divine and the spiritual. I am here referring to the familiar adage that describes the harmony underlining Chinese thought and civilisation: that Heaven and humanity are one – *T'ien-jen ho-yi / Tianren heyi* (literally: Heaven and the human being join as one). It is an adage that has frequently been misunderstood by those who claim that the Chinese cannot distinguish between the two orders, the divine and the human. But it is an adage that I believe to have originated in that very mystic and ecstatic union between the human being and the possessing deity or spirit. This was the primeval experience, the experience of a shaman. It was never forgotten. It has been celebrated in songs, myths and rituals. It was formulated philosophically as an expression of the continuum between the human being as the microcosm of the universe as macrocosm. And this microcosm–macrocosm correspondence has been basic to most of philosophising in China. It was the expression of the profound experience of many mystics, whether Confucian, Taoist, or Buddhist. In later ages, with increasing Buddhist influence, it was also transformed into the philosophical adage – that All Things are One (*Wan-wu yi-t'i / wanwu yiti*) representing more pantheism than personal theism. And this articulation of human harmony with the cosmos is what I believe to lie at the very *heart of Chinese wisdom.*

In illo tempore ('Once long ago' or 'At that time'). Thus do the Gospels begin their chapters. Thus does Mircea Eliade describe the primeval, sacred time when humankind had its original experience of oneness with the deity. This was an experience recapitulated in myth and reenacted in ritual. Eliade speaks more of India, and of the Australian aborigines, than he does of Chinese civilisation. But

his insight, *mutatis mutandis*, is reflected in the Chinese experience as well, as I have just described.[1]

THE SAGE-KING PARADIGM

It is my thesis that the charisma associated with shamanic ecstasy created the aura for the office of kingship, giving it a sacred, even a priestly character. But this charisma was eventually institutionalised and routinised, by a line of men who no longer possessed the gifts for summoning the spirits and deities. To support their power, however, they frequently resorted to the *suggestion* of charisma and of divine favour. They fabricated tales of divine or semi-divine origins; they consulted with the deities and spirits through divination, sacrifices and other rituals. Such examples abounded in the rest of Chinese history – following upon the end of the heroic period of the sage-kings.

I mentioned sage-kings. It is actually my belief that such never existed. There were shamanic kings, and their heirs fabricated the tales of divine ancestry. There were better and worse kings, as well as mediocre kings. But there were never sage-kings, if we are to take literally the exalted meaning of sagehood. However, later times, possibly those of Confucius and Mencius, looked back to the earlier ages and gilded them in retrospect; they created a myth of the sage-kings. Yes, the humanists and rationalists, with their vague memory of shamanic rulers of the past, created this myth, for the sake of having real rulers emulate such mythical figures as Yao and Shun and Yü who were made into paragons of human virtues: as humane rulers, filial sons, and self-sacrificing toilers. And so we have the sage-king paradigm, and it was to leave an indelible impact on Chinese civilisation as a whole.

The German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel has spoken of China in terms of the 'one man': the ruler. This was the term by which the ruler referred to himself (*ku* / *gu* or *kua-jen* / *guaren*, literally, the solitary man). If he was lonely in his responsibility, he was also solitary in his awesome power. Head and centre of the state and society, the ruler was the one to whom ecstatics and ethical spokesmen, as well as classical scholars and Taoist and Buddhist

[1] Consult Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Pantheon, 1954).

clergy, turned for support and patronage. And he, in return, also depended on them for confirmation of his mandate and legitimacy, for advice in government and for implementation of his decisions. Besides, the Chinese ruler regarded himself as representing all human beings under Heaven, in his role as mediator between Heaven and Earth. He was advised, among other things, to practise yoga and meditation to clear his mind and heart, to be able to make wise decisions but also to achieve a certain mystical awareness of his own mediatorship by communing with the universe, and to offer important seasonal sacrifices associated with his office. And all under Heaven symbolically participated in his mediatorship when they in turn sought to commune with Heaven or the divine, by performing ritual sacrifices – but only to the gods or spirits appropriate to their own ranks, such as ancestral spirits – or even by meditating in private, and thus also seeking a higher consciousness of oneness with the universe.

And if I apply in part the insights of the phenomenologist of religion Mircea Eliade and of the sociologist of religion Max Weber to the case of China, I am not necessarily saying that Chinese civilisation is fundamentally similar to Western civilisation, or to Indian civilisation. As I shall show, and as our reference to Hegel suggests, I believe that Chinese wisdom is quite unique in itself, even when the inspiration behind it has universal affinities. Indeed, it is my assertion that Chinese wisdom represents a particular way of reflecting the insights gained from experience, that underscores harmony over conflict, and harmonisation over diversification.[2] And it is also my assertion that, strange as it may sound to those who have always focused on the apparently secular character of Chinese culture, the wisdom that was China was not only based on intuitive rationality, but also on mystical experience, even if, in the case of some early rulers, this was desired for the sake of governing better, and of keeping power, more than for the ecstasy of the experience itself.

I am therefore saying that in the Chinese experience, shamanic figures, the original, spontaneous, and charismatic religious individuals, were often, although not always, also the political leaders or kings, assisted by other, lesser, shamans. As such, they were also the

[2] For Max Weber, consult *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*, trans. and ed. by Hans H. Gerth (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1951).

chief diviners of their realms, assisted by a bureaucracy of diviners. And they were the chief priests as well, assisted by an official clergy. As their charisma became routinised, the political leaders remained priests, eventually leaving their other functions to religious specialists. And even if a few of them sometimes permitted deputies to perform important sacrifices, they remained themselves the chief priests, whose prerogative it was to offer state sacrifices.

The Confucian scholars were sometimes powerful enough to gain the ear of a ruler, to participate in the office of kingship by serving as mediators on behalf of the people. But they were not, strictly speaking, priests. Other priests eventually emerged in China, belonging to the Taoist religion. While they occasionally assisted in the state rituals, they did not become the official clergy. They were never powerful enough as a church to oppose the state, as the Catholic church did in medieval Europe. Interestingly, they showed themselves heirs to the ancient shamans as a group, by incorporating shamanic rituals into their tradition. And if Taoist priests and Buddhist monks occasionally performed various forms of divination, the status of divination as such tumbled very early, to become the private exercise of those private individuals who knew how to use the Book of Changes, or the livelihood of lowly sooth-sayers in popular religion.

I speak of the *paradigm* because the institution of kingship goes back, in principle, to the sages of a mythical past, and became, for later generations, an ideal of striving, embodying all the virtues of humane government, as well as of a humanity open to the beyond. My argument is that the sage-king paradigm was able to persist so long, not only because of its intrinsic attractions of desirable good government, but also because of its functional transformations during history. The humanist philosophers who created it also transformed it – by appropriating it to themselves. They had witnessed that successful, actual rulers were usually despots rather than sages, while some of their own, especially Confucius, deserved far more the title of sage and the office of kingship. And so, the philosophers' fancy created a posthumous honour for Confucius: as uncrowned king (*su-wang*), judging the affairs of the world by his moral pronouncements in the classical texts which he supposedly wrote or edited, especially the Spring–Autumn Annals.

On the other hand, the philosophers also came to the conclusion that sagehood was not the preserve of an elect few, say those of royal

blood, but was accessible to all. This was the doctrine of human perfectibility, articulated especially by Mencius. An implicit corollary was the natural equality of all human beings, and the potential for every man to become a king as well. This offered a solid basis for future political transformation, including the flowering of democracy, even if this never quite occurred. However, as we shall see, the sage-king ideal maintained such a strong hold over popular imagination that the country never expected more than a benevolent monarchy, or, perhaps we should say, a benevolent despotism.

Still, what was made explicit was a doctrine of rebellion, supported by the belief that Heaven gives the mandate to rule to the best person. And so we are to witness the rise and fall of many dynastic cycles, each of which claimed that heavenly mandate for itself, even if hardly any of the claimants would qualify as a Confucian sage. At the same time, a 'messianic' idea developed, within the bosoms of Confucianism, Taoism, and even Chinese Buddhism.

So the philosophers, especially the Confucians among them, emerged as the ethical and exemplary prophets of the tradition, ready from time to time to stand up to the kings when the latter abused their powers. They were not priests, except within the bosoms of their own families, where the *pater familias* celebrated the ancestral rituals. Occasionally, the officials among them also presided at minor, regional state cults and sacrifices, as the functions of a bureaucrat included also this cultic responsibility.

And the ancient texts that supported the sage-king paradigm were all enshrined in a canon of Confucian classics, becoming thereby also a repository of sagely authority, to be manipulated by the scribes and exegetes who interpreted them under the supervision of the state. This became its own saga, with its own twists and turns, and essentially made China the classical and literate civilisation it became. While philosophers also made use of exegesis for their own arguments, Chinese intellectual history fluctuated between periods dominated by philosophical thinking and periods when philology and exegesis flourished.

ONENESS OF HEAVEN AND HUMANITY

The sage-king paradigm was appropriated not only by Confucian humanists. It was similarly appropriated by Taoists and Chinese

Buddhists, even if each of them gave the paradigm a somewhat different meaning, and even when each fought the other as a rival for people's minds and hearts. As events unfolded, Taoism and Buddhism each inspired periodic revolts in the name of a messianic ruler, while they each gave their blessing and legitimation periodically to those actual rulers who favoured their respective religion, usually with no regard to particular merit. Quite separate from all this, and in private, Taoist and Buddhist mystics experienced the sagely bliss of mystical awareness, usually also articulated as that of oneness with the universe, or oneness with the Tao (*pinyin*: Dao). Such *personal* mysticism, benefitting the individuals only, was quite different from the more public shamanic ecstasy or the spirit–medium trances that certain Taoists also experienced, while in the service of others or of the religion itself.

In this way, I shall explain how the institutionalisation of the charisma associated with ecstasy could not terminate the ecstatic impulse in many individual persons. The shamanic character of Chinese wisdom persisted, even if shamans themselves did not retain the high social status granted them by antiquity. Indeed, this impulse survives in many practices of Chinese folk religion, if only in a fragmented fashion. And the union between the human and the so-called divine remained the goal of the mystics, both the theists, including polytheists – such as in religious Taoism – and the so-called pantheists, such as in philosophical Taoism, Ch'an Buddhism, and neo-Confucianism. Besides, I shall maintain that this union, as represented in the adage the Oneness of Heaven and humanity, or the Oneness of All Things, represented, in an analogical sense, both a philosophical belief and a mystical ideal. The two orders of the divine – or the natural – and the human, while always intertwined, were usually distinguished one from the other.

It is also part of my argument that the private appropriation of the sage-king paradigm reached a climax with the neo-Confucian movement, where the heirs to the ancient philosophers, influenced also by mystical strands coming from Buddhism and Taoism, seriously sought mystical experience for its own sake as well as for moral self-transformation. I am speaking of men like the twelfth-century Chu Hsi, and especially the late fifteenth-century Wang Yang-ming, and the late sixteenth-century Kao P'an-lung. Nevertheless, while sagehood and kingship went separate ways to a certain extent, the ideal of a sage-king refused to go away entirely. This is an important

reason why China never abandoned a monarchical form of government until modern times, and why such a form often remains in force even behind the banner of republicanism.

I am not seeking to treat comprehensively and exhaustively the wisdom that was China. That would have included many other areas, especially literature and the arts. I am concentrating on the religious, philosophical, textual, and even political traditions, and I am discussing them selectively, with my focus on what wisdom means. Even in this case, I cannot cover everything. I acknowledge that I do not formally cover popular religion, that hybrid creature descended from archaic tradition, bearing influences from all the other traditions. I would mention also that while the Confucian classics teach a philosophy of life better known for its more rationalist emphases, Chinese rationalism is quite different from Greek or European rationalism. It remains inseparable from intuition, which is both the warp and the woof of that fabric we call Chinese wisdom.

Instead of regarding China's wisdom only as religion, or philosophy, or as a rich textual tradition, I am accepting it as all three and more. I shall follow an approach that involves methodologies borrowed from the history of religion and of philosophy, of philology and of hermeneutics, without limiting myself to only one of these. If anything, the closest is that of intellectual history, an approach that respects religion, accepts intuition, and regards practice as a test for the viability of tradition.

The sage-king paradigm arose out of the experience of ancient shamanic rulers, even if, in some ways, the gradual eclipse of ecstasy was accompanied by the growth of ethics and exegesis. An oral, shamanic tradition became supplanted in influence by a written and more rationalistic one. But the shamans never disappeared. Indeed, our thesis is that shamanism was absorbed into religious Taoism, where it received a textual, if secret, transmission. The great ethical spokesmen who emerged did so without always formally repudiating the ecstatics of the past. Instead, they exalted the shamanic kings as sages and moral exemplars. And their followers, the exegetes and those who studied and popularised their work, contributed to the moulding of a whole cultural tradition that may be represented as Chinese wisdom.

I seek to approach an integrated wisdom tradition, to look at a *whole* and to discover its heart. For Chinese thought has manifested a

certain rhythm: a movement of activity, its *yang* side, in Confucian moral and social philosophy, usually dominant during the periods of political unity and social order; and a moment of passivity, its contemplative, *yin* side, in Taoist 'naturalism' and quietism, and Buddhist mysticism and religion. We shall contemplate it from these angles, while following the civilisation from its cradle, through its gradual growth and evolution. This took place not without conflicts and contradictions, to its present status in a modern world, where we believe it is undergoing dissolution, and perhaps, transformation.

The chapter divisions are thematic, and broadly chronological. Chapters 1 and 2 deal with the matrix of the wisdom in antiquity ('Whence'), namely, from the beginnings to roughly the third century BCE or a bit later, covering approximately the first three millennia. Chapter 3 continues from roughly the sixth century BCE on, with its focus on the classical period of the philosophers, considered the defining period of Chinese wisdom and 'Why' it became what it did – with the emergence of Confucius and his moral philosophy. Chapter Four covers the development of the sages' message in the next two millennia and more. Attention is given also to the place of religion in early philosophical thinking. Chapter 5 treats the legacy of the classical texts, which enshrined the wisdom attributed to the ancient sages, leaving it to later interpretations as well as manipulations.

With all their influence on the populace in general as well as the intellectuals and even occasionally on the political rulers, Taoism and Buddhism were 'other-worldly', each in its own way, often a refuge for the non-conformists. For this reason, the two traditions remained marginal in China. Isabelle Robinet even says: 'In a certain sense, it is the very vocation of Taoism to be marginal.'[3] Chapters 6 and 7 give more attention to Taoism and Buddhism, with special reference to their understanding and manipulation of the sage ideal. They also focus on the place of the shaman in Taoist philosophical texts, the shamanic character of both the Taoist and the early Chinese Buddhist religion, and Taoist and Buddhist messianism: topics that have not always received adequate scholarly attention. This treatment helps to give a comparative perspective to these two traditions, which together offer 'the other side' of Chinese

[3] Isabelle Robinet, *Taoist Meditation: The Mao-shan Tradition of Great Purity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 2.

culture: the more reclusive and mystical as contrasted with the more public and rational system of Confucianism.

In saying this, I do not forget that my own thesis focuses on mysticism as being at the heart of Chinese wisdom, which, I maintain, remains a dynamic and action-related tradition. And then, on account of the emphasis on leadership in a context that is both sacred and secular, I can hardly bypass the question of authority, both religious and political. For this reason, the discussions of shamanic kingship, royal priesthood, ethical prophecy, and classical and scriptural exegesis usually presuppose the dimension of authority.

I concentrate much more on the formation of the wisdom tradition, rather than on those later developments leading to its decline and its near-dissolution in our own days. And then, in the final chapter, I deal more directly with political power and authority, which has been included briefly in the beginning chapters of the book. I examine this theme both in ancient Legalist thought and in the twentieth-century phenomenon of Mao Zedong's role. Limits prescribed for the size of this book prevent me from doing more, and I try to define my scope carefully. In my conclusion, I deal briefly with the limitations of Chinese wisdom and the problems that have confronted the Chinese tradition as it responds to the challenges of modernity, while seeking to offer a brief prognostication about the future direction – 'Whither'. In this way, I look at Chinese wisdom from various vantage-points, rather than breaking it up into different parts. And whenever I do discuss any parts, I shall hasten to put them together again, into a whole.

In carrying out this task, I attempt to maintain a comparative perspective, especially *vis-à-vis* other religious traditions. However, on account of space considerations, the comparisons are only occasional, to serve as a context, while permitting an in-depth look into China's own wisdom tradition. And while I speak principally of China, I do not neglect the many parallels and similarities – as well as important differences – between the Chinese wisdom tradition and those of her near neighbours like Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. My basic assumption is that, despite all the cultural and social differences between these countries and China, the civilisation of East Asia as a whole enjoys a unity that comes from shared cultural origins as well as historical exchanges. The sage-king paradigm is actually a shared legacy, but full discussion of this sharing is not possible.

In writing this book, I am helped by the work of many others, whether those who have gone before me, or others who are my contemporaries, writing in English, French and German, as well as in Asian languages. In the latter case, I refer especially to the original Chinese sources, as well as the secondary literature, in both Chinese and Japanese.

I also owe an intellectual debt to many persons. I have indicated several in my specific notes. Let me mention here as well the series of collaborative conferences between North America and Europe during the past decade, with such themes as scriptures and fundamentalism, and civil society, of which the most recent one, entitled 'State and Ritual in East Asia', took place in Paris, 28 June–1 July 1995. I learnt a lot from many of the participants. I should also acknowledge my local colleagues at Toronto, including James C. H. Hsü and R. W. L. Guisso; the former has helped to explain technical terms, and the latter has indicated useful bibliography. I should also thank my spouse, Willard G. Oxtoby, for his unfailing support, our former colleague John Berthrong, now at Boston, and Alex Wright and Ruth Parr, editors for Cambridge University Press, for their collaboration. Their insistence on the limitations of space actually obliged me to think things through more carefully, and perhaps, articulate ideas and evidence with less cumbersome verbiage. And I should thank Kwok-yiu Wong, for his help in preparing the glossary, the Chinese and Japanese portion of the bibliography, and the index.

In referring to translations from original sources, I have first consulted the original, and then usually adapted from one of the available translations, working with the one that appears the most suitable for the passage concerned. In citing bibliography, I follow the conventions of Sinology when giving references in Chinese, while usually making sure that the meaning of the titles given is understood. In the case of classical texts, and only of these, like the Book of Songs or the Book of Changes, the titles are not italicised. In the case of citations from the Analects, the chapter and verse sequence followed is that from D. C. Lau's translation, which varies sometimes from James Legge's. Quotations from *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* and from *Han Fei Tzu*, both translated by Burton Watson, copyright © 1968 by Columbia University Press, are reprinted with permission of the publisher. A glossary is supplied of special terms, with Chinese characters, and a select bibliography is provided.

Where transliterations from the Chinese are concerned, I usually follow the Wade-Giles system. In the case of special terms, I also give the *pinyin* along with the Wade-Giles whenever these terms first appear and there is a difference between the two. The authors and titles of publications that appeared in mainland China since 1949 are usually given in *pinyin*, unless the authors are long deceased. For the bibliography in Chinese, especially the primary sources, I follow the conventions of Sinology.

I hope that the readers will better understand this integrated tradition called Chinese 'wisdom', in which so many parts interrelate to form a whole, with the centre remaining that of the ideal of harmony between humankind and Heaven or nature, with its richness and contradictions, especially as manifest in the sage-king ideal. A critical note will not be missing, when we discuss certain abuses, whether these be ritual human sacrifice in the distant and not so distant past, or tyranny and dictatorship throughout history and even in our own days.

This book is being offered as a stimulus to further thinking, rather than as an effort to be scrupulously comprehensive about all that makes up Chinese wisdom. Attempts have been made to include what is possible, more to support my own hypotheses than to take in everything. When one looks at the whole from various perspectives, one cannot help missing some of its facets.