
Ritual and Rationality: Religious Roots of the Bureaucratic State in Ancient China*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the religious origins and evolution of the instruments of political legitimation in ancient China. In the first section I explore the relationship between primitive spiritualism and the emergence of the institution of kingship in the pre-Warring States era (ca. 1100–500 B.C.). Linking the ancient Chinese cult of ancestor worship to two important stratificational devices that emerged during this epoch – patrilineal kinship and ancestral genealogy – I show how archaic religious beliefs and practices played a key role in legitimizing China's pre-imperial political order. In the second section I examine the routinization of charismatic political power that took place in the Warring States and early imperial eras (ca. 550 B.C.–200 A.D.). It was during this period that a number of primordial Chinese religious beliefs and practices, e.g., the rituals associated with the 'Mandate of Heaven' and the diviner's art of reading auspicious signs, were stripped of their archaic spiritual content to become secular instruments of political legitimation in the hands of self-serving court cosmologists and Confucian literati. In these ancient, interconnected processes of charismatic routinization, ritual secularization, and dynastic legitimation I find important clues to the essence, emergence, and evolution of China's uniquely enduring bureaucratic political order.

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Every single primitive society without exception postulates the existence of spirit beings and supernatural powers... [which] respond with favor or disfavor to specific acts of man.

E. Adamson Hoebel (1954)

Rituals obviate disorder as dikes prevent inundation.

Book of Rites (tr. Legge 1885)

INTRODUCTION

Ever since urban centers first emerged as loci of political power in the late Neolithic era, kings have been distinguished from other types of powerholders by virtue of their putative possession of a divine mandate, or ‘charisma’, setting them apart from all others (Dawson 1958: 109). In primitive states, the charismatic potency of kings was most commonly validated with reference to their presumed ability to receive communication from heavenly spirits (Beattie 1964: 227). Since the power to communicate with spirits was the power to direct heavenly attention to human affairs – and thereby to change (or at least to foresee) the course of the latter – the spiritual potency of kings comprised the key ingredient in the primordial process of political legitimation; indeed, such potency constituted the earliest, most pervasive source of the ‘consent of the governed’ (Cohen and Service 1978: 31).

This article examines the religious origins and evolution of the instruments of political legitimation in ancient China. In the first section we explore the relationship between primitive spiritualism and the emergence of the institution of kingship in the pre-Warring States era (ca. 1100–500 B.C.). Linking the ancient Chinese cult of ancestor worship to two important stratificational devices that emerged during this epoch – patrilineal kinship and ancestral genealogy – we show in this section how archaic religious beliefs and practices played a key role in legitimizing China’s pre-imperial political order.

In the second section we examine the routinization of charismatic political power that took place in the Warring States and early imperial eras (ca. 550 BC–200 AD). It was during this period that a number of primordial Chinese religious beliefs and practices, *e.g.*, the

rituals associated with Tian Ming – the ‘Mandate of Heaven’ – and the diviners art of reading auspicious signs, were stripped of their archaic spiritual content to become secular instruments of political legitimation in the hands of self-serving court cosmologists and Confucian literati. In these interrelated processes of charismatic routinization, ritual secularization, and dynastic legitimation we shall find clear evidence concerning the origins and early development of China's traditional bureaucratic political order.

OF KINGS, SPIRITS, AND THE PRIMITIVE MUTUALITY OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

As noted at the outset, the idea that unseen heavenly forces operate to influence events on earth is virtually universal in primitive and pre-modern societies. In early China, gods and spirits were believed to be capable of exerting great influence over the course of human and natural events¹. The deities did not speak directly to man, but rather revealed themselves indirectly through what Max Weber called ‘the regimen on earth’. When the gods were contented, human welfare flourished; when they became restless or angry, catastrophe ensued. All bad events were believed to be symptomatic of disturbance in the ‘providential harmony of heaven and earth’ (Weber 1951: 28).

Heavenly intent was conveyed to earth via a hierarchy of benevolent spirits (shen) and evil demons (gui). These middle and lower-ranking spirit messengers, though powerful in their own right, were far from omnipotent; their impact could be mitigated by the magical powers of shamans and priests, whom Weber referred to as ‘charismatically qualified brokers’ – men who specialized in divining the intentions of the spirits and conducting the appropriate ceremonies and sacrifices needed to propitiate them.

Although tutelary spirits could be mollified or otherwise influenced by ritualized priestly mediation, they could also on occasion prove quite obstinate, unresponsive, or insufficiently powerful to assist their earthly supplicants. Weber referred to this situation of problematic power relations between men and spirits as ‘primitive mutuality’:

With these spirits one was on a footing of primitive mutuality: so and so many ritual acts brought so and so many benefits. If a tutelary spirit proved insufficiently strong to protect a man, in spite of all sacrifices and virtues, he had to be substituted, for only the spirit who proved truly powerful was worthy of worship. Actually, such shifts occurred frequently. Moreover, the emperor granted recognition to proven deities as objects of worship; he bestowed title and rank upon them and occasionally demoted them again. Only proven charisma legitimated a spirit... (pp. 29–30).

As the principal earthly diviner of heavenly intent, the king himself was the supreme high priest of ancient China. He was Son of Heaven, Tianzi, ordained by the God on High, Shang Di; and it was his duty to offer appropriate, timely sacrifices to the various deities as well as to accurately read and react to heavenly portents so as to ensure the well-being of his people.

Though he was ex officio Son of Heaven, the king nevertheless had to constantly demonstrate, affirm, and renew his own charisma. And if, in spite of his conscientious attention to duty, the rivers overflowed their dikes or the rains failed to fall, this was prima facie evidence that the emperor lacked the charismatic qualities demanded by Heaven. In such cases the emperor was expected to perform public penitence for his failings.

In extreme cases, if the king displayed callous disregard for the welfare either of his tutelary spirits (*e.g.*, through failure to perform appropriate sacrifices) or of his earthly subjects (*e.g.*, through excessive taxation or persistent neglect of irrigation works), resulting in widespread natural calamity, public emiseration or discontent, the Son of Heaven might even forfeit his claim to the charismatic mantle of Tian Ming, the Mandate of Heaven. Such forfeiture carried with it the implied 'legitimate' right to rebel against – and overthrow – a reigning monarch².

In this manner a delicately balanced reciprocity was established between heavenly spirits above and earthly rulers below. Each had certain specified powers and perquisites; and each was required to acknowledge and respect the jurisdictional hegemony of the other.

RELIGION AND POLITICS IN CHINESE SOCIETY

Post-Weberian analysts have generally affirmed the centrality of primitive mutuality in ancient China's religious customs and practices, and have established as well a strong claim for the political symbolism and significance of such practices. Emily Ahern, for example, has argued that many sacrificial and divinatory rites encountered in contemporary Chinese society can be analyzed as if they were forms of political activity – i.e., as attempts by people to persuade, negotiate with, or otherwise influence non-human beings (gods or ancestral spirits) in precisely the same ways they might seek to influence governmental officials through political action (Ahern 1981: 4–5). Noting that many ritualized forms of human/spirit interaction appear to be modelled on political processes, Ahern asserts that Chinese religion ‘mirror[s] the system of state control’. In both cases, the procedures governing access to – and decision-making by – higher authorities are essentially ‘bureaucratic’ in nature, i.e., formalized, routinized, and hierarchically organized (p. 97).

Seeking an explanation for this parallelism, Ahern hypothesizes that sacred ritual, by directly emulating bureaucratic procedure, served a vital ‘political socialization’ function for the great mass of ordinary people in Chinese society, helping to familiarize them with the manners and mores of officialdom and training them in the appropriate techniques of bureaucratic supplication. Through learning and practicing correct ritual behavior in a religious context, she conjectures, people could ultimately hope to increase their chances of successfully appealing for protection and support from ‘higher authorities’ in the political realm (pp. 102–103). In this respect, she concludes, ‘dealing with the gods could be seen as a rehearsal, or playing out, of skills important in dealing with the earthly power system’ (p. 97).

Ahern's postulation of a mutually-supportive, syntonic relationship between religious ritual and bureaucratic procedure echoes in certain key respects a theme raised some years earlier by Joseph Needham, whose multi-volume opus, *Science and Civilization in China*, contains an intriguing speculation about the ostensible bureaucratization of certain traditional Chinese divination practices.

Though generally an unabashed admirer of pre-modern Chinese thought, Needham scornfully dismissed the primitive mysticism and superstition embodied in the ancient Chinese fortune-telling classic, the Yi Jing (Book of Changes). Treating this immensely influential work as an anomalous departure from the proto-scientific naturalism of classical Chinese thought, Needham was led to ponder the longevity and popularity of the Yi Jing. Why, he asked, didn't early Confucian scholars simply 'tie a millstone round the neck of the Yi Jing and cast it into the sea?' (Ronan and Needham 1978: 184)³. The answer, he believed, lay in the curious structural symmetry between Chinese fortune-telling and Chinese politics; and he speculated – anticipating Ahern – that the authority of the Yi Jing may have endured precisely because its symbolic system of ritualized divinations closely mirrored the administrative organization of neo-Confucian bureaucracy (p. 187).

Needham's basic proposition was that like the Chinese bureaucracy itself, the Yi Jing constituted a structural framework for organizing and classifying diverse phenomena, a 'giant filing system' that enabled all ideas and concepts to be neatly stylised and 'fitted in to the [bureaucratic] system without difficulty' (p. 187). Indeed, argued Needham, the Yi Jing could best be described

... as an organization for routing ideas through the right channels to the right departments, almost a heavenly counterpart of bureaucracy on earth, the reflection in the natural world of the unique social order of the human civilization that produced it... Not only the tremendous filing system of the Yi Jing, but also the 'symbolic correlations', where everything had its position connected by 'the proper channels' to everything else, can probably best be described as an administrative approach to nature (p. 188).

Like Ahern, Needham thus viewed traditional Chinese divinatory rites as euhemerized projections of human behavioral characteristics onto supernatural spirits. In this case, however, it was not individual human traits that were euhemerized and transposed into their 'heavenly counterparts', but rather the entire basic repertoire of administrative arrangements that characterized the Chinese bureaucratic order⁴.

PROTO-BUREAUCRATIC RITUALS AND PRIMITIVE RATIONALITY

Primitive cultures display a near-universal tendency to humanize their deities (Weber 1951; Beattie 1964). John Beattie attributes this anthropomorphic inclination to the absence, in primitive society, of an adequate body of empirical knowledge, which might enable people to cope with the hazards of everyday life by means of practical, scientifically verifiable techniques. Lacking such techniques and, more importantly, lacking a suitable epistemology for discovering such techniques, ancient man had little recourse but to humanize his spiritual universe in an attempt to understand – and thereby exert some measure of control over – the forces of nature. By endowing the source of a natural event (*e.g.*, an outbreak of smallpox) with quasi-human attributes (*e.g.*, an act of vengeance by an angry god), primitive peoples could hope to enter into some kind of social relationship with it. Then, through invocation and sacrifice, they could attempt to avert or ameliorate it (Beattie 1964: 227).

In the case of traditional China, the spiritual realm was not merely humanized, but was politically stratified as well. This is clearly revealed in C.K. Yang's description of the parallel bureaucratic hierarchies of Heaven and Earth:

The monarch in Heaven was the Jade Emperor... His imperial court consisted of gods of the stars as well as high deities of Buddhist and Taoist creation. Subordinate administrators under the heavenly court were the spirits immanent in the natural elements of the earth, such as mountains and rivers... The organization of these supernatural authorities was patterned after the traditional Chinese government, with the emperor wielding the highest power, with the six boards of central administration, with subdivisions into administrative districts... down to the county and village, and with the multitude of common souls as subject people (1967: 144, 150).

To this striking structural isomorphism between the administrative realms of Heaven and Earth, Frances L. K. Hsu (1981: 240–244) has added an important psychological dimension. The Chinese, he notes, have traditionally relied heavily upon the emotional security and so-

cial supports provided by familial and clan relationships to shield them against caprice and uncertainty in their dealings with remote (and hence impersonal) imperial authority. The stark contrast between familial intimacy and trust on the one hand, and bureaucratic aloofness and distrust on the other, and the moral dualism engendered thereby, is clearly reflected, he argues, in the bifurcation of the Chinese spirit world. On the one side are aligned the proximate spirits of one's own deceased ancestors – normally protective and benevolent, but occupying relatively low-ranking positions within the overall spiritual hierarchy; on the other side are arrayed the more distant and impersonal (and inherently more capricious) major deities, who collectively constitute the spiritual 'elite', i.e., the heavenly counterpart of the imperial court.

Just as Chinese traditionally employed familial networks as buffers against the capricious authority of the emperor and his bureaucratic underlings, so too they sought to enlist the aid of friendly ancestral spirits to shield them from – or, alternatively, to intercede on their behalf with – the more remote and powerful major gods. Psychologically, then, the relationship of the people to their ancestral spirits closely resembled the contractual bond of interdependency linking clients to their patrons (Hsu 1981: 250–251).

OF SPIRITS, CONTRACTS, AND BUREAUCRATS

Based on analysis of oracular inscriptions carved on animal scapulae and turtle shells in the late Shang period (ca. 1000 B.C.), David Keightley has hypothesized that the functional logic of the earliest documented Chinese divinatory rituals was inherently proto-contractual and proto-bureaucratic:

Shang religious practice rested upon the do ut des ('I give in order that thou shouldst give') belief that correct ritual procedure... would result in favors conferred by [Shang Di, who] stood at the apex of the spiritual hierarchy... So far as we can tell, the relationships between the members of the [spiritual] hierarchy were, in Weber's terms, 'ordered systematically'; that is, the right sacrifices ensured the right responses, and the right

responses by the spirits led, in turn, to appropriate thank-offerings by the kings...

The logic of the sacrificial offerings and divinations was itself frequently bureaucratic: the nature of the offering was inscribed on the oracular bone or shell...; the success of the offering depended upon the correct fulfillment of 'defined duties', that is, the right number of cattle, [sacrificed] to the right ancestor, on the right day... In the oracle bones, experience was compartmentalized into a series of discrete and tentative statements, testing and examining pro and con the approval of the spirits. This readiness to divide experience into manageable units... suggests the workings of a bureaucratic mentality (Keightley 1978: 214–216)⁵.

Keightley's reading of the Shang oracular record strongly supports the conclusion that ancient Chinese cult practices constituted, in effect, pre-scientific 'technologies', employed in a calculative – albeit primitive – fashion to exert some modicum of control, through spirit propitiation, over those powerful forces of nature whose underlying operational principles and 'laws' simply could not be fathomed by primitive man⁶.

POLITICAL RITUALS AND RATIONALITY

If archaic Chinese ritual practices were in fact examples of primitive instrumentalism in action, then it can be argued, *e.g.*, that the ancient doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven, Tian Ming, heavily discounted by modern observers as a convenient political myth employed by dynastic propagandists to legitimize the absolute power of emperors (or alternately to rationalize popular revolts against despotic authority), may usefully be viewed as a rational (albeit pre-scientific) technique for gauging the will of deceased spirits⁷. That the Mandate of Heaven eventually became an instrument of political rationalization and self-justification in the hands of ambitious feudal lords and Confucian literati beginning in the late Zhou period is not to be doubted. But, as numerous observers have pointed out, the archaic spiritual logic that underlay the original concept of Tian Ming was taken very seriously – indeed literally – by early Chinese kings and

court officials (Creel 1970: 82–84; Ho 1975: 330–331; Chang 1976: 191–195).

Because they embodied primitive beliefs about how to tap into and control the power of ancestral spirits, archaic Chinese religious rituals provide important clues to the origins and emergent properties of China's bureaucratic political order. Soothill (1951: 73), for example, notes that certain archaic Chinese cult practices – including sacrifice by earthly rulers to nature spirits and ancestors, ritual ploughing of land by kings, and ceremonial sacrifice at the time of the new moon – clearly served political as well as religious ends. Even such ostensibly secularized, scientific activities as calendrical calculation and meteorological observation had profound political implications. Thus the promulgation of China's earliest lunar calendar – reputedly fixed by Shang dynasty rulers – was aimed less at responding to the immediate economic needs of farmers (who in any event continued to regulate their activities primarily by the onset of floods, the coming of rains, and the helical rising of certain stars) than at satisfying the ritual requirements of charismatic, sacrally-oriented dynastic elites (DeWoskin 1983: 7; Wheatley 1971: 385–386)⁸.

By the 4th century B.C., the Chinese calendar had become a clear symbol of the charismatic potency of dynastic rulers. Because of this symbolic association, each new dynasty – embodying a unique pantheon of supernatural spirits and magical forces – was compelled to devise its own distinctive calendar (Eberhard 1957: 65). Thus, between 370 B.C. and 1851 A.D. no less than 102 calendars were officially promulgated in China – an average of one new calendar each 21 years – generally at the commencement of each new emperor's reign.

In addition to calendrical calculation, various other 'scientific' functions were infused with ritualized political significance in ancient China. By the time of the Former Han dynasty (208 BC–8 AD), astronomers were routinely employed by China's emperors to record and interpret anomalous natural phenomena (*e.g.*, eclipses and earthquakes), which were believed to be heavenly omens of impending dynastic misfortune. Because of the extreme political significance attached to interpretation of such portents under the doctrine of Tian Ming, astronomers and calendar-makers were among

the most important court officials in early imperial China (Ronan and Needham 1981: 79)⁹.

In sum, ancient Chinese ceremonial rituals clearly provided behavioral protocols for the administration of human affairs. These ritualized protocols, in turn, contributed indirectly to the charismatic legitimization (and eventual bureaucratization) of the dynastic Chinese state. In this respect it is almost certainly the case that ancient China's emergent political order – at least in the first instance – derived substantial inspiration and legitimization from the putative world of heavenly spirits¹⁰.

RITUALISM AND THE ROUTINIZATION OF CHARISMA

By Shang times, Chinese kings ruled under a conditional grant of divine authority. They were, in essence, hereditary theocrats, although the principles governing the line of royal succession were not yet firmly fixed¹¹. And from Shang times onward, a prime function of all Chinese kings was that of head priest, or ‘chief prognosticator’, whose task it was ‘to conciliate the forces of nature and so make the sacrifices effective’ (Fitzgerald 1961: 41). It was the king – and only the king – who ‘made fruitful harvest and victories possible by the sacrifices he offered, the rituals he performed, and the divinations he made’ (Keightley 1974: 3)¹².

Although, as we have seen, ancient ceremonial rituals provided rough behavioral archetypes for the proto-bureaucratization of the Chinese dynastic state, the archetypes were themselves subject to a gradual process of evolutionary adaptation and ‘routinization’. It was Max Weber who first convincingly argued that the heavenly-endowed charisma attributed to spirit invocators and other ritual specialists in primitive societies was inevitably subject to pressures of routinization over time. ‘In its pure form’, he wrote, ‘charismatic authority may be said to exist only in the process of originating. It cannot remain stable, but becomes either traditionalized or ratio-nalized, or a combination of both’ (1947: 364).

Routinization made it possible to retain the archaic ritual forms of primitive religious expression while emptying them of their original spiritual content. This is precisely what Weber meant when he wrote

that by the latter stages of the Chinese imperial era, official sacrifices and public cults had become largely matters of ‘social convention... emptied of all emotional elements’ (1951: 173)¹³.

Although the theory of routinized charisma suggests that over time archaic religious symbols tend to lose their sacred meanings, this does not necessarily imply that they become devoid of all social function or utility. As Weber noted, routinized charisma is a powerful force that can be used to legitimize not just the activities of priests and other ‘professional’ spiritual communicants, but also political institutions and elites, ideologies, and economic property relations as well¹⁴.

The Weberian notion of routinized charisma provides one means of reconciling the widely-noted contradiction between the religious roots of the dynastic Chinese state and the ostensibly secularized political culture of the imperial era. By the same token, it also helps to explain the evolution of the concept of Tian Ming from its archaic signification of heavenly-endowed, divinely-revocable charisma to a highly agnostic, instrumental doctrine of moral legitimacy employed by dynastic elites (or would-be elites) to justify the exercise (or overthrow) of imperial power¹⁵.

Inevitably, the moralization of Tian Ming was accompanied by its increasing secularization. In the hands of Confucian scholars from the Warring States period (403–221 B.C.) onward, the doctrine was stripped of much of its original spiritual premise of divine intervention in human affairs. Mencius (b. 372 B.C.), for example, argued that the will of heaven was manifested on earth only indirectly, through the will of the people; and he claimed that divine control over temporal affairs began and ended with heaven's act of investing the dynastic founder with political authority (Eberhard 1957: 36–38). Thereafter, he argued, it was up to the Son of Heaven himself to renew his charisma through wise and benevolent governance – a secular goal whose successful attainment Confucian scholars deemed themselves uniquely qualified to promote through their special ability to render sagacious advice to the emperor.

Although Mencius thus promoted the moral secularization of Tian Ming, the process was not completed until some 1,500 years later, when the Sung dynasty neo-Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi (b. 1130

AD) blatantly altered the ancient spiritual concept of jing tian ('reverence toward heaven'), which had constituted the original theistic core of Tian Ming. In place of heavenly piety, Zhu Xi substituted his own agnostic conception of reverence, rooted in such this-worldly values as propriety (li) and filialty (xiao). In this manner, the ultimate secularization of dynastic authority was achieved¹⁶.

By stripping Tian Ming of its archaic spiritual content, and by adapting it to suit the secular, 'humanistic' ends of imperial governance, neo-Confucian literati ultimately fashioned a powerful doctrine of political legitimacy – a doctrine whose primal religiosity became ever more highly routinized, formalized, and ritually sterilized with the passage of time. As a result, the emperor became increasingly dependent upon the faithful, periodic performance of elaborate and highly-stylized ritual sacrifices to maintain his carefully-cultivated political image as Son of Heaven¹⁷.

The increasingly pompous, sterilized pageantry of Tian Ming provides a cogent illustration of the type of 'secular ritualism' anticipated by the Weberian theory of routinized charisma. Yet Weber's theory cannot take us very far in our effort to resolve a fundamental conundrum noted earlier: for if increasingly formalized religious rituals served the increasingly secularized function of dynastic legitimization, then how are we to explain the continuing, extraordinary popularity of archaic ancestral cults and primitive divinatory rituals in modern China, among the masses of common people? No concept of routinized charisma, no theory of 'vestigial cultural formalism' can satisfactorily explain the survival and continued active ceremonial use of hundreds of thousands of ancestral temples, housing myriad family shrines, in China's countryside in the modern era¹⁸.

Nor does the theory of routinized charisma go very far toward explaining the particular political and administrative forms and structures exhibited by the Chinese state in its transition from patrimonial theocracy to imperial bureaucracy. In order to help account for the emergence of these forms we turn next to a discussion of the linkage between religion and socio-political stratification in pre-imperial China.

SPIRITUAL HIERARCHY

AND THE CULT OF ANCESTOR WORSHIP

The key transitory structure linking ancient Chinese theology with later Confucian social stratification was the ritualized cult of ancestor worship. As we have seen, the spirits of the deceased founders of the Shang dynasty were believed by their latter-day descendants to be able to intercede with powerful deities (up to and including Shang Di himself) to secure heavenly assistance, *inter alia*, in bringing bountiful harvests and in winning victory on the battlefield. Through ritual prayer and offerings of grain, millet-wine and animal flesh, successive generations of Shang kings sought both to propitiate the spirits of their departed royal ancestors and, through the ‘good offices’ of the latter, to divine the higher deities’ earthly intentions. In this way, the kings could demonstrate their ‘power’ over nature and the spirit world, and thereby legitimize their charismatic claim to the exercise of temporal authority (Keightley 1978: 213).

Not all ancestral spirits were considered equally powerful, benevolent, or amenable to propitiation, however. The longer a particular ancestor had been dead, and the closer his direct consanguinity with the earliest Shang rulers, the higher was the heavenly status he enjoyed – and the greater was the sacrificial ‘booty’ he commanded at ceremonial offerings. Somewhat paradoxically, however, the higher the ‘seniority’ – i.e., generational age and rank – of the deceased ancestor, the more impersonally and impartially his power would be exercised (Keightley 1978: 218; Hsu 1981: 240–244)¹⁹.

Although the frequency and material value of sacrifices offered by Shang kings to their deceased forebears varied in direct proportion to the generational age and bloodline of the ancestor, only rarely did living kings appeal directly to the God on High, Shang Di. Shang Di was not, as far as is known, regarded as a lineal ancestor of the Shang royal house²⁰. Due to this apparent lack of consanguinity, royal diviners seemingly preferred to lavish their ritual offerings upon lesser deities (primarily direct family forebears), who were presumed to be more benevolently disposed toward their own kinsmen (Keightley 1978: 218–219). It has even been suggested that since Shang Di very likely did not share Shang royal blood, he could not be

presumed to be favorably disposed, a priori, toward the perpetuation of Shang rule; that as a non-consanguine ‘outsider’, he might be effectively immune to sacrificial inducements or bribes offered by Shang kings; and that he might thus be capable of bringing harm to the dynasty (*e.g.*, by supporting an attack by enemy tribes) – something no self-respecting, properly-propitiated Shang royal ancestor would ever dream of doing²¹.

Regardless of the precise degree of ancestral favoritism and ‘reliability’ that could be expected by Shang kings in particular cases, the generational ranking of deceased ancestors represented a systematic schema for differentiating the presumed potency of various deities; at the same time, it provided a convenient index for assessing differential degrees of spiritual proximity and familiarity. But to keep such rankings in order, and to ensure that the appropriate sacrifices would be offered to the right ancestors, some formal system of classification – or genealogy – was needed.

Because the propitiation of royal ancestors was directly related to the well-being of their living descendants, and because the interests of generations living and dead were thus inextricably intertwined, China's ancient rulers urgently required a system for reliably identifying sanguinary relationships. Such a system was provided by the institution of surnames, which made their earliest known appearance in China during the late Neolithic era (Wu 1982: 21).

Surnames are instruments designed to separate and distinguish people from one another in accordance with their parentage. With the invention and recording of surnames, gradations in attributed spiritual affinity and potency could be more-or-less precisely correlated with differences in ancestral lineage. Genealogy thus became an important method for affixing the relative ritual statuses and sacrificial entitlements of the various branches (and individual members) of one's ancestral tree²².

Genealogy also served symbolic social/ceremonial functions. For example, calendrical calculations in the Shang period were geared to a ten-day ritual cycle which governed the conduct of ancestral sacrifices. Since proper regulation of these sacrifices was deemed vital to the well-being of the dynasty, each deceased Shang king was posthumously given a new name which correlated his paternal lineage

with a relevant phase in the ritual cycle of the dynastic calendar (Chang 1976: 79–89).

Finally, since the king's position in the socio-political order was in large measure a reflection of the ritual statuses and entitlements of his deceased ancestors, genealogical analysis of the dead carried with it profound political implications for the living²³. With dynastic authority a contingent function of ancestral lineage, political power in ancient China could fairly be said to have grown not out of the barrel of a gun (or the shaft of a spear), but out of the trunk of the family tree. And it is undoubtedly for this reason that the compilation and recording of dynastic genealogies became such a preoccupation – indeed a virtual obsession – with countless generations of early Chinese emperors, scholars, scribes, and court officials²⁴.

KINSHIP AND POLITICAL STRATIFICATION

In societies possessing well-developed ancestral cults – including ancient Greece and Rome, as well as China and much of contemporary Africa and Asia – genealogy provides a vital sense of continuity between past and present, between heaven and earth. In such societies, ancestral cults help to sustain the existing social order by defining the distinct lineage subdivisions into which the community is organized (Beattie 1964: 225–226).

Just as the departed ancestors of living Chinese kings were classified and ranked for purposes of ritual worship according to criteria of generational seniority and purity of bloodline, so too were living members of ruling lineages ranked according to age, generation, and degree of royal consanguinity (Ho 1975: 292–295; Chang 1980: 175–189). When relatives of the ancient kings (usually sons, uncles or male cousins) were sent out from the royal capital to settle new towns (to relieve population pressure, open up new agricultural land, or shore up military defenses), they were given distinctive surnames (xing) to signify their clan affiliation along with territorial names (shi) to designate their new settlements. At the same time, ritual paraphernalia and ceremonial regalia (including carriages, drums, bells, flags and colored silks) symbolizing their political status

within the ruling lineage were also bestowed upon them by the king (Chang 1983: 16).

In his new settlement, the royal benefice holder would erect an ancestral temple, in which his own lineage tablet would eventually be placed as founder of a branch clan. In time, new segments would hive off from this branch, forming secondary (and then tertiary) territorial sublineages which were ranked in a sequential hierarchy of descending political and ritual statuses. In this manner, the system of Shang patrimonial benefices – the earliest known form of institutionalized territorial governance in China – reflected gradations of kinship status within a segmented royal lineage, gradations which had themselves been patterned in the first instance after the patriarchy of ancestral spirits²⁵.

By the end of the second millennium BC there were well over one hundred agnatic clans in China, each with its own surname²⁶ as well as its own myth of ancestral origin, its own ancestral temple, shrine and tablet, its own symbolic paraphernalia of political legitimacy, and its own ethos of clan solidarity.

Through a combination of agricultural settlement (and concomitant lineage segmentation), military conquest and political alliance, the territorial scope of the central state expanded rapidly beginning in the late Shang. But this expansion proved a mixed blessing to dynastic rulers, whose patrimonial/ritual authority inevitably suffered geopolitical dilution as it was projected farther and farther outward from the royal capital toward an ever expanding, ever more distant dynastic frontier²⁷.

Increasingly, the king was unable personally to conduct all the manifold ceremonial rituals that, as Son of Heaven, he was called upon to perform in each of the central state's territorial domains; increasingly, the powers of territorial administration had to be delegated, *de facto*, to local benefice holders; increasingly, too, the ruler was forced to share the spoils of dynastic expansion with – and accommodate the diverse regional/special interests of – his benefice-holding relatives²⁸; and increasingly, new benefices were granted – on a hereditary basis – to heads of allied tribes or peripheral states who were unrelated by blood to the royal family, in exchange

for military services rendered or for pledges of future fealty (Ho 1975: 301–305).

The ironic end result of the process of dynastic expansion, then, was a serious weakening of ancient China's centralized patrimonial-theocratic state. Paradoxically, the vitality of the late Shang/early Zhou state was progressively sapped by its very political/military successes. In consequence, a new form of governance gradually emerged in China – feudalism – marked by the institution of hereditary enfeoffment (*feng jian*) and by a pronounced shift in the balance of dynastic power from the royal center to the enfeoffed periphery²⁹.

With the feudalization of the Chinese state during the Western Zhou were sown the seeds of eventual dynastic disintegration. For feudalism, by its very nature, has seldom proved successful as a means of imposing central governance over extensive territories for long periods of time (Creel 1970: 420)³⁰. And by the time of the Spring and Autumn period, centrifugal forces had increased to the point where newly-engendered political/territorial rivalries began to erupt into open conflict.

This disintegrative process reached its peak during the Warring States era, when contending feudal lords, often representing different sublineage branches of a common royal ancestry, vied openly for the protective mantle of *Tian Ming*³¹. In this struggle for imperial supremacy, the legitimizing principle of ancestral lineage became so significant as to provide full-time employment for a bevy of itinerant scholar-genealogists. Eberhard thus writes:

Whether or not the lords believed in the Mandate [of Heaven], rulers and pretenders [alike] always... tried to establish their legitimacy. Accordingly, if one of the feudal lords thought of putting forward a claim to the imperial throne, he felt compelled to demonstrate that his family was just as much of divine origin as the emperor's, and perhaps of more remote origin. In this matter travelling scholars rendered valuable service as manufacturers of genealogical trees. Each of the old noble families already had its family tree, as an indispensable requisite for the sacrifices to ancestors. But in some cases this tree began as a branch of that of the imperial family... [while in]

others the first ancestor [was] a local deity worshipped in the family's home country... Here the scholars stepped in, turning the local deities into human beings and 'emperors'. This suddenly gave the noble family concerned an imperial origin... (Eberhard 1977: 48)³².

Although the politicization of ancestral lineage was thus carried to extremes during the Warring States period, the phenomenon itself was by no means unique to China.

With so much attention being focused in ancient China on ancestral lineage as a key to the legitimization of power, it was but a short and logical step from a political ethos which stressed the seniority-based rank ordering of forebears to one which stressed the moral obligation of the young to venerate the old, sons to venerate fathers, wives to venerate husbands, and the living to venerate the dead – i.e., the ethos of filial piety (*xiao*). And it was this ethos, in turn, which provided the focal point, or moral pivot, around which Confucian ideologists subsequently sought to knit the three worlds of ancestral spirits, kinship groups, and the imperial bureaucracy into a single, integrated system of hierarchical social and political authority³³.

CONCLUSION

To summarize our argument, evidence drawn from the historical record of pre-unification China suggests the following general propositions:

FIRST, there was an intimate and powerful connection in ancient China between ritual leadership and the emergence of the institution of kingship;

SECOND, ancient theocrats initially derived charismatic authority from their imputed ability to invoke and propitiate high-ranking ancestral spirits;

THIRD, through an analogical process of celestial modelling, Chinese social and political institutions initially came to mirror the proto-rational spiritual logic of archaic religious practices;

FOURTH, the key structural ingredient in this modelling process was the generational ranking of ancestral spirits, which provided a paradigm for the proto-bureaucratic stratification of Chinese society;

FIFTH, the archaic concept of Tian Ming provided a basis for the heavenly legitimization of royal authority that was wholly consistent with the emergent principles of patrilineal kinship and ancestral genealogy;

SIXTH, through a combination of charismatic routinization and Confucian cooptation, Tian Ming eventually became politically moralized and ritually formalized;

SEVENTH, the Confucian moralization of power, rooted in the twin secular imperatives of propriety and filial piety, extended the paradigmatic legitimizing principle of generational-based hierarchy downward from heaven through the imperial bureaucracy to the individual clan and family; and

EIGHTH, the impact of ancient religion upon the formation and articulation of the dynastic Chinese state has been generally underestimated because primordial Chinese religious sentiments and rituals were, from the late pre-unification period onward, routinely cloaked in the profane garb of this-worldly Confucian propriety and piety.

In almost none of these respects – save perhaps for the last two – was China particularly unique in the ancient world. On the contrary, we have sought to demonstrate how very similar pre-unification China was to other patrimonial theocracies. Taken individually and in isolation, moreover, few of the propositions advanced above are wholly new or original. Viewed configuratively and in developmental perspective, however, they provide a series of valuable interlocking clues to the emergence and evolution of the pre-imperial Chinese state, and thus to the origins of China's unique – and uniquely enduring – bureaucratic political order.

NOTES

* This article is dedicated to the memory of my friend and mentor, Arthur S. Iberall (1918–2002), whose extraordinary insight into the origins and dynamics of complex systems, both physical and social, profoundly shaped my understanding of 'the way things work'.

¹ The phenomenon of charisma (lit: 'gift of grace') was first systematically explored by Max Weber, who used the term to connote '...a certain quality of personality by virtue of which an individual is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least ... exceptional powers or quali-

ties'. Insofar as such powers were believed to be divinely inspired, they were deemed 'inaccessible to the ordinary person' (Weber 1947: 358–359).

² Conveniently for historiographers, heavenly sanction for such rebellion could only be demonstrated with any certainty by retrodiction, i.e., after the fact of a successful dynastic change.

³ For a cogent analysis of Needham's views on traditional Chinese science, see Restivo (1979).

⁴ Unlike Ahern, Needham did not attribute to divinatory rituals the latent function of political socialization, limiting himself to the mere observation of structural symmetry between the ways of imperial bureaucrats and the ways of heavenly spirits.

⁵ Sarah Allan concurs with Keightley's assessment of Shang ritual proto-bureaucratism, but disputes the contractual nature of the divinatory process, arguing that the process was more magical than contractual: 'The King did not divine in order to reach agreement with his ancestors, but to determine by magical means which combination of categories would be 'auspicious' and likely to produce the desired results' (Allan 1981: 312).

⁶ In this respect, Keightley may have somewhat overstated the 'scientific' attributes of Shang ritual. For as Beattie (1970) has argued, 'Belief in the efficacy of ritual is not, like belief in science, based on testing (hypotheses) against experience, but on the imputation of causal efficacy to symbolic expression itself'.

⁷ Most historians trace the Tian Ming doctrine back to the Zhou conquest of the Shang. Keightley, however, claims that the doctrine had its roots even earlier, in the proto-bureaucratic spiritualism of Shang times (1978: 220). Allan (1984: 529–531) concurs in this dating, though for different reasons. In her view, the original precedent for the idea of a conditional Mandate was set when the first Shang king (Tang) successfully rebelled against the Xia dynasty in 1766 B.C. and thereupon offered to sacrifice his own life to Shang Di to atone for his act of lese majeste. The God on High refused to accept Tang's sacrifice, however, and instead sent down a sudden rainstorm to end a severe drought that had plagued the country – thus implicitly giving Heaven's stamp of approval to Tang's rebellion.

⁸ This notion of a ritualistic 'charismatic validation' function served by dynastic calendar regulation partially contradicts the more straightforward economic hypothesis advanced by Joseph Needham, who argued that 'For an agricultural economy... regulat[ion] of the calendar was of prime importance. He who could give a calendar to the people would become their leader' (Ronan and Needham 1981: 75–76). Needham's conjecture may help explain the initial fixing of the lunar calendar, but it can hardly account for the frequency with which the calendar was subsequently revised and re-issued – to the inevitable accompaniment of elaborate ceremonial pomp – by successive imperial regimes.

⁹ In the Former Han, one of the highest-paid and most influential officials in the imperial court was the Grand Master of Ceremonies who, together with his various

underlings, was responsible, inter alia, for fixing royal sacrificial rituals, for recording omens and portents, for supervising the royal observatory, and for annually promulgating the royal calendar (Bielenstein 1980: 17–19).

¹⁰ Nor was ancient China particularly unique in this respect. E.A. Hoebel, for example, has described the religious ethos of tribal politics in 20th century Ashanti (Gold Coast) in terms strikingly reminiscent of the type of ritualized spirit mediation and charismatic validation that flourished in ancient China (Hoebel 1954: 264–265). And Christopher Dawson has noted a clear parallel between China's ancient dynastic legitimizing principle of Tian Ming and the Polynesian concept of heavenly 'mana', or spiritual grace (Dawson 1958: 112–113, 121).

¹¹ K. C. Chang (1976: 79ff) describes a complex system of Shang political succession based on generational alternation between two principal royal sublineages.

¹² A substantial proportion of all Shang oracular prognoses were personally rendered by the king himself, assisted by a retinue of lesser priests, including diviners, invocators and sorcerers (Keightley 1974; Chang 1983: 45ff). Arguably, these royal spiritual attendants were China's first true proto-bureaucrats.

¹³ Hu Shi had essentially the same notion in mind when, early in the 20th century, he noted that Chinese religious rituals had become vestigial cultural remnants, 'mere formalistic ceremonies without serious realistic significance' (Yang 1967: 178).

¹⁴ 'One of the decisive motives underlying all cases of the routinization of charisma', wrote Weber, 'is naturally the striving for security. This means legitimization, on the one hand, of positions of authority and social prestige, (and) on the other hand, of the economic advantages enjoyed by the followers and sympathizers of the leader... To a very large extent the transition to hereditary charisma or charisma of office serves... as a means of legitimizing existing or recently acquired powers of control over economic goods. Along with the ideology of loyalty, which is certainly by no means unimportant, allegiance to hereditary monarchy in particular is strongly influenced by the consideration that all inherited property and all that which is legitimately acquired would be endangered if subjective recognition of the sanctity of succession to the throne were eliminated' (Weber 1947: 372–373).

¹⁵ C. K. Yang has referred to this evolutionary shift in the Chinese concept of Tian Ming as the 'moralization of power', i.e., the process of establishing an ethical basis for dynastic domination through 'inculcation of moral meaning into political power' (Yang 1967: 137–138).

¹⁶ A noted 17th century Japanese critic of Zhu Xi later wrote of this secular transformation: 'Reverence' (jing) ...takes respecting heaven and respecting ghosts and spirits as its foundation. There can be no reverence without an object of reverence. Zhu Xi originated codes for cultivating reverence, but his was a reverence without an object to be revered (Quoted in Yamashita 1979: 311–312; emphasis added).

¹⁷ Ray Huang thus notes that by the time of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644 AD), maintenance of the divine imperial mandate 'required ritualistic exercises involving

the sovereign and his chief ministers to be enacted with vigor and regularity, completely in a public spirit, and accompanied by aesthetic and moral overtones. Paganry or not, the many rounds of kowtowing reaffirmed imperial supremacy; yet merely the fact that the emperor attended the ceremonies indicated that he was subjecting himself to the cosmic order and moral law... Obviously a degree of make-believe was involved; but make-believe is not necessarily unreal. One must realize how powerful an instrument of government it was when all participants shared a belief in it' (Huang 1981: 46–47).

¹⁸ In this connection C. K. Yang argues that the longstanding practice of periodically offering sacrifices of money and other valuable worldly goods to ancestral spirits could not have been a mere vestigial formality, since it constituted a substantial drain upon the economic resources of a marginally-subsistent peasantry (Yang 1967: 178–179).

¹⁹ Keightley notes that 'recently-dead ancestors might plague (or protect) living individuals (who would perhaps have known them when they were alive), but the dead of more distant generations affected the state as a whole by influencing harvests, droughts and enemy invasions' (1978: 218).

²⁰ The Chinese characters representing the two 'Shangs' are wholly dissimilar. The dynastic 'Shang' is represented by a logograph whose modern meaning is 'commerce'; while the supreme deity 'Shang' is depicted by the locational character meaning 'above'.

²¹ Keightley speculates, somewhat ingeniously, that the Shang royal house's concern over Shang Di's apparent impartiality, stemming from the supreme deity's lack of direct family ties to dynastic founders, may help explain the emergence of the conditional 'meritocratic' theory of Tian Ming.

²² In this connection it may be hypothesized that the widely-noted absence of an institutionalized church and professional clergy in traditional China stems from the inherent pluralism of China's archaic, ancestral-based system of religious beliefs. With Shang Di and other 'supreme' deities being inaccessible to the common people, and with ancestral spirits being the key guardians and guarantors of individual and family welfare, organized supra-familial (or supra-clan) worship was simply beside the point, and an organized priesthood was therefore unnecessary – the more so since the emperor himself officially monopolized those ceremonial rituals used to invoke the highest deities on behalf of the commonweal. For a somewhat more abstract and metaphorical interpretation based on the archaic myth of a 'severance of communication between heaven and earth', see Wu (1982: 7–20). By way of contrast, Hsu (1981: 107, 243–248, 270–276) stresses the eclectic, polytheistic, utilitarian, and non-dogmatic aspects of traditional Chinese spiritual values as explanations for the weakness of institutionalized religion in the Middle Kingdom.

²³ The existence of genealogical constraints on political power was clearly not unique to ancient China. In discussing the relationship between genealogy and chieftaincy among the Trobriand islanders, for example, Hoebel notes that 'The entire clan and subclan system with its attendant differences in rank, land rights... and

chiefly prerogatives is based on supernatural postulates... specifically (involving deceased ancestors' (1954: 264). A similar observation concerning the stratificational function of ancestral cults has been made by John Middleton in his study of primitive religion among the Lugbara of Uganda (Middleton 1960). Cf. also Beattie (1964: 226).

²⁴ The celebrated Han dynasty historian Sima Qian (b. 135 B.C.) reportedly had at his disposal large numbers of such dynastic genealogies – in the form of hand-carved 'lineage tablets' (*pudie*) – when he compiled his monumental Historical Records of antiquity. Indeed, as late as the Ming-Qing period (1368–1911 A.D.) local genealogies provided one of the richest and best-documented sources of microsocial data to be found in all of the Chinese historical record (Dardess 1983: 75–76).

²⁵ For analysis of the relationship between genealogy and political stratification in late Shang/early Zhou China, see Chang (1976), esp. chapters 3–5 and pp. 189–195.

²⁶ Hence the term 'old hundred surnames' (*lao bai xing*), used since ancient times to collectively designate the Chinese people. In its original late Shang/early Zhou usage, the term referred exclusively to elite sublineages of the ruling family. Later its meaning shifted to connote the masses of ordinary people.

²⁷ Ho Ping-ti (1975: 301) notes that 'rapid geographic expansion made it necessary for Shang rulers to amplify existing institutional devices, or establish new ones, by which to administer extrapatrimonial territories'.

²⁸ Creel (1970: 345) asserts that if the dynastic rulers of the period had not shared the fruits of military victory with their regionally-entrenched kinsmen, 'they might well have been unable to hold the conquered territories altogether'.

²⁹ There remains considerable controversy over the nature, origins, timing and extent of feudalism in late Shang/early Zhou China. For a representative sampling of contending views, see, *inter alia*, Bodde (1956: 85ff); Creel (1970: 317ff); Wheatley (1971: 118ff); and Eberhard (1977: 13ff).

³⁰ Carl Stephenson (1942: 76) thus argues that 'the feudal state... had to be small'. By contrast, the Chinese state continued to grow ever larger during the Western Zhou.

³¹ The best analytic account of the dynamics of interstate relations in the Warring States period is Walker (1953).

³² Because of the manifest politicization of genealogical scholarship in this period, Eberhard and others are highly skeptical of the authenticity of all pre-unification accounts of dynastic lineage in China.

³³ Dawson thus notes: 'The canonization of filial piety as the great Confucian virtue provided a perfect psychological basis for the paternal authority of the Confucian state and the ceremonial piety of the state religion' (1958: 166).

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