

RELIGION AND POWER
DIVINE KINGSHIP IN THE
ANCIENT WORLD AND BEYOND

edited by

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THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
ORIENTAL INSTITUTE SEMINARS • NUMBER 4
CHICAGO • ILLINOIS

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HUMAN AND DIVINE KINGSHIP IN EARLY CHINA: COMPARATIVE REFLECTIONS

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At first glance, it may seem odd to have China brought into a discussion focused upon divine kingship. After all, in comparative discussions of kingship, China is often mentioned as the prototypical example of a culture based upon human, as opposed to divine, visions of sovereignty. For one example among many, one can cite Manabu Waida's argument to this effect in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*:

The classical Chinese conception of sovereignty took shape in the Ch'in and Han periods (221 B.C.–220 A.D.). While the sovereign adopted the title, connoting supreme power, of *huangdi* (emperor), he was never considered divine, at least while he was alive, nor was he regarded as an incarnation of a divine being. Rather, he was a "unique man" representing Heaven's will on earth and serving as the link between heaven and earth. The Chinese notion of the Son of Heaven in its classical form had nothing to do with the genealogical conception of kingship, such as in ancient Egypt or Japan, that the king was the descendant of a certain god or the god incarnate; the emperor was simply the earthly representative of Heaven or heavenly will (Waida 2005: 5179).

Unlike a view that rulers are divine by descent, the classical notion in China to which Waida refers holds that the ruler is human. Monarchy was hereditary but would only be maintained within a given lineage as long as that lineage was seen to be doing its job properly. When it was not, the lineage would be overthrown and replaced with another. Thus, although referred to as a "Son of Heaven," the ruler was seen not as truly descended from Heaven but rather, as Waida points out, a representative of Heaven who would be kept in office only as long as he performed his duties properly.

Thus, within a framework that defines cultures in terms of the claimed divinity of their rulers, Egypt and Japan would appear as examples of divine kingship, while China would be an example of a distinctly human vision of sovereignty.

Although such arguments have been common in the history of religions, some questions should be raised about the use of such frameworks. In general, it may be misleading to build comparative frameworks in which entire cultures are placed on a single line defined, in this case, by visions of human kingship on one pole and those of divine kingship on the other. A more promising approach may be to build such frameworks by comparing the tensions and competing claims of the cultures in question, with an interest, among other things, in comparing how and why the tensions were defined as they were and in analyzing the historical implications of the ways those tensions have played out in the various cultures in question.

In the case at hand, we will see that claims to divine kingship were extremely strong in early China. Although such claims were always hotly debated, they nonetheless played a crucial role in the development of imperial rulership in China. Comparatively speaking, then, the interesting issue is not that China represents a vision of human sovereignty — since this was only one of the views that can be found in early China. The interesting issue is rather the

tension between human and divine forms of kingship — why this tension developed, how the terms were defined, and historically how these tensions played out.

THE SACRIFICES OF HUMANITY

Allow me to begin my discussion with precisely the sorts of claims one finds in early China concerning the inherent humanity of the king — the sorts of claims, in other words, that generated the kinds of comparative readings of China that have become so common in the writings of contemporary scholars. These are from texts dating from probably the fourth through the second centuries B.C.¹ They would later come to be included in the *Book of Rites* (*Liji*), one of the five classics that would become part of the curriculum of educated elites throughout East Asia and would for significant periods of Chinese history be used as the basis for court ritual in the imperial Chinese state. In short, these would become highly influential texts.

In these texts, it is most certainly true that, although a proper king would be called a “Son of Heaven,” this involved no claim whatsoever of an inherent genealogical relationship between Heaven and the ruler. In fact, very much the opposite: the ruler was clearly defined as human, and the relationship with Heaven was most definitely not one of divine genealogy.

The explicit concern of the texts is that the cosmos in which humans reside is at least indifferent to humans and is perhaps governed by highly capricious spirits with whom humans have no inherent relationship whatsoever. Humans are not only disconnected from these divine powers, but they are equally disconnected from each other: they regard only members of their biological families as objects of concern. Moreover, when people die, the energies that kept them alive floats up to the heavens, and their souls settle in the earth — neither having a relationship with the living again. In short, the world is one of discontinuity — families separated from others, humans separated from the rest of the cosmos, the living separated from the dead.

The texts in question offer as a solution the practice of certain sets of sacrifices invented in the distant past by sages — human sages. With these sacrifices, the practitioners come to view the remains of dead humans as ancestors, view the ruler as their father and mother, view the ruler as a Son of Heaven, and view other families as linked through their common relationship to the ruler. In all these cases, the figures in question know that there are no actual genealogical links between, for example, Heaven, the ruler, and the populace. But, through acts of sacrifice, practitioners learn to extend their familial feelings to those other entities. Sacrifice, then, ultimately allows disparate families in an (at best) indifferent cosmos to come to think of the entire realm — other families, the ruler, the larger world — as a single family. In short, with sacrifice, one forms genealogical links at the emotional level with entities with whom one knows oneself to be unrelated.

Let us begin with discussions of the deceased:

Everything that is born will die. When one dies, one returns to the ground. This was called the “ghost.” The bones and flesh wither below; hidden, they become the earth of the fields. Their *qi* (energy) is sent out above; it becomes radiant brightness. According with the essence of things, instituting the pivot of action, [the sages] clearly named these “ghosts” and “spirits,” taking them as a pattern for the black-haired

¹ I refer in this section to the “Li yun,” “Ji yi,” “Ji fa,” “Ji tong,” and “Jiao te sheng” chapters of the *Book of Rites*.

For a fuller discussion of these and related chapters, see Puett 2005.

people. The populace was thereby awed, and the myriad people thereby submitted² (*Liji*, “*Ji yi*,” 126/25/25–27).

The terms “ghosts” and “spirits” were given by the sages to those portions of the deceased that went into the ground and air, respectively. Although this nomenclature awed the populace, it was still insufficient (presumably for controlling the populace), and the sages thus created temples and ancestral halls:

The sages took this as still insufficient, so they constructed dwellings and houses, and set up temples and ancestral halls. They thereby differentiated closer and more distant kinship, and closer and farther removed in terms of descent. [The sages] taught the people to turn to the past and look back to the beginning, no longer forgetting where they came from. The populace submitted to this and therefore obeyed with greater urgency (*Liji*, “*Ji yi*,” 126/25/28).

The invention of places of ancestral worship taught the populace to differentiate kinship levels and to understand the degree to which they are dependent upon what came before. The sages then went on to create ancestral sacrifices:

When these two ends were established, they responded with two rituals. They set up the morning service, burning fat and manifesting it with the radiance of [burning] southernwood. They thereby responded to the *qi*. This taught the populace to return to the beginning. They offered millet and rice, and served liver, lungs, head, and heart, presenting them and separating them into two bowls, and supplementing them with sacrificial wine. They thereby respond to the earthly souls (*po*). This taught the people to love one another, and taught superiors and inferiors to utilize their dispositions. This was the utmost of ritual (*Liji*, “*Ji yi*,” 126/25/29).

The sacrifices set up for the spirits taught the populace to see themselves as linked to what came before, and the sacrifices set up for the earthly souls in the tomb taught the populace to have proper dispositions toward other humans.

In short, ancestral sacrifices allowed humans to connect with the remains of the deceased as ancestors, and thereby to refine their dispositions toward living kin as well.

Similar arguments underlie these chapters’ discussions of sacrifices to elements in the natural world. Both heaven and earth are repeatedly presented as natural elements on which humans are fully dependent. But both are indifferent to humanity. Sacrifice allows the givers to forge relationships with them, thus helping the givers to recognize these forces as powers on which humans depend. Several chapters emphasize that sacrifice leads the recipients to view these indifferent powers as spirits.

Thus, we find a discussion of the reasons that certain natural elements were chosen by the ancient sages as objects of sacrifice:

When it came to the sun, moon, stars, and constellations, they were what the people looked up to; as for the mountains, forests, rivers, valleys, and hills, these were the places from which the people took their resources to use. If they were not of this type, they were not entered into the sacrificial canon (*Liji*, “*Ji fa*,” 123/24/9).

² My translations here and throughout have been aided greatly by those of James Legge (1885).

Certain natural elements were important for humanity — either because humans looked up to them or because they contained resources that humans used. Thus, they were entered into the sacrificial canon.

Moreover, some of these natural elements appeared to cause strange phenomena. Thus, they were called “spirits”:

The mountains, forests, rivers, valleys, and hills that could send out clouds, make wind and rain, and cause to appear strange phenomena — all were named “spirits” (*shen*) (*Liji*, “*Ji fa*,” 122/24/3).

In other words, the ancient sages made natural elements into objects of sacrifice not because they were already spirits but because naming them as such and creating sacrifices on their behalf allowed the populace to develop a better relationship to them.

Similarly, the “*Jiao te sheng*” chapter argues that the *she* sacrifice leads humans to think of the way of earth as a spirit:

The *she* is that by which one makes into a spirit the way of the earth (*Liji*, “*Jiao te sheng*,” 70/11.17/14).

By worshipping the way of earth as a spirit, humans will constantly be reminded of their dependence on the harvests of the earth and thereby maintain a proper relationship with it.

The “*Jiao te sheng*” chapter goes on to argue that the *jiao* sacrifice illuminates for humans the way of heaven:

The *jiao* is that by which one illuminates the way of heaven (*Liji*, “*Jiao te sheng*,” 71/11.20/1).

But if forming Heaven, Earth, and other natural objects into recipients of sacrifice allows humans to forge a better relationship with them, then what precisely is this superior type of relationship that humans should seek? The same, it turns out, as one should forge with one’s deceased relatives.

As we have seen, one of the reasons one has ancestral sacrifices is that they lead the living to recognize the degree to which they are dependent on those who came before. This is true of sacrifices to elements of the natural world as well. Ritual allows the living, therefore, to see both Heaven and deceased humans as the source from which the living arose. But it also leads humans to think of these elements of the natural world in kinship ways as well — just as they do with the deceased humans.

Accordingly, the sacrifices to one’s ancestors and to Heaven are similar, but also need to be distinguished to underline the distinction between human and natural relations. The chapter discusses this in ritual terms:

If the ox for Di is inauspicious, one uses it as the ox for [Hou] Ji. The ox for Di must stay in a pen for three months; the ox for Ji need only be complete. This is the means by which one distinguishes between serving the spirits of Heaven and serving the ghosts of humans. The myriad things are rooted in Heaven, humans are rooted in their ancestors. This is the reason that it matches the High Di. The *jiao* sacrifice recompenses the root and returns to the beginning (*Liji*, “*Jiao te sheng*,” 71/11.20/1–2).

Two points must be mentioned to explicate this passage. The first is that the Zhou recognized Hou Ji as their ancestor. The second is that, as in many of the texts from early China, the chapter equates Di (the high god) with Heaven. The chapter is therefore arguing that there is a

parallel between Heaven and Hou Ji: all things (including humans) are rooted in Heaven, and all humans are rooted in their ancestors. Thus, the sacrifice to Hou Ji must match the sacrifice to Di (the deified form of Heaven). But the two must also be distinguished, since Heaven is the inclusive ancestor of all, whereas Hou Ji is merely the ancestor of the Zhou people. Thus, worship of the spirits of Heaven must be distinguished from the worship of the ghosts of humans. The rituals are parallel, and both involve an ox, but the sacrifice to Di requires an auspicious ox that has been kept separate from the herd for three months, whereas Hou Ji need only receive an ox that is complete.

But the parallel between the two sacrifices has significant implications. By performing these rituals, both Heaven and Hou Ji come to be seen as ancestors from which we descend.

And these same relations should hold among the living as well. Just as sacrifices allow the living to see Heaven and deceased humans in ancestral terms, so should children, through ritual, recognize their parents as their forebears. And here too, the parallels between the rituals allow the practitioners to see Heaven as like a parent, and the parent as like Heaven. The “*Ai gong wen*” quotes Confucius as stating:

“Therefore a humane man serves his parents as he serves Heaven, and serves Heaven as he serves his parents” (*Liji*, “*Ai gong wen*,” 136/28.7/16–17).

Indeed, it is the ruler who sacrifices to Heaven, and, as such the ruler becomes the “*Son of Heaven*”:

Therefore the Son of Heaven sacrifices to Heaven and Earth, the lords of the states sacrifice to the altars of the land and grain (*Liji*, “*Li yun*,” 61/9/10).

And, if the ruler through sacrifice makes himself the “*Son of Heaven*,” so does his reverence in sacrifice help him to be seen as the father and mother of the people:

If he is not reverent when sacrificing, how can he be taken as the father and mother of the people? (*Liji*, “*Ji tong*,” 133/26/22).

As the “*Li yun*” argues, the consequence of these various sacrifices — families developing proper filiality through sacrifices to ancestors, the ruler sacrificing to Heaven and thus defining himself as both the Son of Heaven and the father and mother of the people — is that the entire realm comes to function as a single family:

Therefore, as for the sage bearing to take all under Heaven as one family and take the central states as one person, it is not something done overtly. He necessarily knows their dispositions, opens up their sense of propriety, clarifies what they feel to be advantageous, and apprehends what they feel to be calamitous. Only then is he capable of enacting it (*Liji*, “*Li yun*,” 62/9/22).

In short, sacrifice allows the sage to build his rule by affecting the dispositions of the populace, leading the people to think of the realm as a single family: the living think of pieces of deceased humans as their ancestors and think of the ruler as their father and mother and also as the Son of Heaven. As such, the sage is able to rule effectively, but not (and this is presumably part of the reasons for the effectiveness) overtly.

Making a similar argument, the “*Biao ji*” chapter states that sacrifice allows for the realm to be controlled without causing the type of resentment that overt domination creates:

The Master said, “As for the sacrificial victims, ritual, and music being properly arranged and flourishing, this is the means by which there is no harm from the ghosts and spirits and no resentment from the hundred families” (*Liji*, “Biao ji,” 151/33/27).

Thus, these chapters from the *Book of Rites* utilize a vision of ritual that functions by transforming the participants such that they think of themselves as linked in chains of genealogical continuity. Power, then, is built up through the particular dispositions inculcated through the rituals. The goal is to create a society that is hierarchically ranked, defined through the dispositions associated with those of genealogical relationships. In such a system, the ruler is indeed human, but he comes to be seen as both the Son of Heaven and the father and mother of the people — the central figure linking living humans, dead humans, and the spirit world into a genealogical web of relationships. A form of control, but one that is, as we saw above, “not done overtly.”

Not only is the Son of Heaven not seen as a true divine descendant of Heaven, but the relationship in effect operates the other way: it is the ruler who connects Heaven, along with other natural forces, capricious spirits, and deceased humans into a web of human, ritualized genealogical relationships. The key is to humanize (in the sense of bring into the links of human genealogical dispositions) the natural and divine powers, just as disparate families also come to be linked to each other by these same relationships. The ruler thus becomes the center of everything: the father and mother of the myriad disparate families as well as the Son of Heaven.

This is most certainly a vision of human, as opposed to divine, kingship. Indeed, it is a remarkably strong form of human kingship, in which the king’s relationships to the divine world and to the populace as a whole is explicitly defined as being simply forged through ritual. Without ritual, there would be no substantial links at all between the ruler and the divine world.

So why were these texts making such arguments and who are they arguing against? And, more specifically, how do they fit into the larger set of tensions to which I alluded at the beginning of this paper?

The chapters under consideration here were written in the Warring States and early Han periods — roughly fourth through second centuries B.C. They are arguing for a particular form of governance and social hierarchy, in opposition to the forms of extreme centralized statecraft that were becoming increasingly dominant over this period. The authors are making their argument through a description of a sacrificial system they claim was created by the ancient sages, was practiced throughout the Bronze Age (during the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties) and should now be instituted again.

Although the authors were of course re-interpreting certain elements of those rituals, they were in fact building on certain elements of what we can reconstruct from at least the late Shang (ca. 1200–1050 B.C.) and Western Zhou (ca. 1050–771 B.C.) periods. In order to understand the historical background to what they were doing, a brief discussion of these earlier periods will be helpful.

KINGSHIP AND SACRIFICE IN THE BRONZE AGE

The social world of the late Shang and Western Zhou periods was composed, at the elite level, of several competing lineages, each of which controlled particular aspects of land, with attendant populations, material resources, and sacred sites (Chang 1980, 1983; Keightley 2000,

1978; Campbell 2007). These lineages do not appear to have thought of themselves as having any kind of genealogical relationship with each other.

At any given time, one of these lineages would control the kingship, and the others would continue to rule their domains while giving ritual obeisance to the royal lineage. All positions of power were based upon one's rank in the lineage and the ranking of that lineage vis-à-vis the royal one.

The royal lineage was not seen as having any inherent divine powers, nor did they have any inherent essence greater than other aristocratic families. A successful ruling lineage would instead be one that, through either conquest or suasion, could gain and maintain the allegiance of the other lineages. When that allegiance could no longer be maintained, it would be overthrown by another lineage that would then take over the royal title of king (*wang*). Hence the dynastic cycle, of one lineage being overthrown by another, with the winner always attempting to control the other families and divine powers.

The lineage in control would always seek the support of the highest divinity — Di (for the Shang) or Heaven (for the Zhou).³ There was, however, a problem. One of the views that prevails throughout early China is that the more a divine power is removed from earth and earthly forms, the stronger that divine power is, and the less pliable it is by human ritual. Thus, Heaven/Di is not only extremely powerful, but also extremely difficult to sway with human ritual.⁴ Even the spirits of long-deceased humans were powerful, but, insofar as they were far removed from the living, they too were difficult humans to control (although not nearly as difficult as Heaven/Di).

To effect change on divine powers, therefore, one would always begin with the most recently deceased. These are the least powerful, but also the ones most pliable by living humans. The goal was to use sacrifice to transform the recently deceased (and usually highly capricious) spirits into ancestors, who could then be called upon to act in support of their descendants. As David Keightley has convincingly demonstrated, Shang sacrificial practice was aimed at “making ancestors” (2004). Building upon Keightley's reading, I have argued:

The concern, in short, was to transform a capricious and potentially antagonistic spirit world into a hierarchical pantheon of ordered genealogical descent interested in its living descendants' welfare (Puett 2002: 198).

For the royal lineage, then, the goal was to transform the spirits of the deceased into ancestors who would then be called on to ascend and serve the highest divinity, Heaven/Di. Thus, for example, when King Wu of the Zhou conquered the Shang, he called upon his deceased father, King Wen, to serve the high god. One finds in the Tianwang *gui*,⁵ a bronze inscription that dates to the reign of King Wu:

The greatly illustrious deceased father King Wen serves and pleases the Di on high.
(Shirakawa 1.1:1)

³ The Zhou also assimilated the Shang god Di to their own high god Heaven. As a result, Zhou texts refer to the high god as either Heaven or Di. As we saw above in our discussion of the *Book of Rites*, this practice of using Heaven and Di interchangeably continued thereafter.

⁴ Indeed, the Shang do not appear to have ever sacrificed to Di directly.

⁵ Also known as the Da Feng *gui*.

In *Book of Poetry* one finds a similar reference to King Wen serving the high god:

King Wen is above,
 How glorious he is in Heaven.
 Although Zhou is an old state,
 Its mandate is new.
 Are the rulers of Zhou not illustrious,
 Was the mandate of Di not timely?
 King Wen ascends and descends,
 Residing to the right and left of Di (*Shi*, Mao #235).

This same process would continue with each passing generation: sacrifices would be given to the most recently deceased ancestors, who would then be called upon to serve the next highest in the lineage, all the way up to those ancestors who would be called upon to serve Heaven.

It is certainly true, therefore, that Heaven/Di and the ruler were not understood to have an inherent genealogical relationship. In fact, the only significant access the ruler had with Heaven was through his own ancestors — the deceased being made into ancestors, who would then be called upon to serve the high god and (hopefully) maintain its support.

In such a sacrificial system, however, there was a built-in inevitability of decline. Just as maintaining the allegiance of the other lineages grew progressively more difficult over time, so was there an inherent sense of degeneration from the sacrificial system itself: since it was defined genealogically, each subsequent generation would grow ever more distant from the ancestors serving Heaven. This process can be traced quite well for the Zhou, for whom we have ample documentation. One example can be seen in the Maogong *ding*, a late vessel, perhaps dating to the reign of King Xuan:

Bright Heaven is sickening and awesome. In succeeding, I, the young man, cannot be up to it. How will the direction of the state be auspicious? In chaos are the four quarters, greatly licentious and untranquil. *Wuhu!* Worried am I, the young man. The family is submerged in difficulty, and eternally (I) fear the former kings (Shirakawa 30.181:637).

Although some scholars read lines such as these from the end of the Western Zhou as indicative of a growing social crisis, one can equally well read them as simply the inevitable ritual statements of later kings, who do, according to the logic of the sacrificial system, see themselves as dangerously distant from the founding ancestors. But, of course, these two readings are directly related. As the reigning kings grow ritually weaker, rival claimants from powerful lineages inevitably begin seeking allegiances that would allow them to overthrow the king and begin a new dynasty.

In short, the late Shang and Western Zhou were characterized by the politics of lineages that do not appear to have seen themselves as connected. The ordering of the political and divine realm would be undertaken by the lineage that could take and maintain the allegiance of the other lineages and the divine powers, and its eventual fall was inevitable — the genealogical ordering of the realm ensured that the dynasty would be seen as weakening over time. The result was a dynastic cycle, in which the rulership would change hands from one lineage to another every few centuries.

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However, as the Zhou declined, no other clan was able to succeed in overthrowing it. The realm gradually fell into disunity, and finally into a system of de facto independent states vying for dominance (Hsü 1965; Lewis 1999, 2006; Falkenhausen 2006). By the fourth and third centuries B.C. one begins to see the formation of centralized forms of statecraft in several of these states. The key is that these centralized institutions were explicitly aimed at undercutting the power of the aristocratic lineages that had dominated political life during the Bronze Age. The goal was to create military and bureaucratic systems that would promote those born beneath the aristocracy — precisely to push the aristocracy from power.

These trends reached their extremity in 221 B.C., when one of these states, Qin, succeeded in conquering the others and declaring the emergence of the first unified empire in Chinese history.

To mark his distinction from the dynasties that came before, the Qin ruler invented a new title: “Huangdi,” which means literally “august god” (*Shiji*, 6.236). The ruler also proclaimed himself the “First August God.” He was to be followed by the “Second August God,” and then the third, and so on for the next ten thousand generations (*Shiji*, 6.236). The speech in which this claim appeared was recorded by the historian Sima Qian over a century later, so its historical validity is impossible to verify. But the interpretation that Sima Qian gives certainly makes sense: the use of the prefix “first” implies that the ruler is expected to be only the first in a very long line. The sense would appear to be that the Qin was not simply another dynasty supplanting the Zhou, in turn to be supplanted by another lineage. It was rather intended to be an empire that would continue forever.

To make good on this goal, the Qin ruler began an overt policy of undercutting the power of the lineages throughout the realm. To begin with, the Qin created a military commandery system: the realm was divided into thirty-six commanderies, each of which was controlled by officials appointed directly by the central court (*Shiji*, 6.239). Instead, therefore, of having the land and resources controlled by potentially rival lineages, the Qin emperor would maintain direct control himself. The goal, clearly, was to prevent the empire from simply being like one of the ruling lineages during the Bronze Age — a lineage ruling only until one of the other lineages grew to sufficient strength to stage an overthrow.

As a further measure to undercut the power of rival lineages, the First Emperor forced the powerful families of the realm to move to the First Emperor’s capital (*Shiji*, 6.239).⁶ Thus, not only did the central court take direct control of the land, but the families themselves were removed from their centers of power.

As might be expected given these goals, the First Emperor went on to shift the sacrificial system dramatically. Instead of basing the sacrificial system on a genealogical vision, the goal was to do the precise opposite. The First Emperor would travel to every local area (previously controlled by the regional lineages) and personally offer the sacrifices to the local spirits (*Shiji*, 28.1377). This of course entailed the First Emperor’s direct control over the local areas, instead of a yielding to the local lineages. Moreover, the goal does not appear to be one of bringing the spirits into a pantheon with the ruling lineage on top (as we saw in the Zhou). The claim appeared to be that the ruler was personally strengthened by these encounters with the spirits. Thus, an endless expansion of the empire was necessary to take control of more and

⁶ I follow the convention of referring to the “First August God” as the “First Emperor.” Although this is not a lit-

eral translation, it does accurately capture the distinction with the earlier title *wang*, translated as “king.”

more such sites so that the ruler could be ever more strengthened by the spirits he encountered. The result of such a procession would be the gradual divinization of the ruler and his ultimate ascension into the heavens as a god. And, as a god, he would not be dependent on the sacrifices of the living to transform him into an ancestor, nor would he be pliable by the entreaties of the living. Moreover, the empire would not be dependent upon him serving Heaven and calling upon Heaven to preserve the ruling lineage, since, as a god, he could intervene directly on behalf of those below.

In short, the First Emperor was indeed asserting a form of divine kingship. But note that it was not a form that claimed any kind of divine descent. Indeed, at the beginning, the ruler would be fully human, but he would transform himself into a divine immortal through the sacrificial process (*Shiji*, 6.245, 252, 258, 263, 28.1377). Once done, the ruler would be completely autonomous from the system of genealogical relationships that defined the Zhou form of governance.

And his empire, of course, could last forever. The sacrificial system of the First Emperor would have ended such an inherent tendency toward degeneration. If, in the previous sacrificial order, the founding king would die and thereafter be made into an ancestor who would serve Heaven until he was replaced by a new founder, the system of the First Emperor would result in the founder — the First Emperor himself — ascending to the heavens and residing there permanently. The empire he founded would then be ruled by his descendants for eternity: since the ritual system would not be based upon moving the sacrifices up the lineage to the founder, the reigning monarch would not become increasingly removed from the founder, and the dynasty would not become progressively weaker. Thus, the founder would never lose his position in the heavens, and he, like the empire he founded, would never be displaced. Thus, the divinity of the ruler provided the longevity that the previous Bronze Age sacrificial system had denied.

In short, a claim of divine sovereignty was also a claim of complete autonomy from the constructed world of lineage relations that defined the Zhou, as well as from the inevitable genealogical weakening that underlies a system based on the dynastic cycle.

But note that this form of divine kingship did require the ruler's ascension into the heavens. As mentioned above, in early China everything on earth was seen as dying, so gods by definition had to reside in the heavens. Thus, for the First Emperor to become divine required his ascension to the heavens and thus also required a second emperor, and a third, and on down to reside on earth.⁷ But if the First Emperor himself would not be a god on earth, he would be a god in the heavens, and his empire would last for ten thousand generations.

But if this was the goal of the First Emperor, he failed completely. The Qin fell only a few years after the death of the First Emperor. And, tellingly, it was destroyed precisely by the major families that the First Emperor had tried to undercut (*Shiji*, 6.273). In short, the Qin failed dramatically to end the earlier lineage system on which the previous dynasties had thrived.

Nonetheless, the centralized imperial system and the sacrificial system of the Qin were revived by Emperor Wu of the succeeding Han dynasty. Like that of the First Emperor, the sacrificial system put in place under Emperor Wu involved a divinization of the ruler, resulting in his ultimate ascension, as well as a strong symbolic claim for the personal control that the

⁷ Thus, unlike Polynesian rulers who, as Sahlins (1985) has argued, became living gods on earth, there was always a cosmological limit in China: the earth consists of

forms, which are transitory. Gods are beyond forms, and thus reside in the heavens. For a ruler to become a god, therefore, he had to ascend into the heavens.

emperor should exercise over all sacrificial sites and the territories in which they were found (*Shiji*, 28.1389–96; see also Puett 2002).

Over the subsequent decades, however, the state suffered dramatically from imperial overreach, and several voices emerged calling for a scaling back of the empire. In particular, the system came under attack during the 30s B.C. by figures such as Kuang Heng and Zhang Tan, who argued that the ritual system introduced by Emperor Wu “differs from the regulations of antiquity” (*Hanshu*, 25B.1254). Explicit calls were made to return to the ritual system of the Zhou. And one of the main texts they turned to was the *Book of Rites*, chapters of which were discussed above.

The appeal of these chapters is that they called for a weakening of the imperial institutions, a strengthening of the lineage systems, and a return to a sacrificial and institutional system based upon lineage and genealogy. Once again, rulers would be defined as human, and the goal of a ruler was not to become divine and thereby take direct control over the populace but rather to build out a set of genealogical relationships that would ultimately allow the ruler to control covertly — but hopefully much more effectively. As we have seen above, the texts put forth a vision of sacrifice clearly based upon (although re-interpreted from) that dominant in the courts of the late Shang and Western Zhou: making the recently deceased into ancestors and then using that as a basis for defining the ruler’s relationship to the other families and to the high god in ritually defined genealogical terms.

Ultimately, these voices won. In 31 B.C., the ritual system created by the First Emperor and consolidated by Emperor Wu was overthrown, and a new system based upon a particular reading of the *Book of Rites* was put in place (Loewe 1974; Kern 2001; Puett 2002). The ruler was defined as human and was again referred to as a “Son of Heaven” — defined in ritual terms, not as descent. The emphasis turned again to a form of control based upon a decentralized form of governance using ritual claims of constructed genealogies to gain support.

These ritual reforms marked the first point in which the *Book of Rites* became a basis for court ritual. The text would ultimately become highly influential and be defined, as mentioned above, as one of the Five Classics and as one of the key normative works for defining court ritual (Zito 1997; Wilson 2002). It is here that we see the crucial steps taken for defining the “classical form” of Chinese kingship discussed above by Manabu Waida: the ruler as human, as a ritual Son of Heaven, ruling within a royal lineage until a rival lineage could successfully take over and declare a new dynasty.

HUMAN AND DIVINE KINGSHIP

From this brief history it is already clear that the emergence of divine claims of kingship occurred together with the rise of empire. Although these claims were ultimately rejected, they were to remain a crucial part of the repertoire of potential sovereignty claims available to later courts. Indeed, the two systems that were forged at this time — the one based upon constructed genealogical claims, the other on claims of divinity and on a complete autonomy from such claims — operated as almost perfect mirror images of each other, with the strength of each resting in part on its opposition to the other. In the former, the central model is of a lineage-based system, with the ruler as central figure in a web of extended, ritually defined genealogical relations. The ruler becomes the father and mother of the people, as well as the central sacrificer to the ancestors. In the latter, the ruler himself becomes a god, removed from all genealogical constraints, with direct control over (ideally) everything. The success of each to a significant degree relied on its rejection of the other. Part of the initial appeal and later hatred

of the First Emperor no doubt emerged from his successful opposition to the powerful lineages of the day and the entire political and sacrificial system built upon them, and much of the appeal of the subsequent calls to return to a re-interpreted version of the Zhou system of sacrifice lay precisely in its calls for a return to power of dominant lineage organizations.

And this pattern would continue. Later figures who played the extreme forms of divine rulership seen in figures like the First Emperor and Emperor Wu — I am thinking here of figures like Song Huizong and Mao — would work precisely to destroy lineage organizations, and those periods that would emphasize the genealogically based systems of sacrifice would instead appeal to a decentralized form of governance strongly reliant upon the lineage organizations kept (it was hoped) not quite as strong as the ruling family. A further pattern is that those claiming divine rulership have tended to be figures claiming to found a new order that would last longer than the genealogically based lineage systems, and in all cases their calls for complete autonomy have in fact led to political systems that faltered soon after their own deaths.

Even outside of such extreme moments of history, however, notions of divine emperors were to continue in later Chinese history. If the main court rituals were often modeled upon the *Book of Rites*, visions of divine rulership continued to underlie later Daoist rituals. And both sets of rituals were often sponsored by the courts, thus allowing rulers to shift back and forth between human and divine claims.

In short, the interplay between these two mirror-image visions of sovereignty would continue to play a crucial role throughout later Chinese history.

CONCLUSION

In China, the interplay of human and divine forms of kingship has been crucial in the development of and reaction to the imperial state. In terms of comparative work, these points do not of course completely reject the standard view that in China sovereignty is based upon a notion of human kingship: even the divine claims to kingship assume a human king who is then gradually divinized through sacrificial practice, and the opposition to such divine claims certainly involves an extraordinarily strong assertion of the human nature of rulers. But hopefully the demonstration of this interplay between human and divine claims will allow the Chinese material to be brought into comparative discussions in a more helpful way than just the contrastive framework of placing China on one side of a pole and Egypt and Japan on another.

The more exciting comparative implications of this material would instead encourage further analyses of the ways in which the tensions we have sketched here — between lineage organizations and centralized institutions, human claims to kingship and divine ones, genealogical definitions of sacrifice and theomorphic ones — have played out in China and the degree to which comparable tensions have played out in the histories of other cultures. The comparative focus could then be on the ways in which these tensions have been defined in different cultures and the implications of the nature of these tensions for the histories of the cultures in question.

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