

Ancient Greece and China Compared

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7 | Genealogies of Gods, Ghosts and Humans: The Capriciousness of the Divine in Early Greece and Early China

MICHAEL PUETT

Divine powers in ancient Greece and early China could hardly appear more different. Most obviously, the divine powers in Greece have, well, personalities. The stories of a Zeus, an Aphrodite, a Poseidon have been repeated for millennia precisely because the divinities in question are such complicated figures. Complicated figures, with complex motivations, relating to each other and to humans through emotions of pride, jealousy, at times even contempt.

At first glance, the divine figures from China may seem to offer a radical contrast. We know almost nothing about Heaven, the highest god. In early texts, Heaven is often presented as primarily a force for good, handing a mandate to rule to moral kings, and withdrawing the same mandate from kings if they behave improperly. Later, Heaven is often described as simply a cosmic force, with, again, no emotional qualities at all. And that's just Heaven. Where is the rest of the pantheon? Where is the equivalent of a Hera, an Apollo, an Athena? In contrast to early Greece, early China may appear to be lacking in a pantheon of gods and goddesses with personalities. The divine in China, at this first glance, seems to be defined more as sets of forces – moral, cosmic, or both – rather than as individual agents. And, as such, humans in early China also appear to relate to the divine radically differently than they did in ancient Greece. If in Greece the gods and goddesses had complex personalities, humans would frequently find themselves trapped in the conflicts that would accordingly ensue. The gods and goddesses were capricious, and humans were often caught in the crossfire.

Here as well, China would appear to offer a contrast. If the divine powers have no personality, and are instead simply instantiations of cosmic and moral forces, then presumably they are not capricious either. Working with the divine would be, from this perspective, simply a question of according with the larger cosmic and moral order, rather than one of dealing with complex and contradictory personalities. If we seem to be missing in China the complex personalities that dominate the Greek pantheon, we also seem to be missing the stories of the humans who would have to interact with these prideful and jealous gods and goddesses.

Where is the equivalent of a Prometheus, an Achilles, or a Heracles? As David Keightley once famously remarked, in China one finds ‘no tension between the counterclaims of god and man, between a Zeus and a Prometheus’.¹

In short, a radical contrast is often drawn between the visions of the divine found in ancient Greece and early China. Divine powers in Greece are often portrayed as a pantheon of individual gods and goddesses (Zeus, Aphrodite, etc.), each with a highly distinctive personality, and each with highly antagonistic relationships with humans. In contrast, divine powers in early China are often portrayed as lacking in the distinctive personalities that are seen to characterise the gods and goddesses of ancient Greece.

How do we account for the difference?

How to Compare

As G. E. R. Lloyd has argued, one of the common mistakes in comparative analyses involves pulling materials from different genres in two or more cultures and then presenting these as examples of contrasting mentalities.² This danger is particularly evident with the material at hand. Stories from, for example, Greek tragedy are placed in contrast to statements in Chinese political theory concerning the importance of rulers following the moral dictates of Heaven. The contrast says a great deal about the different genres, but very little about the larger comparative questions at hand. But if, as Lloyd has argued, we alter the questions we are asking, and take seriously the different genres of texts we are using when we draw these contrasts, we may find more productive ways of developing comparisons between these two cultures than can be achieved through the frameworks discussed above.

I have argued elsewhere that one of the recurrent problems in dealing with early Chinese material is the tendency to take statements – made either in ritual contexts or in philosophical literature – as assumptions. A statement to the effect that the cosmos is moral and harmonious is taken as an assumption – namely, that early Chinese assume the cosmos to be moral and harmonious. Such an approach is a problem in any case. But it is a particular problem in the case of early China, where statements concerning harmony have played such a crucial role in our interpretative frameworks.

¹ Keightley 1990: 32.

² The argument was developed fully in Lloyd 1990. See also his more recent Lloyd 2014.

The result has been a recurrent use of comparative frameworks in which Greece and China are contrasted for having ‘tragic’ and ‘harmonious’ cosmologies respectively.³

As a first step in making the comparison, therefore, let us begin by lining up the comparative project in terms of genre. When we do so, we will certainly see many differences, but they will be ones that we will hopefully be able to deal with more productively.

Ritual Spaces in the Bronze Age

I will begin my discussion in a seemingly bizarre place – one that may at first glance appear to exemplify many of the stereotypes that this chapter is intended to question. The text is an inscription on a Western Zhou bronze vessel entitled *He zun* (JC: 6014; Sh 48.1:171). The *He zun* is a sacrificial vessel from the fifth year of King Cheng, one of the first rulers of the Western Zhou. It would therefore date to roughly the eleventh century BCE:

It was the time when the king (Cheng) first moved and settled at Chengzhou. He once again received⁴

King Wu’s abundant blessings from Heaven. It was the fourth month, bingxu (day 23).

The king made a statement to the young men of the lineage in the great hall, saying: ‘Earlier

your father, the duke of the clan, was able to accompany King Wen. And then King Wen

received this (great mandate). It was when King Wu had conquered the great city Shang that he then, in court, announced to Heaven, saying: “I will settle this central territory, and from it rule the people.” Wu

hu! You are only young princes without knowledge. Look up to your elders, who have merit in Heaven. Carry out my commands and respectfully make offerings. Help the king uphold his virtue, and hope that Heaven will accord with our lack

of diligence.’ The king completed the announcement. He 何 [the maker of the vessel] was awarded thirty strands of cowries that he used to make

for Duke X this treasured sacrificial vessel. It was the king’s fifth ritual cycle.

At first glance, the inscription appears to fit into the general picture outlined above. The primary divine figure is Heaven, which certainly has

³ Puett 2002. For a fuller critique of Keightley’s argument on the lack of a Zeus and Prometheus in China, see in particular 73–6.

⁴ Following Tang Lan’s reading of the graph (1976: 60).

no personality. Heaven is simply portrayed as offering a mandate to rule and as continuing to support the worthy thereafter. The ancestors are equally without personality. They are simply, well, good ancestors. King Wu resides in Heaven, and gives benefits to his son. And the descendants are called upon to be good descendants, to continue the work of their ancestors, and to continue making offerings to the ancestors. Everyone is defined by his role (benevolent deity, supportive ancestor, obedient descendant), and everyone performs his role properly. There are no personalities here, no conflicting emotions, and no complexity of relationships defined by these conflicting emotions. Where, indeed, are the Zeus and the Prometheus?

Of course, this is an inscription from the Bronze Age. One might wonder if this is simply a product of a Bronze Age society, where social roles were tightly defined, and where the divine world was accordingly thought of in a similar way. Surely, one might think, as society changed dramatically over the course of the next several centuries, so too would notions of the divine.

As we will see, some of this (the changes, anyway) was the case. But, intriguingly, many of the characteristics that we are seeing in these Bronze Age rituals of ancestral worship were to be developed and appropriated later.

But then does this not seem to lend support to the religious contrasts mentioned above?

Not really. The inscription is a ritual text. It is inscribed in a ritual vessel to be used in making sacrifices to the ancestors of the makers of the vessel. The reason it is inscribed inside presumably means that at least one of the intended audiences is the ancestors themselves. So what we are seeing here represents not an assumption of what the ancestors and Heaven are like. These are ritual statements, performing a vision within the ritual space of what the world should be like. It is not that Heaven or the ancestors were assumed to be supportive figures, properly playing their role, with no personality. And it certainly is not the case that the descendants were simply following their roles and living out the plans of their ancestors.

So what existed outside the ritual space? A very different world. Here's a poem about Heaven from a different context:

Heaven, vast and great,
Does not hurry its virtue.
It sends down death and starvation,
It cuts down and destroys the states of the four quarters.
Great Heaven is sickeningly awesome

It exercises no discretion, no forethought.
 It abandons those with fault:
 They have already suffered their hardships;
 But even those without fault,
 Are ruined all the same.⁵

Heaven throws down death and famine indiscriminately.

So if this is Heaven outside of the ritual, let us return to the ritual, and more specifically to the inscription above.

A little background will help.

King Cheng was the reigning king at the time when the inscription was composed. The inscription concerns his attempt to gain the support of the lineages that had aided his father, King Wu, at the time of the conquest. It was, as we know from other sources, a period of great instability. King Cheng assumed the throne at a very young age, and his support was weak. Indeed, he would soon face a major revolt from his own uncles (the brothers of King Wu). King Cheng's rule would be saved by another uncle, the Duke of Zhou, who may well have been attempting to usurp the throne himself.⁶

One of King Cheng's (or the Duke of Zhou's – exactly who was really in power at this stage is unclear) moves to consolidate power was to establish a new capital at Chengzhou. The capital would be more in the centre of the new Zhou kingdom, and would hopefully allow the king to be more directly in control of the set of uncles ruling the eastern part of the kingdom. As we know from what would come later, this did not succeed.

And, of course, where Heaven and the ancestors of the various figures vying for power stood in all this is very unclear.

What is clear, however, is the ritual claim within the inscription. It is Heaven that gave the mandate to King Wen. His son, King Wu, followed his deceased father's plan by conquering the Shang and starting the Zhou dynasty. King Wu was aided in the conquest by the other lineages, the next generation of which is being addressed by King Cheng, the son of King Wu. According to this vision, Heaven and the ancestors are the driving forces behind the conquest, and the living are being called upon to continue the path laid out by these divine figures and ancestors.

Given the context, such ritual claims should be read not as an assumption concerning the nature of the relationship between humans, ancestors and Heaven but rather as a performative act – i.e., a statement that changes the reality of the situation. In the case at hand, the participants in the ritual

⁵ Mao #194. ⁶ Shaughnessy 1993: 41–72.

are being called upon to take on these relationships. King Cheng, in his address, is claiming that Heaven supported the founding of the Zhou and that the father of the young men being addressed was a supporter of the Zhou founders. The claim is further that Cheng's founding of the new capital is simply a continuation of the actions begun by Wen and Wu, and that similarly the young men of the lineage, if they are to continue their ancestors' work, should support Cheng as well.

One of these young men was He. The king awarded He thirty cowries of shells that he took to the royal foundry to have the vessel, with this inscription, cast. The ritual vessel would then be used to sacrifice to He's ancestors. Within the ritual, therefore, the call would be for the deceased to be proper ancestors and the living to be proper descendants, each playing their proper role in supporting King Cheng.

In short, the inscription is not a statement of a belief. It is a ritual text, not aimed at making statements about the world as it is believed to be but rather making ritual claims exhorting the entities in question to be transformed into supportive beings.

Gods, Ghosts and Spirits

Why would a Bronze Age ritual vessel be helpful for explicating classical understandings of gods and humans? Particularly considering the tremendous social changes that occurred over the subsequent few centuries as the great aristocratic families were destroyed?

Let's turn to some of these social changes, some of the religious worlds these changes spawned, and some of the ritual responses.⁷

Over the course of the fifth to second centuries BCE – a period roughly corresponding to the period we have come to call 'classical Greece' – much of the aristocratic world of the Bronze Age was destroyed. Centralised states emerged that took as one of their primary goals the breaking down of aristocratic control. These efforts involved developing bureaucracies that would be as independent as possible from the aristocracies, creating legal systems that would hold aristocrats and commoners equal before the law, and building mass infantry armies to replace the aristocratically dominated chariot warfare of previous centuries. One of the keys for accomplishing the latter goal was to take direct control over all resources and populations within a

⁷ For an excellent discussion, see Falkenhausen 2006.

given territory such that they could be exploited for war. This involved, among other things, taking full censuses of the entire population. And this in turn involved ensuring that the entire population be placed within lineages.

How far down the social ranks the ancestor rituals we have been discussing were performed is impossible to say. But certainly the elite families – whether the elite status came from aristocratic birth or bureaucratic position – practised them. So much so that restricting how far up the ancestral line sacrifices could be given became a recurrent concern of the emerging states. (As we shall see, how high up the ancestral sacrifices could go was significant, as it allowed one to move to higher levels of spirits above.)⁸

And comparable rituals were performed to other entities than just the deceased members of one's family.

One of the many things we have learned from the explosion of new discoveries from early China is the ubiquity of sacrifices and offerings to spirits and ghosts.⁹ We have also learned that the spirits and ghosts were seen as extremely difficult to deal with, albeit in different ways.

Many of the ghosts were of recently deceased humans.¹⁰ There were also other ghosts whose provenance was unknown. They may or may not have once been human. (The term used here, *gui*, could also be translated as 'demon'.) All tended to be highly dangerous.

As I have argued elsewhere, the recurrent concern throughout this period was to transform potentially antagonistic gods and ghosts into an orderly and controllable pantheon.¹¹ The ghosts of those one was related to would hopefully be turned into ancestors, while other ghosts would be transformed into gods. The result of all this was not a weakening of the sacrificial system that we have seen from the Bronze Age but rather a generalisation of it.

Humans, Ghosts and Personalities

And all of this is very telling for the nature of the personalities – or lack thereof – of the resulting pantheon.

But let us begin with living humans.

⁸ For a helpful summary of the evolving kinship system, see Lewis 2010: 155–77. For one of the many attempts to give a normative system for how high up the ancestral line each social rank should be allowed to sacrifice, see the *Liji*, 'Ji fa', ICS, 122.24.5 (discussed in Puett 2005b: 77–8).

⁹ Sterckx 2011. ¹⁰ On ghosts, see Poo 2003 and 2004. ¹¹ Puett 2002.

A common understanding of the self by the Warring States period was that humans consist of a mess of dispositions, energies, souls, faculties and spirits. What one becomes over time then depends on how these various aspects are (or are not) trained, developed and domesticated.

But, at death, the training process would end, and the various energies that were held within the body would be released.¹² Once unmoored from their bodily container, the spirits would float upward into the heavens, where other spirits reside. The sense was that over time the spirit would continue to move upward into the heavens, becoming more and more removed from the human realm. Increasingly, it would become more like the other spirits – largely indifferent to the concerns of humans.

But if the concern was that the spirits would ultimately become indifferent, the period right after death contained far greater dangers. The energies and souls associated with what we would call emotions would also become unmoored. And potentially very dangerous. Death could unleash extraordinary levels of anger and resentment aimed at the living, whom the deceased would see moving on with their lives. And such energies of anger and resentment, if they were connected with the spirit before it became too distant, would be directed at the living with incredible degrees of power.¹³

This was what would be called a ghost.

Thus, one of the goals of the ritual work with the deceased was to disconnect these energies and souls from the spirit. The energies would be sealed in a tomb with the body. Inside the tomb would be placed things that the person enjoyed in life – hopefully therefore helping to keep the souls in the tomb, and hopefully also helping to keep them domesticated. And then the souls would be called upon to stay in the tomb and not leave.

If this was successful, the souls and energies – all of what we would call the personality – would thus be separated from the spirit. Over time, the souls would either dissipate or move off into various afterlives – paradises or hells.¹⁴

¹² On notions of death in early China, see Guo 2011; Cook 2006; Seidel 1987; Yu 1987; Brashier 1996, Puett 2011.

¹³ This is a problem that we can trace to our earliest writings from China. In the Shang oracle inscriptions, one of the key questions for divination when one became dangerously sick was to see if the illness was the result of a curse by one of the recently deceased. Those who had died long before were more powerful, but were also relatively indifferent to the living. So, if one of the living became sick, it was the recently deceased who were the likely culprits. For a careful reconstruction, see Keightley 2000.

¹⁴ We do not yet have a full study of all of the various conceptions of possible paradises and hells – largely because new evidence keeps coming in through new excavations. For an excellent study of the excavated evidence from the state of Chu, see Lai 2015.

But, either way, the hope was that they would stay away and not haunt the living.

The spirit, on the contrary, is the part one would try to make into an ancestor. That is the piece of a former human that would be above ground (and ever more so over time), that one would call down to participate in rituals in a temple, and that one would call upon to be a supportive ancestor. To the degree to which the ritual was successful, the spirit would become an ancestor and would work on behalf of the living.

But the rituals rarely worked fully. The souls would not stay in the tombs, and the spirits of the recently deceased would not remain supportive ancestors. They would on the contrary become dangerous ghosts that would haunt the living, and the rituals would have to be performed again and again.

Over time, the spirits would continue to float further into the heavens. As they did so, they would become increasingly distant, increasingly removed from the concerns of humans, and increasingly indifferent. This is another reason that so much ritual activity was focused upon the recently deceased. Not only were the recently deceased far more dangerous, they were also far more pliable by human sacrifices.

And then, of course, there were also the spirits already far above in the heavens. The most extreme was Heaven itself. Heaven does not appear ever to have been a human. Heaven was rather a distant spirit. And, like other spirits, Heaven was capricious and indifferent to the concerns of humans. Or perhaps one should say: at best indifferent to the concerns of humans. Sometimes, as we shall see, Heaven seemed to act directly contrary to human attempts to create a better world.

Given Heaven's distance, it was often relatively unresponsive to human attempts to control it through ritual activity. Accordingly, one of the goals was to work more with the recently deceased figures, call on them to behave as ancestors, and call on these ancestors in turn to move up the pantheon to ever more distant spirits. Ultimately, the hope was to influence Heaven. This is why the rulers would try to restrict how many ancestors non-royal lineages would offer sacrifice to: the hope was to restrict access to the more distant spirits, and particularly to Heaven.

And what about the ghosts that were not made into ancestors? Those of uncertain origin, or those that did not have descendants to make them into ancestors? Those are the ones that would be made into gods and goddesses. There would be no tomb for the souls and energies, however, so the goal would be to take those elements of the ghost/demon and attempt to transform them into a god or goddess who would be helpful to humans.

But here too, the rituals were often inadequate, so gods and goddesses frequently too would become either dangerous (reverting to their ghostly sides) or indifferent (floating up into the heavens and becoming unconcerned with the needs of living humans).

As much as possible, the hope was to create a divine world of supportive ancestors and gods, shorn of their capriciousness. And, yes, shorn of their personality. Indeed, one of the precise *goals* of the ritual work was to remove the personality from the ancestral spirit or god.

The Creation of the Gods

We have already seen this at work with ancestors and with Heaven. Some examples of attempts to make demonic figures into gods will be helpful.

Gaozu, the first ruler of the Han empire, initiated sacrifices to Chi You as a god of war.¹⁵ Chi You is otherwise known as a vicious warrior. An entire cycle of stories surrounds the figure.¹⁶ According to numerous stories in the cycle, Chi You, prior to his death, was a rebel who attacked Huangdi (the Yellow Emperor), the figure often credited with beginning the first state in China. Elsewhere, he is presented as a monster.

One example among many of the story cycles concerning Chi You is the 'Da huang jing' section of the *Shanhaijing*:

Chi You created weapons and attacked Huangdi. Huangdi thereupon ordered Ying Long to subdue him in the fields of Jizhou. Ying Long held back the waters, and so Chi You asked Fengbo and Yushi to let loose great winds and rain. Huangdi then sent down the Heavenly female called Ba, and the rain stopped. He thereupon killed Chi You.¹⁷

If Chi You was a rebel, a creator of weapons and a vicious warrior, the goal was to domesticate these traits posthumously. The point of the sacrificial acts was to preserve Chi You's skill in warfare, while also hopefully domesticating Chi You's dangerous sides and gaining Chi You's support.

Of course, sometimes the aspect that was worth keeping was not so dangerous. Huangdi himself became a major object of sacrifice by rulers during the early Han.¹⁸

¹⁵ *Shiji* 28.1378–80. ¹⁶ Puett 2001: 92–140.

¹⁷ *Shanhaijing jianshu*, 'Da huang bei jing', SBBY, 17.5a–5b. ¹⁸ *Shiji*, 28.1386.

And many of the stories told about the gods equally emphasise that the divinisation is based upon good things that the human did while alive. As the *Huainanzi* puts it:

Yandi created fire; when he died, he was made into the God of the Stove. Yu labored under Heaven; when he died, he was made into the God of the Soil. Houji created sowing and reaping; when he died, he was made into the God of the Grains. Yi rid all under Heaven from harm; when he died, he was made into the God of the Ancestral Temple. This is the means by which ghosts and gods were established.¹⁹

The sense here is that the actions the person took in life define the type of god that the person would be made into posthumously.

The same logic is at work in the placement of nature spirits into the sacrificial canon. The *Book of Rites* describes the work of deciding which natural powers would be made into 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.²⁰

Those that were made into objects of sacrifice were defined as 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’.²¹

Even a specific ritual such as the *she* is defined as one of making the earth into a spirit: ‘The *she* is that by which one makes into a spirit the way of the earth.’²²

The entire pantheon, in short, is a product of ritual domestication. A product of taking various powerful forces and forming them into ancestors and spirits.

Indeed, the very act of placing a name on a spirit was part of this practice of domestication. As the *Huainanzi* states, the creation of writing was a key part of the human project of domesticating the ghosts and divinities:

In ancient times, when Cang Jie created writing, Heaven rained grain and the ghosts cried all night.²³

Writing was one of the creations that allowed humans to gain some degree of control over the divine powers and the ghosts.

¹⁹ *Huainanzi*, ‘Fanlun’, ICS, 13/131/9–13. ²⁰ *Liji*, ‘Ji fa’, ICS, 123/24/9.

²¹ *Liji*, ‘Ji fa’, ICS, 122/24/3. ²² *Liji*, ‘Jiao te sheng’, ICS, 70/11.17/14.

²³ *Huainanzi*, ‘Benjing’, ICS, 8/62/27–8.

But the ghosts needn't have cried too much. Yes, within the ritual space, Heaven would be called upon to be a perfectly moral agent, the gods and goddesses to be fully reliable, and the ancestors to be fully supportive. But, despite these calls, the spirits would often return to being dangerous and capricious outside the ritual space. The human domestication of the divine was all too limited. The ghosts and spirits were more powerful than the rituals, more powerful than human attempts to domesticate them.

Undomesticated Divinities

If these rituals of domestication were among the dominant religious practices of the time, many movements arose in opposition to such practices. The views of the gods that appear in such movements are extremely telling.

One of the more influential such movements centred around the teachings of Confucius and Mencius. The claim here was that ritual did matter, but that the importance of ritual lay not in transforming divine powers but rather in transforming the human participants.

But the result of this latter approach was that divine powers were seen as not subject to human domestication. One of the key teachings was thus that the world was inherently capricious, and that ethics in part consisted of trying to domesticate human emotions while accepting that the divine world could not be counted on to support human endeavours.

The capriciousness of Heaven, indeed, became a crucial part of such ethics. The goal was to cultivate oneself to become a better human being, working to create situations in which others could flourish. And only if one knew one would not necessarily be rewarded for doing this would one do it fully.

Thus, the texts in this tradition strongly emphasise that Heaven is at best indifferent to the concerns of humans. And at times Heaven seems to act directly against the work of humans to construct a better world.

When Confucius' best disciple died young, Confucius is presented as looking to the skies, calling out: 'Heaven is destroying me!'²⁴

And such a vision pervades the view of history seen in the *Mencius*.

In distant antiquity, according to the stories told in the *Mencius*, sages governed the world. And, since sages act to create environments in which humans can flourish, having sages on the throne ensured that other sages

²⁴ *Lunyu*, 11/9.

would be emerging as well. Thus, when the ruler was aging, he would look around and choose the most sagely in the population to succeed him. The sage Yao was accordingly succeeded by the sage Shun, who in turn was followed by the sage Yu.

But then the pattern was broken. Instead of handing the throne to the most sagely in the realm, Yu gave it to his son. And thus began hereditary monarchy. This ensured that sages would rarely if ever be on the throne, since the principle of succession was based on heredity rather than sagacity. Moreover, since sages were not on the throne creating environments in which other sages might emerge, sages became extremely rare. Not only were they not on the throne, there were almost no sages around anyway. And it was Heaven that created this change:

All of this was due to Heaven. It is not something that man could have done. If no one does it, and yet it is done, then it is Heaven. If no one brings something about, and yet it is brought about, it is mandated.²⁵

Fortunately, according to Mencius, a sage has nonetheless tended to emerge every five hundred years or so. Since sages are no longer rulers, sages who do emerge are forced to go to those who have the political position to put the teachings into practice. When this happens, a new dynasty can be formed.

If one is a sage, then, the most one can hope for in terms of political position is to become a sage minister.

Towards the end of his life, Mencius decided that the time was ripe for the creation of a new order. He began travelling from state to state, speaking to the rulers who would be in positions of power to begin a new dynasty. When these efforts ended in failure, the text narrates a scene of Mencius returning home:

When Mencius left Qi, Chong Yu asked him on the way, 'Master, you seem to look displeased. A few days ago I heard you say that "a gentleman does not resent Heaven nor bears a grudge against men."' Mencius responded, "That was one time, this is another time. Every five hundred years, it must be the case that a king will arise. In the interval there must arise one from which an age takes its name. From the Zhou until now, it has been more than seven hundred years. The mark has passed, and the time, if one examines it, is proper. Yet Heaven does not yet wish to bring order to all under Heaven. If Heaven wished to bring order to all under Heaven, who in the present generation is there other than me? How could I be displeased?"²⁶

²⁵ *Mengzi*, 5A/6. ²⁶ *Mengzi*, 2B/13. See Yearley 1975; Puett 2005a: 49–69.

Heaven, in other words, was actively working to block the creation of order. And humans must learn to live in such a capricious world.

Thus, texts in this tradition emphasise the powers of an implacable Heaven that bizarrely kills Confucius' best disciple, that inexplicably creates hereditary monarchy and thus brings to an end a period when the most virtuous would always rule, that prevents a proper order from being created even when the time is ripe. If human rituals cannot domesticate Heaven, then one must strive to live properly in an inherently capricious world.

A Moral Cosmos

A very different approach can be seen in an early religious movement started by a charismatic figure named Mozi, who argued that, contrary to much of the religious practice of the day, Heaven was in fact a good deity. And Heaven presided over a pantheon of ghosts who were themselves fully moral and completely reliable. The ghosts would always reward the good and punish the bad, and the key was for all humans to believe in the reliability of these ghosts. The stories the Mohists tell about Heaven and ghosts, therefore, are precisely the ones that in other texts would appear only in ritual contexts. The move here was essentially one of taking these ritual statements and calling on people to believe them as being true outside the ritual space as well.

Moreover, there are ways that I (Mozi) know Heaven loves the people deeply. It shaped and made the sun, moon, stars, and constellations so as to illuminate and guide them (i.e., the people). It formed and made the four seasons, spring, autumn, winter, and summer, so as to weave them into order. It sent down thunder, snow, frost, rain, and dew so as to make the five grains, hemp, and silk grow and prosper, and sent the people to obtain materials and benefit from them. It arranged and made mountains, streams, gorges, and valleys, and distributed and bestowed the hundred affairs so as to oversee and supervise the goodness and badness of the people. It made kings, dukes, and lords and charged them with, first, rewarding the worthy and punishing the wicked, and, second, plundering the metals, wood, birds, and beasts and working the five grains, hemp, and silk so as to make the materials for people's clothing and food.²⁷

²⁷ Mozi, 'Tianzhi, zhong', SBBY, 7.6b-7a.

Far from trying to domesticate a capricious deity and dangerous ghosts into a (hopefully) supportive pantheon, the goal was rather simply to follow and accord with the proper order of Heaven and the ghosts:

Therefore, in ancient times the sage kings made manifest and understood what Heaven and the ghosts bless and avoided what Heaven and the ghosts detest so as to increase the benefits of all under Heaven and eradicate the harms of all under Heaven. This is why Heaven made coldness and heat, placed the four seasons in rhythm, and modulated the yin and yang, the rain and dew. At the proper time the five grains ripened and the six animals prospered. Diseases, disasters, sorrows, plagues, inauspiciousness, and hunger did not arrive.²⁸

The cosmos is already moral, and the spirits and ghosts are not capricious at all.

Similar reactions to the dominant religious practices of the day would continue to populate the religious landscape in early China. Several centuries later, in 142 CE, Zhang Daoling would receive revelations from a high deity Laozi. Laozi was a good deity who, like Heaven for the Mohists, created proper guidelines for humans to follow. The followers of these teachings formed an autonomous community called the Celestial Masters, who created a meritocratic society based upon the degrees to which the followers put into practice the revelations of Laozi.

But unlike the Mohists, the Celestial Masters were taught that ghosts were not moral beings but rather highly dangerous creatures. And the goal was not to sacrifice to them: according to the Celestial Masters, sacrifice only empowers the ghosts. The practitioners were told on the contrary to reject sacrifice altogether and instead simply to believe in the revelations of Laozi.²⁹

Similar claims would reappear throughout subsequent millenarian movements in China. But the power of such movements can only be understood when they are seen as a rejection of the dominant practices of the time.

Stories of the Living, Stories of the Dead

Having explored these sacrificial practices as well as attempts to deny their efficacy or reject them entirely, let us return to the earlier point about the supposed lack of stories concerning the personalities of the gods in China.

²⁸ *Mozi*, 'Tianzhi, zhong', 7.6a–6b. ²⁹ Puett 2004.

As we explore these religious practices and the responses to them, it becomes clear that we have simply been looking in the wrong places.

In early China, there was no lack of concern with the capricious and dangerous qualities of divine powers. Hence the endless concern with domesticating and humanising them. And this is how one must understand the stories that are told about them.

Given the nature of these ritual practices in early China, the stories about the personalities of divine figures are to be found in the story cycles concerning what humans did before they died and were made into gods and goddesses. A Chi You before he becomes a god of war, for example. Or, posthumously, those figures who were not made into ancestors or gods. Hence the endless obsession with ghost stories in China.

And one finds as well an endless obsession with the capriciousness of the spirits. A capriciousness that manifests itself when, for example, Heaven throws ruin upon the innocent despite ritual entreaties. Or when Heaven acts to disrupt human attempts to build a better world.

In contrast to such stories, the ritual texts – like the bronze inscription mentioned above – present the gods and ancestors as perfectly moral and supportive figures playing out their roles flawlessly. Heaven is simply a moral force, rewarding the good and punishing the bad; ancestors are simply benevolent figures, acting to support their descendants. But that is because they are ritual texts, making ritual claims. They are not statements of belief. Or, when one finds such calls to believe that both Heaven and the ghosts are inherently good and supportive – as in the recurrent appeals of the Mohists – these are calls for a belief very much at odds with the practices of the day.

Ritual and Non-Ritual Worlds

As we have explored the nature of these materials, early Chinese notions of the divine no longer seem so different from those found in early Greece. Indeed, what is striking on the contrary is how similar the two cultures now appear.

In both societies, one of the dominant religious concerns was to work with a series of divine figures that were often seen as either highly capricious in their dealings with humans or overly indifferent to the concerns of humans. In both cases, ritual, and particularly sacrifice, was one of the key ways of trying to work with and hopefully gain the support of these capricious powers. In short, instead of a broad contrast between two

radically different cosmologies, we see on the contrary a surprising set of similarities.

But if the basic problem – dealing with capricious and potentially dangerous divinities – was extremely similar, the responses went in different directions.

And this is where things get interesting.

The differences between Greece and China lie not in contrasting overall conceptions of the nature of the cosmos, or, more immediately, contrasting overall conceptions of the divine. Certainly, as we have seen, the divine figures in China were in no manner, shape or form more harmonious or inherently predisposed towards the living than those in Greece.

But what if we think in terms of problems, rather than assumptions? If we focus on the problems that figures in the two cultures were facing, then the comparatively interesting questions emerge in the differing ways that the problems were wrestled with.

Ritual, Belief and the Imagination

Often with comparisons between Greece and China, the comparison begins with categories taken either implicitly or explicitly from the Greek side. So let's try going the other way.

In the ritual theory that develops in the Warring States period of China, one of the points that becomes emphasised is the notion of as-if worlds being created in a ritual space.³⁰ The idea is that the participants enter a ritual space where they are transformed by acting in different roles. The living act as if they are filial descendants and devoted worshippers, making offerings to supportive ancestors or divinities (rather than dangerous ghosts and capricious spirits), within a harmonious and coherent cosmos.

Hopefully, the dangerous ghosts and capricious spirits will in fact enter the ritual space and be transformed. But, regardless, one sacrifices to them as if this is the case. As Confucius is quoted as saying in the *Analects*: sacrifice to the spirits 'as if they are present'.³¹ Although this has often been read in twentieth-century Western scholarship as a statement of agnosticism about whether spirits really exist or not, it in fact is a statement concerning the as-if nature of ritual action.

³⁰ Seligman, Weller, Puett and Simon 2008: 17–42, 179–82. For an analysis of 'as-if' from a larger philosophical perspective, see Vaihinger 1911.

³¹ *Lunyu*, 3/12.

An entire body of ritual theory developed in the Warring States and early Han devoted to such theories of ritual. During the early Han, this was consolidated into the *Book of Rites*. In the thirties BCE, the *Book of Rites* became defined as one of the five classics, and much of state ritual practice became modelled upon the ritual vision found therein.

One of the key arguments in the chapters on sacrifice in the *Book of Rites* is that, within the ritual space, the entire cosmos is like a single family. Each lineage has a defined number of ancestors it is allowed to make offerings to, all of the lineages in turn are called upon to think of the ruler as their father and mother, and the ruler is called upon to be the Son of Heaven. Thus, within the ritual space, everything is connected through genealogical lines, with the ruler serving as the fulcrum connecting the entire populace with Heaven.³²

Except, of course, this isn't true outside the ritual space. Heaven is not seen as having actually given birth to the ruler; the ruler certainly is not the parent of the population, and even the descendants rarely think of deceased ghosts as inherently supportive ancestors outside of ritual contexts. The ritual serves as an as-if space, in which participants are called upon to become something different than they were before they walked into the ritual space. To the degree to which it works, the living will act as filial descendants to the deceased; the ghosts of the deceased will behave as supportive ancestors to their descendants; the people will follow the ruler as if he were their parent; the ruler will treat the population as his own children; and Heaven will support the ruler as his own son. But, over time, the transformative effects of the ritual will weaken. The deceased will return to being ghosts; Heaven will become indifferent. And thus the rituals will be performed again.

This is, needless to say, a ritual theory that is built upon the practices that we have traced back to the Bronze Age, now being self-consciously appropriated and theorised.

What if we use this model for our comparative endeavour? If we think of ritual not as socialising participants into a belief system but rather as creating imaginary as-if possibilities – trying to create a world that is perceived as not yet existing – then the comparatively interesting questions turn to issues like: What are the as-if worlds being created in the ritual space? And what are such as-if worlds being posited in opposition to?

So let us now return to our comparison, bringing the discussion of the Chinese material into conversation with the Greek material and looking in

³² Puett 2005b, 2008, 2014.

more detail at what the rituals entail and how the imaginary space of the rituals operated.

Genealogies of Descent, Genealogies in Reverse

In both Greece and China, we are dealing with cultures in which divine powers were seen as highly capricious. Ritual in general, and sacrifice in particular, was a crucial way to try to gain the cooperation of the divine figures, and perhaps even control them. Depending on the context, therefore, Zeus could be treated as a great and good divine ruler as well as a highly capricious divinity. And the same was true of Heaven.

Given this similarity, the interesting comparative issues thus come down to the permutations that play off these similarities. What is the nature of the capricious spirits with whom one is struggling, and what is the nature of the world one is trying – even if only for brief moments – to create within the ritual space?

A standard sacrifice in ancient Greece would consist of the slaughter of an animal. The carcass would then be divided, with the meat being eaten by the humans and the bones being offered to the gods. In short, the sacrificial structure consisted of division, with a clear demarcation of the places of humans and gods.³³

Perhaps the most famous elaboration of this sacrificial practice of division is that of Hesiod. In his *Works and Days*, Hesiod portrays the division as a result of Prometheus' theft of fire – a transgression that won for humanity autonomy from the gods, but at the cost of a life of toil and, ultimately, death. The sacrificial division was a part of this same ambivalence. Hesiod presents the division as a ruse: Prometheus surrounded the bones with fat, hoping thereby to fool Zeus into believing he had been given the better portion, while Prometheus kept for himself the meat. But underlying the ruse was the reality of the relationship: humanity needed food in order to survive, while Zeus, an immortal, did not.³⁴

The deeper and fuller narrative elaboration of the division, however, is to be found in the *Theogony*. Hesiod reconstructs the genealogy of the gods

³³ Perhaps the most influential studies of sacrifice in Greece are those undertaken by Jean-Pierre Vernant and Marcel Detienne. See the collection Detienne and Vernant 1989. More recently, these interpretations have been deepened through a closer attention to the implicit theology of the sacrificial acts. See in particular Naiden 2015, as well as the edited collections by Faraone and Naiden 2012, and Hitch and Rutherford 2017.

³⁴ See the excellent study by Vernant 1989.

that led ultimately to the world of the present. This is the world of genealogically related immortals that the all-too-mortal humans are now both autonomous from yet dependent upon.

Different figures would, of course, develop the genealogy differently. In various contexts, the ancestry of a given god or goddess would be traced one way rather than another. But the permutations reveal the implicit logic. The imaginary of the world of Greek divinities was one of an inter-related group of immortals, all connected through complex and interweaving descent lines.

For humans, the goal was to break from this world and win for humanity a life of autonomy – even if that also meant a life of want, deprivation and ultimately death. The consequent need for food and help thus meant that humans continued to be dependent on the gods, while still maintaining, as much as possible, distinction.

The ritual as-if, in short, was one of trying to gain the support of the gods while also demarcating the line between the gods and the human supplicants. The sacrifice thus consisted of both supplication and division, both submitting to the will of the divine while at the same time defining for each its proper place.

In early China, the divine powers were seen as equally capricious – perhaps even more than in Greece. But the goal in the ritual space was one of connecting – ideally into familial relationships. Even actual ancestral offerings in early China, as we have seen, were based on constructing ancestors – transforming dangerous ghosts of the recently deceased into ancestors who would be called upon to act on behalf of humanity. The movement, in other words, went from the living upwards to the deceased, as the living formed the deceased into (hopefully) supportive ancestors. When done fully, the world within the ritual space would be a single patrilineal lineage, with the king serving as the Son of Heaven and the father and mother of the people, pulling together all of the disparate and capricious energies of the cosmos into a harmonious family.

This was not a question of descendants winning their autonomy from the ancestors; the goal of sacrificial practice in early China was not to create discontinuity. It was rather a never-ending attempt to create continuity. The problem was not to break from a genealogically related set of immortals; the problem was rather to bring disparate beings together into a ritually constructed lineage.

In Greece, the ‘Son of Zeus’ was, well, the son of Zeus, in a genealogical sense – Heracles, Dionysus, Apollo. The ‘Son of Heaven’ in China, on the contrary, was a ritual claim. The ruler was not seen as having actually

descended from Heaven, and the ruler was never called upon to in some sense succeed in gaining his autonomy from such an ancestral figure. The problem was rather the opposite: the divine powers were discontinuous from humans, and the goal was to create linkages.

The sacrificial as-if, in other words, goes in opposing directions in the two cultures. Greek sacrificial practice involved (hopefully) gaining the support of the gods while also creating a ritual distinction from them – the sacrifice thus recapitulating the dependence of humans on the gods along with the (ultimately doomed) attempt to gain autonomy from them. In contrast, the ritual as-if in early China was predicated upon a claim of connecting and domesticating, of endlessly trying to create (also ultimately doomed) continuity where none before was seen as existing.

In short, by focusing on competing cosmologies – with early China being portrayed as ‘harmonious’, and early Greece as ‘tragic’, we have missed what is most interesting in these relations between humans and divinities in the two cultures. The problematic – dealing with highly capricious divine powers – is actually quite similar. But the ways of working with this comparable problem have taken very different forms. In early Greece, the imaginary was one of presenting the world of capricious spirits as an inter-related world of immortals who had to be supplicated while also being kept at a distance. In early China, the imaginary was of domesticating the divine powers into a humanly constructed lineage.

Both cultures, then, are fully ‘tragic’. In both cultures the endless problem was one of working with highly capricious divinities through a set of ritual constructions. And these ritual constructions were doomed to failure: the divine powers were incomparably more powerful than the human rituals designed to control them.

Divine Personalities, Divine Forces

So, finally, let us return to personalities. There is another similarity between these two cultures. Families are messy. And, yes, they often involve complex emotional responses – jealousies, resentments, anger. Some of this we might call ingredients of a personality, but that actually is not the term used in either culture at the time. If our tendency is to fall into complex emotional responses with the ones with whom we are close, what is intriguing from a comparative perspective is where these jealousies, resentments and angers are located in the divine.

In the imaginary of early Greece, such emotional responses are pervasive among the gods and goddesses, all of whom are inter-related. And they are pervasive in the stories (outside the ritual space, of course) of gods and goddesses as they relate to humans as well. Hence the need to divorce such emotions from the ritual space.

In early China, such emotional responses are pervasive among humans, but they are seen as growing less and less significant the longer one is dead. Eventually, one simply becomes like the spirits above – powerful, no longer driven by deep-seated angers and resentments, but also indifferent to the needs of humans. That, of course, is a huge problem for humans. But, before that, the problem is how to deal with these angers, jealousies and resentments before they dissipate – the angers, jealousies and resentments of the recently deceased, of the ghosts. And that is one of the crucial goals of ritual work: to construct a world that as much as possible would function like a harmonious family. And the nature of the family was clear from the claims within the ritual space. The family would be one in which each figure would play his role perfectly; one, in other words, where the angers, jealousies and resentments would be driven out.

Hence the ramifications we see playing out in our sources: cycles of stories in early Greece playing upon the angers and jealousies of the gods and goddesses, cycles of stories in early China playing upon the angers and jealousies of ghosts and the capriciousness of the higher spirits. And, in both cases, a ritual world of perfect relationships.

Conclusions

As we have seen, the contrast so often drawn between ancient Greece and China concerning the purported antagonistic relationship between humans and gods in Greece versus the purported harmonious relationship in early China is based upon taking statements out of radically different contexts and then reading such statements as assumptions of the culture in question. But, once we focus on the contexts in which such statements were made, and the problems such statements were trying to solve, a different set of issues emerges. What is striking on the contrary is the tremendous similarity in concerns with dealing with divine powers. In both cases, the hope was to bring the divine powers into the ritual space. Sometimes the divine powers would come, and sometimes they would not. When they would come, the divine powers would be treated within the ritual space as if they were supportive beings, and the

relationship between humans and gods would be presented as if it were harmonious.

Outside the ritual space, however, narratives and protests would circulate about the capriciousness of the spirits. And entire movements would develop based upon reacting against the capriciousness of the spirits and the seeming inadequacy of human efforts to control them through sacrifice.

In China, the capricious and dangerous divine powers were seen as being either ghosts (remnants of deceased humans filled with anger and resentment) or indifferent spirits. And the solution was one of trying, to whatever extent possible, to transform these ghosts and spirits into a pantheon of supportive ancestors, gods and goddesses. This attempt to domesticate the world of the divine was seen as never-ending, since the ghosts and spirits are always more powerful than human attempts to control them. But, to whatever extent it succeeded, the result would be a world in which these dangerous beings would on the contrary become a genealogically linked set of supportive ancestors and divinities.

In Greece, the imaginary worked the other way. The capricious gods and goddesses were represented as genealogically linked, and the problem for humans was to win a level of autonomy from them, even though this break also meant that humans would be mortal and dependent upon the more powerful gods. The goal of the sacrificial act was thus not to transform the divine into (ritually speaking) genealogically related ancestors; the goal on the contrary was to break from them and define the respective spheres of humans and gods, while also requesting their support.³⁵ If the goal of the sacrificial act in China was to create continuity, the goal of the sacrificial act in Greece was to create discontinuity.

These differences help to illuminate the types of stories concerning divinities found in the two cultures. In both cases, the imaginary focuses on what sacrifice is being called upon to change – in other words, what exists outside or prior to sacrifice.

The imaginary that develops out of sacrifice in Greece inspires a constant concern with the interconnected world of divine beings – a world that sacrifice helps to win autonomy from, even while that world is also hopefully being transformed into a more supportive one through the sacrificial act. In contrast, the imaginary that develops out of sacrifice in China is focused on the lives of humans before they died, including the personality

³⁵ This was, of course, for ordinary mortals. Heroes, on the contrary, were humans who would be divinised after death and sacrificed to as such. Instead of marking a distinction between humans and gods, sacrifices to heroes involved the role of heroes as a mediating force.

traits that sacrifice domesticates by either expunging or transforming; the angers and resentments of the ghosts; the indifference and capriciousness of the spirits and natural powers.

In short, if sacrifice – like ritual in general – operates in an as-if world, the imaginary world of the stories often plays on what the sacrificial action is working upon.

The seeming lack of a Zeus or a Prometheus in early Chinese ritual constructions is not due to a lack of capricious deities or a lack of human attempts to respond to such capriciousness. On the contrary. This is precisely the sort of all-pervasive relationship the rituals in early China were trying to expunge.

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