

To become a god

Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-
Divinization in Early China

Michael J. Puett

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Conclusion

Culture and History in Early China

At the end of the Western Han, the dominant conception of the cosmos was of a world organized by humans, ritually separate from, yet correlated with, Heaven and Earth. Kuang Heng's model was a cosmological re-reading of narratives from the *Shangshu* concerning the Duke of Shao's aligning of Luoyang: the king places his capital and thus determines the positions of Heaven and Earth. Heaven, Earth, and man are harmonized when each performs its proper cosmological duty. But it is only if we know the significance these ideas possessed in the early Han that we can understand the real concerns behind the ritual reform—namely, various claims of divinization that had flourished in the early Han, or, more explicitly, theomorphic notions of kingship as well as self-cultivation practices that involved a rejection of textual authority and the precedents set by the past sages. It is thus fitting to end this study at this point, when the Han court forcefully rejected the claims of divinization—claims that had played such a crucial role in the reaction against sacrifice and divination and in the rise of empire. And it is not surprising that in rejecting these claims, figures such as Kuang Heng turned back to a particular, cosmological reading of Bronze Age rituals—since these were precisely the rituals that the divinization movements had reacted against.

Following David Keightley, I have argued that the paramount religious concern of the Shang and Western Zhou was to forge deceased humans into

ancestors who could then be influenced through sacrifices and divinations. The rituals worked from the bottom up: the lower ancestors were weaker, yet more amenable to the blandishments of human ritual, whereas the higher powers were stronger but less malleable. The goal was thus to work one's way up the pantheon: the ritual specialists would appeal to the lower ancestors, who would in turn be directed to appeal to the higher ancestors, who would in turn be called on to pacify the more powerful, non-ancestral powers—including, most important, Di, or Heaven. These sacrificial practices represented an attempt to join nature spirits and the ghosts of deceased humans into a single, unified system. The deceased humans were transformed into ancestral spirits, defined by their roles in a hierarchy; nature spirits and unrelated yet nonetheless powerful deceased humans were similarly placed into this hierarchy as well.

By the fourth century BC, however, a new group of figures (usually referred to in the secondary literature as the *shi*) began gaining prominence at the courts of the time. It is clear from their recurrent critiques of sacrifice and divination that such figures felt themselves to be in competition with ritual specialists. Indeed, the authors of these texts not only rejected sacrificial models but also attempted to reverse them and thereby supersede them. Sacrificial models in early China operated by working from the recently deceased and less powerful local spirits toward more distant and more powerful deities. In contrast, the new model posited the One, the ultimate ancestor from which everything—all spirits, all natural phenomena, and all humans—were generated. This concept emerged, for the first time, in numerous fourth-century BC texts, such as the "Neiye," the *Taiyi sheng shui*, and the *Laozi*. The entire pantheon of deities—from local spirits to Heaven itself—as well as the natural phenomena they supposedly controlled, were subsumed under the One. And instead of appealing to this ultimate ancestor by working up the pantheon, proponents of the new model claimed direct access to the One and thus full power and knowledge over the cosmos.

Much of the interest in these texts lies in the different ways these systems based on the One were built. One approach, developed in the "Neiye" and taken further in texts like the "Xinshu" chapters, is self-divinization, which is achieved by, among other things, returning to and holding fast to the One: the sage gains power over the things of the universe by grasping the ancestor that generated them and continues to underlie them. Another approach, seen in the *Taiyi sheng shui*, is to gain full knowledge: rearranging the pantheon of the

day into a series of lineal descendants from the One allowed the authors to claim that they alone understood the workings of the cosmos. In each of these texts, however, the authors claimed either the ability, or possession of the techniques that conferred the ability, to reach the One and thereby understand and exercise control over the cosmos without resorting to divination and sacrifice. What bothered figures like Xunzi and the authors of the *Xici zhuan* about these claims was that they denied the efficacy of time-honored rituals of the past. These authors therefore argued in support of divination and sacrifice, even while building their arguments on many of the same cosmological claims as the proponents of self-divinization and gnosis.

The debate between ritual specialists and cosmologists continued during the rise of empire in early China. Although the sacrificial system that arose with the Qin and Han empires has often been described as based on a correlative system, I have argued that it was based largely on a new variant of the sacrificial model—divinization through sacrifice rather than through cosmology. The process here was, horizontally, to take over more and more sacred spaces inhabited by local spirits and offer them cult and, vertically, to appeal to ever higher gods in the pantheon. The endless process of consolidating local cults while also appealing to higher gods was seen to aid in the process of the divinization of the ruler and ultimately lead to his ascension. The extreme was reached with Emperor Wu, whose consolidation of the empire coincided with his sacrifices to the Great One.

As Sima Qian correctly pointed out, this created a dynamic in which the ruler tried to gain more land and undertake more travels in order to appropriate more and more divine power. This new form of theomorphic kingship was critiqued by several voices in the early Han—from the authors of the *Huainanzi*, who called for a cosmological form of divinization, to figures like Dong Zhongshu, who rejected divinization and proposed correlatively defined sacrifices. Both of these were attempts to limit the theomorphic claims of the ruler through appeals to cosmological patterns.

Ultimately, Emperor Wu's system began to falter because of imperial overreach, and it was finally repealed near the end of the Western Han. The divinization claims that had so dominated court politics since the beginning of the Qin empire were rejected. Rulers were defined as humans, ritually separate from divine powers, with their own duties to perform. As a consequence, claims of ascension became associated with those groups who opposed the empire.

These points also have comparative significance. As we have seen repeatedly in this study, China, when discussed in a comparative perspective, has long been characterized as a culture that assumed continuity between the human and the divine world. In some comparisons, China is seen as the antithesis of the West; in others it is placed at a different point on an evolutionary line of development. But either way, early China is presented as a society devoid of the tensions between man and God, Zeus and Prometheus, that pervaded the Hebraic and Greek traditions, as a society that never experienced the distancing of the world from divinity that has existed in the West. Although Weber portrayed this negatively, most China specialists have portrayed it positively: China has become the land where gods and men are linked in harmony, and where there exists a fundamental continuity of the human and the divine. China is also frequently presented as the one major civilization that never discarded primitive notions of harmony with the natural and divine worlds. Working from this same line of argument, scholars have built other comparative models for explaining China: shamanism, this-worldly optimism, bureaucratic harmony, sacrificial *do ut des*.

One of the few scholars working within a comparative framework who has rejected this approach is Heiner Roetz. Roetz attempts to read into early China the same transcendental breakthrough and "disenchantment of nature" that he sees as inherent in any rational evolution, and his picture of early China is wildly at odds with that of other scholars. But even Roetz attributes what he sees as the ultimate failure of Chinese philosophy to its inability to develop as strong a tension between human society and the world as in the West.

I have tried to break down the binaries of dualism/monism and tragic/harmonious cosmologies as they are often applied to Greece and China in two ways. First, I have tried to focus on how specific individuals in specific contexts worked through issues of the proper relationships between humans and divine powers and how the resulting debates played out historically. As we have repeatedly seen, characterizations of Greece as dualistic and China as monistic are of little use in this approach. Empedocles, for example, was monistic; question four of the *Shiwen* was dualistic. Moreover, even the term "monism" is insufficiently nuanced to cover the positions taken in these debates. Depending on one's method of positing the human and divine elements of the cosmos, one can assert discontinuity even while proclaiming a monistic cosmos. For example, Dong Zhongshu asserted a monistic cosmos

in opposition to the theistic cosmology dominant at the imperial court of his day, but he also strongly distinguished humanity and Heaven and argued, also in opposition to the cults at the court, that humans could not become gods. A strong assertion of continuity was coupled with, at a different level, a strong assertion of discontinuity. And only by looking at the contemporary context can one understand the significance of these claims. To describe Dong Zhongshu as simply "monistic" fails to do justice to the many implications of his arguments.

And the point can be put in stronger terms when we look at attempts to describe several early Chinese authors as "monistic." Both the "Xinshu" chapters and Dong Zhongshu's cosmology are monistic, but these two monisms have very different implications. The authors of the "Xinshu" chapters were arguing for the continuity of human and divine powers in opposition to the discontinuities implied by sacrifice and divination; Dong Zhongshu was distinguishing Heaven and man in opposition to the claims of imperial divinity. For the authors of the "Xinshu" chapters, humans could become spirits and hence did not need divination and sacrifice; for Dong Zhongshu, humans were separate from the divine, but, precisely through such actions as sacrifices, had a crucial cosmic role to play. For the authors of the "Xinshu" chapters, the king was divine; for Dong Zhongshu, he was human. In short, the categorization of early Chinese thought as "monistic," in opposition to a "dualistic" cosmology of the West, breaks down at every level when we explore the historical contexts and implications of specific statements.

My second goal has been to place the debates analyzed in this book within a comparative framework that has greater explanatory power than that of a "monistic" cosmology or the related claims of shamanism and sacrificial *do ut des*. At first glance, this second goal, of seeking to analyze this period of early Chinese history from a larger perspective, might appear to be in conflict with the emphasis on nuance that characterizes my first goal. One of the underlying arguments of this study, however, has been that these two goals are mutually reinforcing, for it is precisely in the nuances of the debate that issues of comparative interest come to the fore. More specifically, it is through such nuances that one can recognize the tensions and concerns underlying the debates, and it is only, in turn, by recognizing these tensions and concerns that one can compare the Chinese material with that found in other cultures facing similar political and cultural problems.

It follows that comparison will be most fruitful when we compare cultures that have faced a similar set of historical circumstances. I have therefore agreed with the many scholars who have stressed the benefits of comparing early China and early Greece. Like early China, ancient Greece also witnessed, at roughly the same period, comparable social and political changes (the breakdown of an older aristocratic, Bronze Age society, and the growth of independent, competing territorial states, some of which developed imperial ambitions), as well as a series of interrelated debates concerning divinization, sacrifice, and cosmology. But I have tried to develop this comparison on different grounds.

I have advocated working toward a vocabulary that is both nuanced enough to allow for careful historical studies and yet open enough to maintain cross-cultural validity. Instead of categorizing cultures in terms of such dichotomies as "monism/dualism" or "immanence/transcendence," and instead of working from (even if only implicit) evolutionary frameworks based on "religion to philosophy" or "animism to humanism and rationalism" narratives, we should try to focus on terms that allow us to tease out the problems and tensions in each culture under analysis. In this book, I have argued that the tensions surrounding "divinization" or notions of continuity and discontinuity may result in more meaningful comparisons between Greece and China than do either the evolutionary or the essentializing frameworks. In both Greece and China, at roughly the same time, one finds comparable tensions surrounding sacrificial action, self-divinization, cosmology, and empire. The interesting issues for comparative studies are how and why the claims were made in each culture, and how and why various solutions came to be institutionalized. Posing the questions in this way has, I hope, yielded results that explain more than the other frameworks discussed in the Introduction.

In setting up this comparative framework, I have turned to anthropological discussions of kingship, sacrifice, and cosmology. Building on the work of figures like Lévi-Strauss and Sahlins, I have tried to develop a valid comparative vocabulary that helps to uncover the complexities of claims made in various cultures. In bringing this literature to bear on the early Chinese materials, I have based much of my analysis on the work of Marcel Granet. This is somewhat ironic, since Granet was one of the most influential figures in defining China as a land of continuity—one of the positions I critique in this book. However, as I argue in Chapters 4 and 6, a careful reading of

Granet yields a rather different portrait of early China: Granet's analyses become far more persuasive when they are taken out of Granet's own essentializing, evolutionary, and typological frameworks. Since I have found much of this anthropological theory—from Granet to Sahlins—helpful in conceptualizing the issues at hand, I hope that I have, at least to some small extent, returned the favor by helping to bring the Chinese material into broader anthropological concerns.

And when we treat these issues from such a historical and comparative perspective, many of the readings proposed from within either the evolutionary or essentialist frameworks cease to be fully convincing. We do not find in early China assumptions of harmony or of a continuity between humans and divine powers or of a lack of tension between humans and the divine. On the contrary, one of the crucial issues in early China was the recurring tension between those who wished to maintain a ritual separation of humans and divine powers and those who wished to destroy those separations and appropriate divine powers for themselves. Spirits were not only powers with which one harmonized; they were often powers one fought, cheated, appropriated, and tried to become or transcend. And a significant part of early Chinese history becomes fully understandable only when we acknowledge such tensions and trace the ways in which they played out.