

Chapter Six

Chinese Religion and Confucianism

“The Religions of Ancient China”

Objectives:

1. Identify the earliest Chinese culture
2. Identify the three ideas/beliefs found in the religious documents of the Yang Shao culture
3. Define matrilineal descent
4. Identify the characteristics of the Shang period in China
5. Explain the symbolism of polarity

The Religions of Ancient China

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Religious beliefs in the Neolithic period

For the historian of culture as well as for the historian of religions, China represents an unusually advantageous field of research. The earliest Chinese archeological documents, for example, go back to the sixth and fifth millenniums, and in at least some cases it is possible to follow the continuity of the different prehistoric cultures and even to define their contribution to the forming of classical Chinese civilization. For, just as the Chinese people arises from many and various ethnic combinations, its culture constitutes a complex and original synthesis in which the contributions of several sources can nevertheless be discovered.

The earliest Neolithic culture is that of Yang Shao, so termed from the name of the village in which vessels of painted clay were discovered in 1921. A second Neolithic culture, characterized by a black pottery, was discovered near Lung Shan in 1928. But it was not until after 1950 that, as a result of the numerous excavations made during the preceding thirty years, it became possible to classify all the phases and the general outlines of the Chinese Neolithic cultures. By the help of radiocarbon dating, the chronology was substantially modified. At Pan Po (in Shensi Province) the earliest site belonging to the Yang Shao culture was brought to light; radiocarbon dating indicates ca. 4115 or ca. 4365. In the fifth millennium the site was occupied for 600 years. But Pan Po does not represent the earliest stage of the Yang Shao culture.¹ According to Ping-ti Ho, the author of the latest synthetic study of Chinese prehistory, the agriculture practiced in

1. Ping-ti Ho, *The Cradle of the East*, pp. 16 ff.

the sixth millennium was a local discovery, as were the domestication of certain animals, ceramics, and the metallurgy of bronze.² Yet, only recently, the development of the Chinese Neolithic cultures and Bronze Age was explained by a dissemination of agriculture and metallurgy from several centers in the ancient Near East. It is not our part to take sides in this controversy. It seems indubitable that certain techniques were invented or radically modified in China. It is no less probable that protohistorical China received numerous cultural elements of Western origin, disseminated across Siberia and the Central Asian steppes.

The archeological documents can give us information about certain religious beliefs, but it would be wrong to conclude that those beliefs represent all the religious beliefs of the prehistorical populations. Their mythology and theology, the structure and morphology of their rituals, can scarcely be made out solely on the basis of the archeological finds. Thus, for example, the religious documents revealed by the discovery of the Neolithic Yang Shao culture refer almost entirely to ideas and beliefs connected with sacred space, fertility, and death. In the villages the communal building is placed at the center of the site, surrounded by small houses half underground. Not only the orientation of the village but the structure of the house, with its central mud pit and its smokehole, indicates a cosmology shared by many Neolithic and traditional societies (cf. §12). Belief in the survival of the soul is illustrated by the utensils and foodstuffs placed in the graves. Children were buried, close to the houses, in large urns having an opening at the top to permit the soul to go out and return.³ In other words, the funerary urn was the dead person's "house," an idea that found ample expression in the cult of ancestors in the Bronze Age (the Shang period).

Certain clay vessels, painted red and decorated with the so-called death pattern, are especially interesting.⁴ Three icono-

2. Ibid., pp. 43 ff., 91 ff., 121 ff., 177 ff.

3. Ibid., pp. 279 ff. Similar beliefs and practices are found in certain prehistoric cultures of the Near East and of eastern Europe.

4. See J. G. Anderson, *Children of the Yellow Earth*, p. 315; Kwang-Chih Chang, *The Archaeology of Ancient China*, p. 103; cf. Hanna Rydh, "Symbolism in Mortuary Ceramics," *passim*.

graphic motifs—triangle, chessboard, and cowrie—are found only on funerary vessels. But these motifs are bound up with a rather complex symbolism that associates the ideas of sexual union, birth, regeneration, and rebirth. It may be supposed that this decoration indicates the hope of survival and of a rebirth in the other world.

A design figuring two fishes and two anthropomorphic figures probably represents a supernatural being or a "specialist in the sacred," a sorcerer or priest.⁵ But its interpretation is still doubtful. The fishes certainly have a symbolism that is at once sexual and connected with the calendar (the fishing season corresponds to a particular period of the yearly cycle). The distribution of the four figures may suggest a cosmological image.

According to Ping-ti Ho (pp. 275 ff.), the societies of the Yang Shao period obeyed the laws of matrilineal descent. In contrast, the following period, that of Lung Shan, indicates passage to a patrilineal society, characterized by the predominance of the ancestor cult. Following other scholars, Ho interprets certain stone objects and their reproductions on painted vases as phallic symbols. Like Karlgren, who saw the derivation of the pictogram *tsu*, designating the ancestor, from the drawing of a phallus, Ho sees in the multiplication of phallic emblems the importance attained by the ancestor cult.⁶ The "death pattern," as we have seen, certainly involves a sexual symbolism. But Carl Hentze explains the various "phallic" objects and designs as representing a "house of the soul"; certain ceramics from Yang Shao represent models of little huts—which are at the same time funerary urns—comparable to the similar documents from European prehistory and to the Mongol hut. These "little houses of the soul," abundantly attested to in the prehistory of China, are the forerunners of the "ancestor tablets" of historical times.⁷

5. There is a good reproduction in Ho, *Cradle of the East*, p. 154, fig. 9.

6. Ibid., p. 282; cf. B. Karlgren, "Some Fecundity Symbols in Ancient China," pp. 18 ff.

7. See Carl Hentze, *Bronzegerät, Kultbauten, Religion im ältesten China der Shangzeit*, pp. 49 ff., 88 ff., and his *Das Haus als Weltort der Seele*, pp. 23 ff. and figs. 10–12. These two works supply a large number of parallels chosen from cultures historically or morphologically related to the archaic civilization of China.

In short, the Yang Shao and Lung Shan cultures reveal the beliefs that are typical of other Neolithic civilizations: solidarity among life, fertility, death, and the afterlife and hence the conception of the cosmic cycle, illustrated by the calendar and actualized in the rites; the importance of the ancestors, a source of magico-religious power; and the "mystery" of the conjunction of contraries (also proven by the "death pattern"), a belief that in a way anticipated the idea of the unity/totality of cosmic life, which will be the dominating idea in later periods. It is important to add that a great part of the Neolithic heritage was until recent times preserved, with the inevitable changes, in the religious traditions and practices of the Chinese villages.

127. Religion in the Bronze Age: The God of Heaven and the ancestors

We are decidedly better informed about Chinese history from the time of the Shang dynasty (ca. 1751–1028). The Shang period corresponds in general to the protohistory and the beginning of the ancient history of China. It is characterized by the metallurgy of bronze, the appearance of urban centers and capital cities, the presence of a military aristocracy, the institution of royalty, and the beginnings of writing. As for the religious life of the period, the documentation is comparatively full. First of all we have a rich iconography, best exemplified by the magnificent bronze ritual vessels. In addition, the royal tombs provide information concerning certain religious practices. But it is especially the countless oracular inscriptions, incised on animal bones or tortoise shells, that are a precious source.⁸ Finally, some later works (for example, *The Book of Odes*), which Karlgren calls "free Chou texts,"⁹ contain much ancient material. We should add, however, that these sources give us information concerning the

8. These exemplify a method of divination that was quite widely practiced in northern Asia: the question was asked, the bones or shells were heated, and the diviners interpreted the shapes of the resulting cracks. Then the question and answer were inscribed beside the cracks.

9. Bernhard Karlgren, "Legends and Cults in Ancient China," p. 344.

beliefs and rituals of the royal clan; as in the Neolithic period, the mythology and theology remain for the most part unknown.

The interpretation of these iconographic documents is not always certain. Scholars agree in recognizing a certain analogy with the motifs documented on the painted pottery of Yang Shao¹⁰ and, in addition, with the religious symbolism of the following periods. Hentze (*Bronzegerät*, pp. 215 ff.) interprets the conjunction of polar symbols as illustrating religious ideas related to the renewal of Time and to spiritual regeneration. No less important is the symbolism of the cicada and of the *t'ao-t'ieh* mask, which suggests the cycle of births and rebirths, of light and life emerging from darkness and death. No less remarkable is the union of antagonistic images (feathered snake, snake and eagle, etc.), in other words the dialectic of contraries and the *coincidentia oppositorum*, a central theme for the Taoist philosophers and mystics. The bronze vessels represent urn-houses.¹¹ Their form is derived either from ceramics or from prototypes in wood.¹² The admirable animal art revealed by the bronze vessels probably originated in wood engravings.¹³

The oracular inscriptions inform us of a religious conception that was absent (or imperceptible?) in the Neolithic documents, namely, the preeminence of a supreme celestial god, Ti (Lord) or Shang Ti (The Lord on High). Ti commands the cosmic rhythms and natural phenomena (rain, wind, drought, etc.); he grants the king victory and insures the abundance of crops or, on the contrary, brings on disasters and sends sicknesses and death. He is offered two kinds of sacrifices: in the sanctuary of the ancestors and in the open fields. But, as is the case with other archaic celestial gods (see our *A History of Religious Ideas*, vol. 1, §§14 ff.), his cult shows a certain diminution of religious primacy. Ti is found to be distant and less active than the ancestors of the royal lineage, and he is offered fewer sacrifices. But

10. The salamander, the tiger, the dragon, etc., still in use in the iconography of Chinese popular art, are cosmological symbols that are already documented at the end of the Neolithic. See Hentze, *Bronzegerät . . . der Shangzeit*, pp. 40 ff., 55 ff., 132 ff., 165 ff.

11. Hentze, *Das Haus als Weltort der Seele*, pp. 14 ff. and passim.

12. Li Chi, *The Beginnings of Chinese Civilization*, p. 32.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

he alone is invoked in matters of fecundity (rain) and of war, the sovereign's two chief preoccupations.

In any case, Ti's position remains supreme. All the other gods, as well as the royal ancestors, are subordinate to him. Only the king's ancestors are able to intercede with Ti; on the other hand, only the king can communicate with his ancestors, for the king is the "one man."¹⁴ The sovereign strengthens his authority with the help of his ancestors; belief in their magico-religious power legitimized the domination of the Shang dynasty. In their turn the ancestors depend on the offerings of cereals, blood, and flesh that are brought to them.¹⁵ It is futile to suppose, as certain scholars do,¹⁶ that, since the ancestor cult was so important for the reigning aristocracy, it was gradually adopted by the other social strata. The cult was already thoroughly implanted, and very popular, in the Neolithic period. As we have just seen (pp. 5 ff.), it formed an essential part of the religious system (structured around the anthropocosmic cycle) of the earliest cultivators. It is the preeminence of the king, whose first ancestor was supposed to descend from Ti, that gave this immemorial cult a political function.

The king offers two series of sacrifices: to the ancestors and to Ti and the other gods. Sometimes the ritual service is extended over 300 or 600 days. The word "sacrifice" designates the "year," since the annual cycle is conceived as a complete service. This confirms the importance of the calendar, which guarantees the normal return of the seasons. In the great royal tombs near Anyang, exploration has revealed, in addition to animal skeletons, numerous human victims, presumably immolated in order to accompany the sovereign into the other world. The choice of victims (companions and servants, dogs, horses) emphasizes the considerable importance of the hunt (rit-

14. The expression "I, the one man" (or perhaps, "I, the first man") is documented in the oracular inscriptions; see David N. Keightley, "Shang Theology and the Genesis of Chinese Political Culture," p. 213, n. 6.

15. As Keightley remarks (*ibid.*, pp. 214 ff.), the cult of ancestors emphasized the royal lineage's aspect as the source of religious and political authority. The doctrine of the "Mandate of Heaven," usually considered to be an invention of the Chou dynasty, has deep roots in the theology of the Shang.

16. For example, Ho, *Cradle of the East*, p. 320.

ual hunt?) for the military aristocracy and royal clan.¹⁷ A number of questions preserved by the oracular inscriptions are concerned with the advisability and the chances for success of the king's expeditions.

The tombs had the same cosmological symbolism and performed the same function as the urn-houses: they were the houses of the dead. A similar belief could explain human sacrifice offered at the time when buildings were newly begun, especially temples and palaces. The victims' souls insured the durability of the construction; it could be said that the building that was raised served as a "new body" for the victim's soul.¹⁸ But human sacrifice was also practiced for other purposes, about which our information is scanty; it can be supposed that the end sought was the renewal of time or the regeneration of the dynasty.

Despite the gaps, we can make out the principal lines of religion in the Shang period. The importance of the celestial god and the ancestor cult is beyond doubt. The complexity of the sacrificial system (bound up with a religious calendar) and of techniques of divination presupposes the existence of a class of "specialists in the sacred"—diviners, priests, or shamans. Finally, the iconography shows us the articulations of a symbolism, at once cosmological and soteriological, that is still inadequately understood but that seems to anticipate the chief religious conceptions of classical China.

17. Li Chi, *The Beginnings of Chinese Civilization*, pp. 21 ff. The author draws attention to the animal motifs (tiger, stag) in the decorations of bronze vessels (p. 33). We may add that these are emblematic animals, carrying a quite complex cosmological and initiatory symbolism.

18. See Eliade, *Zalmoxis, the Vanishing God*, pp. 182 ff.