

State Power in Ancient China and Rome

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Ghosts, Gods, and the Coming Apocalypse

Empire and Religion in Early China and Ancient Rome

Michael Puett

THIS chapter will explore the religious aspects of emperors in ancient China, with comparisons drawn with Rome. In both China and Rome, the formation of the early empires occurred in tandem with the emergence of claims of divine rulership. Also in both cases, these claims were hotly contested, with several religious movements in the empires refusing to accept the emperor as divine, and with other movements trying to make even stronger claims concerning the potentially divine aspects of humans. The ways that the subsequent debates concerning the proper form of rulership for an empire played out over the next few centuries had dramatic implications for the nature of the two empires.

My goals in this chapter will be to analyze why such claims concerning the divine status of the ruler emerged in both cultures during the formation of the empire and to explore the historical implications of the different ways that the resulting debates played out.

1. COMPARATIVE EMPIRES: PAIRED SOVEREIGNS, HUMAN AND DIVINE EMPERORS, AND MILLENARIAN MOVEMENTS

The history of empires in the Roman and Chinese worlds are surprisingly similar. In both cases, the formation of empire involved two key figures: Julius Caesar and Augustus in the Roman case and the First Emperor and Emperor Wu in the second. In both cases, the first of these (Caesar and the First Emperor) attempted to institute an imperial order. Each would be seen by his respective later tradition as a transgressive figure who created the empire but was unable to legitimize it. In both cases, the civil wars that arose after this failure ended with the re-creation of an imperial order by figures who were able to consolidate and legitimize the imperial system initiated by the failed founders. Moreover, in both cases, this legitimation of empire involved claims of divine emperors. Such claims of divine rulership were new, and in both cases the claims were made in opposition to the religious and political practices of the day. Not surprisingly, the claims were in turn strongly contested.

Also in both cases, millenarian movements began forming in opposition to the imperial system, in both cases involving claims of revelations from a higher, moral deity calling for a repudiation of the existing world and the creation of a new order following the divine teachings. Again in both cases, one of these religious movements became tremendously influential, ultimately becoming a dominant religion of the empire. In the case of the Roman Empire, this religion was of course Christianity. In the case of China, the religion was the Celestial Masters. Thereafter, the religion in question became part of the imperial ideology and, after the fall of the empires, would become institutionalized as a (potentially) independent church organization.

This statement concerning the Celestial Masters may at first seem surprising, so a few words on it may be helpful. When we compare the Roman and Han Empires, one thing that does seem to differ is the fact that the Han Empire falls well before the Roman Empire does. But this is somewhat misleading. It is true that the Han Empire falls in 220 of the Common Era, and it is true that an empire that would successfully unify the realm did not emerge for several centuries. However, the Han was followed immediately by the Wei Dynasty, which formed a major empire that controlled the entire North China Plain. Although it is true that the Wei never succeeded in controlling the southern regions, they certainly did not know at the time that they would fail. In terms of the views at the time concerning imperial projects, the Wei fully saw themselves as continuing (and improving on) the imperial project of the previous several centuries.

The fall of empire in China would on the contrary be better dated to the early fourth century, when the North China Plain was overrun by armies from the steppe region. This was, of course, part of a larger rise of steppe peoples across Eurasia, and one that helped bring about the fall of the Roman Empire as well.

This comparability of chronology for the empires on either end of Eurasia is of relevance to the religious history of this period as well. During the end of the Han Empire, the Celestial Masters formed an independent community in what is today Sichuan. When the Han Dynasty fell, the Celestial Masters looked to the Han general Cao Cao as the figure who had received divine support to begin a new dynasty. Cao Cao's son, Cao Pi, started the ensuing Wei Dynasty, which thereafter accepted the Celestial Masters. Many of the elite of the Wei were converted to the Way of the Celestial Masters. Thereafter, all major institutionalized Daoist movements traced themselves back to the Celestial Masters.

In both Rome and China, this conversion to what had been a millenarian movement fundamentally altered both the nature of the imperial ideology and the nature of the religious movement—and here again in similar ways.

Despite these striking similarities between these two empires at either end of Eurasia, two interrelated points are often made to contrast the two. The first involves indigenous political theories concerning the rise of empire, and the second involves claimed cosmological differences between the West and China.

To begin with the first: In Rome, the introduction of empire involved a self-perceived rejection of the Republic, and it was also seen as something different from the earlier monarchy. And these terms—Republic, monarchy, empire—have continued to underlie political discourse throughout later European history. For well over a millennium after the fall of the Roman Empire, most subsequent European history was to be dominated by monarchies. But repeated attempts were made to re-create an empire along the lines of the Roman (Charlemagne, of course, being an obvious example, and more recently Napoleon and Hitler attempted to do so as well). More recently, attempts to create a republic have been self-consciously undertaken in reference to the Roman Republic (both the French and American Revolutions being examples).

The contrast in political terminology in China is striking. The formation of the empire was as hotly debated in China as it was in Rome. But the empire ultimately came to be called a dynasty like the monarchical dynasties of the past. And this continued subsequently as well. Indeed, there is no term in pre-modern China that can be accurately translated as “empire.”¹ Nor, for that matter, is there a term that could accurately be translated as “republic.” There are certainly terms that can be translated as “monarchy,” but that helps to underscore the point of the potential contrast: for all of the many debates about proper forms of political organization in Chinese history, a monarchical order seems not to have been itself a topic of significant debate. In short, debates about the distinct political orders of monarchy, republic, and empire would appear to be absent in China.

And this brings us to a second (although directly related) point of potential contrast, namely what is often referred to as a cosmological contrast between China and the Mediterranean region. It has often been remarked that in China there was an assumption that the cosmos was a harmonious, monistic system, and that the human realm should thus normatively be a unified, harmonious realm as well.² Thus, because of these cosmological assumptions, empire came to be seen as the norm in China—as, indeed, the natural way of organizing the world—whereas in the Mediterranean region and in Europe in general there was no cosmological assumption that tended to lead toward seeing empire as a norm.³

The goal of this essay will be to explore the cultural debates within which these claims of human and divine kingship developed and to chart an alternate comparative approach to those that would emphasize a radical difference in terms of cosmological assumptions between the West and China.

1. What is often translated as “empire” is in Chinese “tianxia”—“all under heaven.” But this same term is used to describe the order achieved by a monarch from the Bronze Age just as much as it is to describe the order (when achieved) during the Han era.

2. See, for example, Mote 1989.

3. This view is perhaps most influentially argued by Max Weber. See, for example, Weber 1951.

2. THE DOMESTICATION OF THE GHOSTS: DECEASED HUMANS,
SPIRITS, AND ANCESTORS IN EARLY CHINESE RELIGIOUS
PRACTICE

First, a general introduction to early Chinese religious practice. I will focus here on those practices dominant in the Warring States and Han periods (ca. fifth through first centuries BCE), although will turn in a later section to a more historical discussion of how some of these practices changed over time.

Humans were believed to be composed of numerous different energies, souls, and powers. Some of these energies (*qi*) were associated with the emotions of the human, while the souls (the *hun* and *po*) were associated with the personality. Another component was the spirit (*shen*), which is what gave humans consciousness, as well as the ability to control things. While alive, humans would try to cultivate these energies and their spirit, trying to refine them and to keep them within the human body.

The latter point is crucial, because when humans died these energies and the spirit would indeed leave the body.⁴ This was a very dangerous situation for the living. The resulting recently deceased ghosts would tend to become overwhelmed by the energies associated with jealousy, anger, and resentment, all of which would often be directed at the living—in part for the fact that they continued to be alive. Moreover, the spirit, now freed from the constraints of the body, would become all the more powerful. The result would be highly dangerous ghosts who would tend to haunt the living.

Fortunately for the living, the energies of anger and resentment tended to dissipate over time—presumably because the souls associated with the personality of the human also dissipated over time. As these energies dissipated, the spirit of the deceased grew even greater in power, and it also grew more distant from the living. Indeed, it would tend to stay around the earth much less, and would increasingly roam in the heavens above.

The reason for such an abode was simple: the heavens were filled with other spirits (*shen*) as well, including various nature spirits and, most importantly, Heaven itself (also called the Di—God), which many saw as the most powerful deity. These spirits consisted purely of the same spirit that existed, in far less refined and far more diluted form, in living humans. As the spirit of the deceased shed more of the elements from the earth that held it down (the body, the souls associated with the personality), it became more like these other spirits in the heavens—extremely powerful, but also distant and potentially indifferent to humans. And such an indifference could also be dangerous, since these spirits controlled things like the weather. So, from the point of the view of living humans, the acts of

4. For discussions of the afterlife in early China, see Yu 1987; Brashier 1996; Mu-chou 1998; Poo 1998; Cook 2006; Seidel 1987; and Puett 2005 and 2011.

the spirits could seem highly capricious—not because the spirits were filled with the angers and resentments of the recently deceased ghosts but rather because they were relatively unengaged with humans, and thus could send down rains and droughts regardless of the needs of humans.

In short, if the ghosts of recently deceased humans were dangerous in the sense of being potentially angry and resentful against the living, the spirits (both the spirits of humans who died long ago, as well as the other spirits in the human) tended to be dangerous in another sense—highly powerful, but relatively indifferent to the needs of humans. The ghosts were potentially malicious toward the living, and the spirits were (from the point of view of the living humans) indifferent and potentially capricious.

This is the background against which to understand early Chinese religious practices. The problem was clear: humans had to deal with dangerous recently deceased ghosts, as well as powerful spirits who tended to be unpredictable. The goal of early Chinese practices was to transform these figures as much as possible—or at least forge relationships with them—such that they would become more responsive to the needs of the living.

For the recently deceased, the first concern was to separate the personality of the deceased from the spirit. Ritual actions would be undertaken to keep the souls of the deceased with the body, which would be buried in a tomb. The goal would be to keep the souls in the tomb, removed from the living. This would be accomplished in part through ritual exhortations that the souls not leave the tomb. It would also be accomplished by making the tombs places where the souls would want to remain. Things associated with the person in life (including food, texts, etc.) would be placed in the tomb, with the hope that the souls would therefore be all the more tempted to stay there, not rejoin with the spirit and not attack the living.

The later destiny of the souls in the tomb was unclear. One possibility was simply that the souls would eventually dissipate. There was also the possibility that they might be reborn in various paradises—in the western paradises associated with Xiwangmu, for example. Either way, they would be removed from the world of the living.

The fate of the spirit would be different. The living would undertake various ritual actions to transform the spirit into an ancestor. The spirit would be given a tablet in the ancestral hall, a temple name, and a defined time for sacrifices. Each of these would be based not on the personality of the person (which the living hoped would be kept separate, in the tomb), but rather on the place of the spirit in the ancestral lineage. At the proper ritual moments, the spirits would be called down from the heavens to enter the ancestral temple and to be sacrificed to as an ancestor. The ancestor would then be called on to act like an ancestor and thus treat the living as descendants who should be supported. If successful, this would mean that the spirit, shorn of the energies and souls that could be so dangerous, would become a supportive ancestor, using its power to act on behalf of the living.

These attempts to separate the souls from the spirit and to transform the spirit into an ancestor, however, were never seen as being completely successful. For the recently deceased, the spirits would often link up again with the souls and energies, and thus revert to being a highly dangerous ghost, and the more distant ancestors would tend to become increasingly indifferent to the needs of the living. The sacrifices thus had to be given repeatedly, because the process was never complete: the ancestors would always revert to being dangerous ghosts or indifferent spirits, and the living were thus in the position of constantly trying to domesticate them yet again.

3. RELIGION AND POLITICS IN BRONZE AGE CHINA

A key part of understanding the political orders that developed in early China is to see how each (attempt at) a political order appropriated these religious practices. Let us begin with the Bronze Age aristocratic kingdoms of the late Shang (ca. 1250 to ca. 1050 BCE) and Western Zhou Dynasties (ca. 1050 to 771 BCE). And let us again turn first to the dead.⁵

When someone in the royal family of the late Shang era would die, the person would be given a temple name and a day in the ritual cycle to receive sacrifices.⁶ But as one might expect, the rituals were never completely successful, and the ancestors would continue to be highly capricious. Given that the ancestors became more powerful and more distant over time, the types of disasters that would befall the living would often be a good predictor of which generation of ancestors was causing the problems. For example, if someone had a toothache, divinations would be aimed at the most recently deceased set of ancestors to see if one of them was cursing the living. Once the culprit was found, further divinations would be given to see what sacrifices would appease the ancestor in question.

But things like droughts and untimely rains were controlled by higher powers—who were unfortunately extremely unresponsive to human rituals. And the most powerful of the spirits was Di, who was tremendously powerful and also extremely unpliant to humans. The royal house would thus offer sacrifices to the more recently deceased ancestors, who would then be called upon to host the next level up in the ancestral hierarchy. This would continue all the way to the most distant ancestors, who would then host Di himself. The hope was not only to transform the recently deceased humans into ancestors, but to use these figures to create, as much as possible, an entire pantheon of ancestors and spirits who would ideally act on behalf of the royal family. When it worked, there would exist a pantheon of supportive divine figures acting to help the royal family. But, of

5. For an outstanding overview of the Shang era, see Keightley 2000.

6. Smith 2010.

course, often it would not. Disasters would rain down on the living, and the sacrifices would be given yet again.⁷

And what about the nonroyal living families? During the Shang period, we possess only written sources from the royal lineage, but with the ensuing Western Zhou Dynasty we get a great deal more evidence. When the Zhou overthrew the Shang, the Zhou claimed sole access to the highest deity (whom the Zhou called Heaven, rather than Di). After their death, the founders of the dynasty, Kings Wen and Wu, would serve Heaven, and the ancestors of each successive generation would then call on each generation above, ultimately reaching Heaven. The Shang ancestors, of course, were no longer allowed access to the high god.⁸

Already we see hints of how the political order was interwoven with the ritual order in the Bronze Age, and let us now pull back and lay out the overall workings of the political culture of the time. All land and resources seem to have been controlled by aristocratic lineages. The most powerful of these lineages would vie for the title of *wang* (king). Only the royal lineage would be able to trace its ancestral line back to its more powerful ancestors, who would then serve the highest deity. The status (religious and political) of the other aristocratic lineages would be defined according to their relative positions vis-à-vis the ruling lineage. The living nonroyal aristocrats would be granted land and resources by the king to rule on his behalf, and the ancestors of the nonroyal aristocrats would continue to serve the ancestors of the royal lineage in the heavens above.

But the political order contained the seeds of its own downfall. At the beginning of a dynasty, the ruling lineage was by definition at its strongest point—the very fact of its success in overthrowing the previous dynasty demonstrated that it had gained the support of the other lineages. Moreover, when the various lineages were granted land and resources by the ruling house, the recipients of the gifts were usually the very people who had fought with the new king in the conquest of the previous ruling lineage. As the generations went by, however, the nonroyal lineages controlling a given region would have less and less relationship with the ruling family. Over time, the power of the ruling lineage would wane dramatically.

And such a waning was built into the ritual system as well. The ruler's only access to the highest deity was through the lineage sacrifice system—working up the lineage to the founding ancestors. Thus, as each generation went by, the king would get farther and farther removed from the highest deity. The ruling house would thus, over time, lose its connection to the highest deity, just as the ruling house would also lose its power vis-à-vis the other lineages.

As this gradual waning occurred, the other aristocratic lineages would increasingly vie among themselves to see which could gain the support to launch

7. See Puett 2002: 31–79.

8. On the Zhou state, see Li 2008 and 2009.

an overthrow of the ruling family. When a conquest finally became possible, the cycle would repeat itself. Such a political system, of aristocratic lineages overthrowing other aristocratic lineages, became known as the dynastic cycle.

4. THE WARRING STATES PERIOD

The ensuing period of Warring States (fifth century BCE to 221 BCE) involved a rejection of the aristocratic system of the Bronze Age and the emergence of a plethora of different types of social and religious orderings. It will be helpful to outline a few of the alternate approaches that emerged during this period.

5. REJECTING THE RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

5.1. *The Mohists*

For our purposes, one of the most significant of these alternate forms of order was the Mohists, a small community organized around the teaching of their master, Mozi. The Mohists claimed, contrary to the religious practices of the day, that Heaven was a purely good deity who had in fact created the cosmos specifically for the benefit of humans:

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.⁹

Moreover, they held, the ghosts of the dead were not dangerous or capricious but were rather entirely beneficent. Indeed, they were organized by Heaven into a hierarchy designed to work on behalf of the needs of the living:

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

9. Mozi, "Tianzhi, zhong," *Sibu beiyao* edition, 7.6b–7a.

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.¹⁰

Instead of living humans using sacrifices to transform the ghosts into a hierarchy of beneficial ancestors, Heaven has already organized the ghosts into such a hierarchy for the sake of the living.

Since Heaven was purely good and has organized the cosmos and the world of ghosts for the benefit of living human beings, the behavior of all living humans should be based on following the guidelines of Heaven. Accordingly, the Mohists opposed the use of sacrifice by humans to manipulate the spirit world. Doing so, according to the Mohists, would disrupt the proper hierarchy set up by Heaven. The same guidelines held for mourning the deceased.

The Mohists further held that the organization of human society should be modeled on the hierarchy created by Heaven above. The hierarchy on earth should be a pure meritocracy, in which humans would be promoted or punished based simply on the degree to which they follow the divine dictates of Heaven.

These ideas, in which a high deity is purely good, has organized the world for the benefit of humanity, and supports a meritocracy on earth based on the degree to which these divine dictates are followed, will become, as we will see, dominant positions in the millenarian religious movements that would continue to emerge in later Chinese history.¹¹

5.2. *Self-Divinization Movements*

A different reaction to the religious practices of the day can be seen in the emergence of movements aimed at avoiding the postmortem fate of other humans. If all humans already have a spirit within them, and if the spirits in the heavens above are composed of spirit as well (simply far more refined and unencumbered by such earthly substances as a body), then the goal came to be to refine one's spirit while alive.¹² Ultimately, the hope was to refine one's spirit such that one would not die but rather ascend into the heavens directly. One would therefore never be made into an ancestor. Moreover, one could potentially even carry one's soul with one during the ascension into the skies, so that one would become a spirit but with one's personality intact.

Many of these movements increasingly came to be focused on the Great One (Taiyi), which was seen as being more powerful and more primordial than

10. Mozi, "Tianzhi, zhong," 7.6a–6b.

11. For a fuller discussion of the Mohist cosmology, see Puett 2001: 51–6.

12. Puett 2002: 80–121.

Heaven.¹³ If Heaven was part of the pantheon associated with the sacrificial practices of the day, the One would be appealed to by those hoping to transcend these practices altogether.

As one could easily imagine, such movements fell under strong criticism. Either the self-divinization was doomed to failure (in which case it was a waste of time to devote oneself to it), or if it did succeed, it would mean one would become autonomous from the ancestral cult altogether.

5.3. *State Centralization*

Certainly the most influential of the movements that critiqued the aristocratic social and religious organization of the time were those that would later be classified under the term “Legalism.” Many of these were based on a strong support for the series of reforms instituted in the state of Qin by Shang Yang, the lord of Shang (d. 338 BCE). The reforms involved an attempt to centralize state control, create a series of laws and punishments that applied to everyone (commoners and aristocrats alike) equally, and create a bureaucracy based on principles of merit rather than birth. The point of these reforms was to have the state take direct control over land and resources and utilize these resources for war.

One of the goals of these reforms was to undercut the power of the aristocratic families that had dominated the previous several centuries of political power. Were it to be successful, it would also mean a rejection of the religious system in which that aristocratic power rested. Successful bureaucratic institutions would ensure the longevity of the state, and would bring to an end the rise and fall of aristocratic lineages (with the related claims of relation with and subsequent distance from Heaven) associated with the dynastic cycle.

6. QIN AND EARLY HAN

These policies were implemented most successfully in the state of Qin, which succeeded in creating an enormous, and extremely well trained, mass infantry army. In 221 BCE, the state of Qin defeated the other states of the period and created a centralized realm. The conquest was a direct result of the Qin having created centralized institutions that were far better at marshaling resources for war than the neighboring states had been able to do.

Upon instituting the new dynasty, the new ruler of Qin did not seek to start a new dynasty along the lines of the Bronze Age aristocratic kingdoms of the past. On the contrary, the new ruler explicitly emphasized the degree to which he was breaking from the past and instituting an entirely new order. To begin with, he

13. One of the first appearances in our extant corpus of the Great One is in the “*Taiyi shengshui*” (“The Great One generates water”), a fourth-century BCE text excavated from the Guodian tomb. The Great One is portrayed in the text as giving birth to the rest of the cosmos, including heaven and earth. See Puett 2002: 160–5.

created a new title for himself—instead of the title of king, he declared himself the first august thearch (*huangdi*; usually translated as “First Emperor”). He proclaimed in his inscriptions to be a greater ruler than any who had preceded him and indeed to be creating a new order altogether:

It is the twenty-eighth year. The First Emperor has created a new beginning [*zuo shi*].

He has put in order the laws, standards, and principles for the myriad things....

All under Heaven is unified in heart and yielding in will.

Implements have a single measure, and graphs are written in the same way....

He has rectified and given order to the different customs....

His accomplishments surpass those of the five thearchs.¹⁴

The ritual system created by the First Emperor underlined this break from the past. He declared himself the First Emperor, to be followed by his son the Second Emperor, and so on—a new dynasty. But far from envisioning a gradual weakening of the dynasty, the First Emperor explicitly declared that this dynasty would last for ten thousand generations.¹⁵ The founder (himself) would not die and become an ever-more distant ancestor to the living. On the contrary, the First Emperor would himself become divinized and ascend to the heavens as an immortal without ever dying. As such an immortal he would become an ancestor to the new order he had created, but instead of being an ever more distant and unreachable ancestor, he would be a living presence for that new order.

Although the Qin empire fell quickly, the ensuing Han empire tried to recreate a comparable order. Indeed, Emperor Wu (r. 141 to 87 BCE) largely recreated the Qin ritual system. This ritual system created for the First Emperor and consolidated by Emperor Wu underlined the claims of absolute sovereignty and endless empire. The ruler would circulate the entire realm, personally performing sacrifices at the sacred sites of each area. Having thereby personally embodied each of these sites, he would ascend a ritual altar. Each step of the altar would represent a new stage in the hierarchy of the pantheon. The second highest rung would be Heaven. The ruler would then move to the highest level, that of the Great One, after which the ruler would ascend to the heavens as an immortal.¹⁶

Clearly, one of the basic goals of the imperial ritual system (from the point of view of the emperor) was to break out of the religious practices of the day. As we

14. *Shiji*, “Qin Shihuang benji,” *Zhonghua shuju* edition, 6.245.

15. *Shiji*, “Qin Shihuang benji,” 6.236.

16. Puett 2008.

have seen, much of early Chinese religious practice can be defined as part of an endless attempt to domesticate capricious ghosts and spirits, transforming them into ancestors and gods who would work on behalf of the living. The attempts were endless because the process was never complete—the ancestors and gods would always revert to being capricious ghosts and spirits, and humans were thus in the position of constantly trying to domesticate them yet again.

With the system consolidated under Emperor Wu, appeals were made to the Great One, the deity who, as noted above, was claimed to be higher and more primordial than Heaven and to encompass all the other divine powers. The ruler would himself become divinized, become associated with the Great One, and gain direct power over the ghosts and spirits. The ruler would also become an immortal, and thus be autonomous from the ritual processes that would otherwise await him after death. The world would be unified under his power, and not under the endless domestication processes of the (nondivine) humans. Moreover, the inherent degeneration seen in the aristocratic system from the Bronze Age would be overcome: the decreasing potency of the lineages from the ancestral founders would cease to be a problem, since the rulers of the empire would be gods, and the empire could thus be made eternal.¹⁷

7. THE HUMAN MEDIATOR OF THE WORLD

This ritual system of divine kingship, invented under the First Emperor and consolidated under Emperor Wu, was enacted alongside a massive military expansion of the empire. By the first century before the Common Era, the empire was clearly overreaching its resources. As the imperial policies of the First Emperor and Emperor Wu were rejected, the ritual system associated with them was ultimately overthrown as well in the 30s BCE.¹⁸ The system put in place was presented as a return to the ritual system of the Bronze Age. The texts associated with Confucius were designated as the Five Classics, and the texts were interpreted as explicating the moral and ritual system of the Zhou.

Heaven, rather than the Great One, was once again posited as the highest deity. The ruler was clearly defined as human, and the sacrificial system was oriented not toward divinizing the ruler, but rather toward positioning the ruler properly with his ancestors and with Heaven and Earth.

Under this system, the ruler was deemed to be a Son of Heaven, rather than an august thearch. Moreover, the ruler's position as Son of Heaven was explicitly presented as a ritual relationship: there was no claim that Heaven had given birth to the ruler, or that he ruled by divine right. On the contrary, the ruler was

17. Puett 2002: 225–58 and 287–316; Puett 2008.

18. For the late Western Han ritual reform, see Loewe 1974; Kern 2001; Bujard 2000.

defined as a Son of Heaven purely in ritual terms: by providing the sacrifices to Heaven that a human would provide to his deceased father, the ruler would become, ritually speaking, the Son of Heaven, and he would be called upon as well to serve as the mother and father of the people. The people's familial dispositions would thus be extended to the ruler, who they would then follow as they would a parent, and the ruler's familial dispositions would be directed upward toward Heaven as his father and downward to the people as his children. The entire realm would thus come to function, again ritually speaking, as a single lineage.

One of the chapters of the *Book of Rites*, canonized during this period as one of the Five Classics, defines the creation as precisely one of domestication. The chapter presents Confucius as narrating how an original unity in distant antiquity was destroyed through the successive innovations of the sages—innovations that created a strong state, and so on, but at the loss of this earlier unity. Confucius is then presented as calling on the ruler to re-create this earlier unity by taking all these innovations and, through ritual, bringing them together into a constructed world—one in which all the participants come to think of themselves as part of a single lineage (which, of course, they are not). As Confucius is quoted as saying:

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.¹⁹

The chapter explicitly compares this ritual construction of the realm into a single family with the process of agricultural domestication. In the latter, a disparate set of phenomena (weeds growing out of the ground, rains, drought, warmth and cold coming at various times, etc.) are domesticated and transformed such that a full system of interaction is created that is directly beneficial to humanity. With ritual, one does the same: the ruler works with a disparate set of phenomena, including the various powers in the realm, the institutional innovations that he has inherited, and so on, and forges them in such a way that the realm functions, ideally, as a single family.

The ruler, then, would be the center, linking these constructed, ritual relationships of the different lineages and Heaven. Instead of the ruler coming to transcend everything and thus control it, the ruler on the contrary defines an order by becoming the center of a web of relationships (Heaven, Earth, the ancestors, and the populace) that he has constructed.²⁰

19. Liji, "Li yun," 9.22/62/5. For a fuller discussion of the chapter, see Puett 2010.

20. For a fuller discussion of these issues, see Puett 2008 and 2005.

These ritual relationships, moreover, could only be maintained if each lived up to the proper roles assigned: the ruler would be called on to behave like a Son of Heaven and to treat the populace as his children, the people would be called on to treat the ruler as their father and mother, and Heaven would be called on to treat the ruler as his son and the populace as his descendants. Such a model of human kingship is thus also associated with the dynastic cycle. The Son of Heaven should only reign as long as he successfully lives up to his role; his failure will mark the end of a dynasty and thus bring about a new one.

But, of course, this installation of a set of rituals modeled on the Zhou kingdom did not at all entail a rejection of the bureaucratic empire. It simply meant that the bureaucratic empire was presented, ritually speaking, as a patriarchal kingdom.²¹

Moreover, even the imperial title of august thearch continued to be used as well. The rulers of the Han could thus be called by either title (august thearch or Son of Heaven), and could take actions befitting either claim. Some rulers would play more the one or the other at different times and to different audiences, and different rulers would emphasize claims more of one or the other. I will return to this point below.

8. THE REVELATIONS OF THE GODS

By the second century of the Common Era, the Han court was losing power dramatically vis-à-vis the local aristocrats. As the empire began to break down, unrest began developing across the realm.

In 142, the One, also called the Way, took the human form of Laozi and handed down revelations to Zhang Daoling. Zhang Daoling created a movement—called the Celestial Masters—based on these teachings. The movement became strong enough to form an autonomous community in what is today Sichuan. At roughly the same time, another movement—called the Taiping (“Great Peace”)—formed in eastern China.

The revelations for these movements proclaimed the possibility of a coming apocalypse because of the improper behavior of humans. Among the key issues both movements singled out were the religious practices of the day—practices that were not domesticating the ghosts, but rather, they claimed, empowering them. Both movements also claimed that above the ghosts was a realm of gods who were actually noncapricious and good—and that humans should actually follow their dictates, rather than try to domesticate them and transform them. Both also proclaimed that the new order to be created would be a full meritocracy, and it would be one in which self-divinization would be open to the larger populace.

The arguments will be worth exploring in detail.

21. Compare Zhao and Eich's chapters in this volume, chapters 3 and 4.

8.1. *The Taiping Jing*

The *Taiping Jing* is a heterogeneous collection, but the earliest strata—those under consideration here—in all likelihood date to the late Eastern Han period.²² Whether the text was actually written within the Taiping movement is impossible to tell, but, regardless, the text provides a powerful example of a late Han apocalyptic text concerned with revelation and the ways to organize the political realm.²³

Let us again start with the dead, and the place of the dead in the world. The section of the *Taiping Jing* in question supports a generally Mohist vision of dealing with the dead. Heaven is posited as providing absolute guidelines for the amounts of sacrifice and offerings to be given. Since the behavior of all living creatures should be based on following the guidelines of Heaven, the *Taiping Jing*—like the Mohists before these precepts—opposed the use of sacrifice by humans to manipulate the spirit world. Doing so would disrupt the proper hierarchy set up by Heaven. The same guidelines held for mourning the deceased.

The *Taiping Jing* posits a cosmos in which all living beings, including the spirits, must play a cosmic role. Moreover, rewards and punishments are given according to the degree to which these beings follow the preordained commands.

As with the Mohists, the high deity for the *Taiping Jing* section under consideration is Heaven, and also as in the Mohists' belief, this high deity is neither capricious nor indifferent. The various spirits under the high deity are also neither capricious nor indifferent. On the contrary, the spirits are arranged in a pantheon by Heaven, and they serve to help Heaven nourish the myriad things. Their rank is dependent on the degree to which they succeed in this goal. The cosmos thus functions like a meritocratic bureaucracy:

In between Heaven and Earth, all of the spirits and essences must together help Heaven generate, nourish, and grow the twelve thousand things. Thus all of the spirits and essences fully obtain ranks and sustenance. This is like the myriad ministers and worthies who all help the emperor and kings nourish the people and myriad things; they all receive ranks and sustenance. Thus they follow Heaven as their model, always with the fifteenth day of the month a small report is sent up; at the beginning of the next month a medium report is sent up; and each year a large report.²⁴ Therefore those with great merit will receive promotion and those without merit will be sent away or punished.²⁵

22. For excellent studies of the *Taiping Jing*, see: Kaltenmark 1979; Xiong 1962; Petersen 1989, 1990a, and 1990b; and Hendrischke 1991 and 1992.

23. The *Taiping Jing* is an extremely heterogeneous collection. I will here be discussing those sections consisting of a dialogue between a Celestial Master and the Perfected. Most scholars agree that the content of this section seems to belong to a later Eastern Han context. See the helpful summary in Hendrischke 2000.

24. This refers to the reports sent up in a bureaucracy from the officials to their superiors. See the excellent discussion by Hendrischke 2010.

25. Ming 1992: 151.407–8. Here and throughout my translations have been helped immeasurably by those of Hendrischke 2007.

Heaven runs the pantheon of spirits as a meritocratic bureaucracy, promoting or punishing the spirits based on the degree of their support for the people.

The same principles underlie the fate of humans vis-à-vis the divine powers. Take ghosts, for example. For the *Taiping Jing*, one's fate in the afterlife is dependent on one's actions while alive. Being good and studying diligently while alive will bring one rewards in the afterlife: one will become a ghost who also roams joyously: "As such, hold fast to the good and study. Those who roam joyously to the utmost become ghosts who roam joyously."²⁶ The opposite is true as well. If one fails to behave properly while alive, one will become a dangerous ghost:

Those who exhaust themselves by bringing distress and bitterness to themselves become distressed and embittered ghosts. Those who exhaust themselves in vileness become vile ghosts. This is something that can clearly be seen. All humans are able to understand this, and yet none are willing to become good and make their *hun*-soul and spirit joyous. This is a truly severe transgression.²⁷

Ghosts are not inherently dangerous or capricious at all. The difference between good ghosts and dangerous ghosts simply comes down to what one did while alive. If one is good, studies hard, and thereby achieves a state of joyousness, one will be the same after death. And if one is the opposite, one will on the contrary become an embittered and vile ghost. Dangerous ghosts, in other words, are simply the consequence of bad behavior on the part of humans while alive. Again, it is a moral cosmos, in which bad things are the result of bad behavior.

And why have dangerous ghosts become so prominent in the world? It is part of the general decline of humanity:

When humans are born, they receive correct *qi* from Heaven and Earth, and the four seasons and five phases come to join as [the *qi*] becomes human beings. This was the ordered form of the former humans. Their bodily forms resided [properly] within Heaven and Earth, the four seasons, and the five phases. The bodies of the former humans were always joyous, good, and without anxieties, turning back to transmit more life. Later generations were unworthy. They have on the contrary long embittered the bodies of Heaven and Earth, the four seasons, and the five phases. This has caused them to be all the more resentful when they die, distressing their *hun* and *po* souls.²⁸

The world of popular religion, in which the dead became dangerous ghosts who had to be dealt with, was the result of a historical decline. In antiquity, humans

26. Ming 1992: 52.73.

27. Ming 1992: 52.73.

28. Ming 1992: 52.73.

lived properly and fit properly within the cosmos; their ghosts were equally joyous and turned back to help the living. It is only in the more recent generations that humans have become embittered, thus becoming after death embittered and dangerous ghosts.

The sages of the past understood this, and they therefore studied hard. Today, it is crucial that rulers follow this path, for only then will it be possible, considering the historical decline that has set in, for Great Peace to be achieved:

Therefore in antiquity the great worthies and sages, planning deeply and considering profoundly, understood that it was like this and did not stop studying. Those who are rulers take pleasure in thinking about the Great Peace and obtain the will of Heaven. Their merit is multiplied. Their *huns* and spirits are able to roam endlessly in joy, connecting with Heaven's good energies.²⁹

So why has this decline occurred? For the authors of the *Taiping Jing* section under discussion, the decline is a result of a progressive accumulation of errors. The period at hand, which the authors term "late antiquity," is one in which these errors have become so extreme that the entire cosmos is in danger.

In high antiquity, those who obtained the Way and were able to bring peace to their rule did so only by nurturing themselves and holding fast to the root. In middle antiquity, there was some loss; they made small mistakes in nurturing themselves and lost the root. In late antiquity, plans were not auspicious, and they regarded their body lightly, saying they could obtain another one. Thus, they greatly lost it [the root], and they brought chaos to their rule. Although this was the case, it was not the fault of the men of later antiquity. It arose from the dangers of inherited burden.³⁰

The world of late antiquity is in such danger for the simple reason that it is so late: the errors of the past have accumulated such that those born in late antiquity have lost the Way dramatically. The text refers to this as inherited burden—the burden of living with the inheritance of the errors of previous generations.³¹

The Way has sent down the proper teachings, but humanity has, over the accumulation of small errors, increasingly strayed from the teachings:

The Way of the root is enduringly correct; it would not viciously deceive the people. But when humans have followed the teachings of the former men, rulers, teachers, and fathers, they have slightly lost this correctness. As they lose the correct sayings, they lose the correct way of nourishing themselves. They then learned by imitating each other. For those born

29. Ming 1992: 52.74.

30. Ming 1992: 37.61.

31. See the excellent discussion in Hendrischke 1991: 8–22.

later, it daily grew worse, and the result is this. It has been accumulating for a long time. They have been transmitting these teachings to each other, but never obtaining the truth. All under Heaven has become completely depraved, and no one is able to bring this to a stop. Therefore, disasters arise ten thousand times over—too many to be calculated. This all arose through accumulation over a long, long time. Ignorant people do not understand this, and they turn around and instead blame the rulers of their own time and accuse the people of their own time. How could this not make the sense of oppression form all the more? All under Heaven has become completely depraved, and no one is able to understand it on his own. Even if a ruler had the virtue of ten thousand men, how would he alone be able to do so? As such, with the conduct of today's men, how can there be a solution?... All of this provides complete proof of inherited burden. Turning around and blaming people of today just makes one unable to pacify one's rule. People of today have been transmitting and receiving depravities for so long; how would they be able to suddenly change and correct things on their own? They have been following along with a constant sense of oppression, and continuing in this way for a long time; Heaven pities them. Thus, the highest august Way responds to the primal *qi* and descends.³²

The authors assert strongly that the growing chaos is not the result of the divine powers being capricious or indifferent. All knowledge is divinely revealed, and that knowledge has been properly given. But humans have consistently made small errors, and these errors have accumulated such that it is now impossible for humans to correct the situation. Indeed, these errors have accumulated to the point that the entire cosmos is now in danger:

Heaven, Earth, and man, the three ranks, require one another in order to be established and form one another in order to be complete. This is like humans having a head, feet, and insides. If one of the ranks is destroyed, the three ranks in turn will altogether perish. This is like a man being without a head, feet, or insides. If there is one that is missing, all three are in trouble. Therefore, man's great way can destroy Heaven and Earth. When the three ranks are all destroyed, all will be dark, and the myriad things will accordingly perish. Now, when things are finished, they are not able to suddenly return to life.³³

This accumulation of errors has occurred more specifically in dealings with the dead. It is important in dealing with the dead to maintain a proper balance: the relation between the living and the dead should be like that between day and

32. Ming 1992: 37.59–60.

33. Ming 1992: 92.373.

night. The ghosts must be kept in their place, just as the night should not overtake the day. If on the contrary the ghosts are allowed to become too powerful, they will dramatically endanger the living:

Living humans are yang, ghosts and spirits are yin. Living humans belong to the day; dead humans belong to the night. You must understand the great significance of this. If the day grows longer, the night is made shorter; if the night grows longer, the day is made shorter. If the yang grows, it triumphs over the yin. The yin retreats, not daring recklessly to appear, and the ghosts and spirits go into hiding. If the yin grows, it triumphs over the yang. The yang retreats, and the ghosts and spirits can thus appear during the day. Now, living humans are associated with the sun, and evil ghostly creatures are associated with stars. The sun is yang, and the stars are yin. Thus, when the sun manifests itself, the stars flee; when the stars manifest themselves, the sun sets. Therefore, when yin triumphs, the ghostly creatures join together to create horrors so profound that no words can describe it. This is called the arising of the yin, and the decline of the yang. It causes rule and order to be lost and endangers the living.³⁴

Understanding the dangers of ghosts, the great sages of high antiquity therefore limited their sacrifices to the dead. They focused their hearts toward the dead, ensuring that only their own relatives would come for the offerings. They also gave to their deceased relatives no more food and drink than they had been given while alive, thus preventing the ghosts from becoming too powerful:

As for the ordering of the funerals by the sages of high antiquity, their hearts were directed toward it, and that was all. They did not dare to greatly increase them. Giving funerals to the dead is the most inauspicious activity under Heaven. Increasing inauspicious activities creates harm. Thus, the hearts [of the sages of antiquity] were directed toward it, and that was all. They did not go beyond providing for the dead the drink and food they provided when they were alive. Therefore at that time humans had much good fortune and no illnesses, and all completed their heavenly years [i.e., the life span allotted by Heaven].³⁵

In middle antiquity, the living began to increase the sacrifices to the dead, thus unintentionally empowering the ghosts. They also failed to direct their hearts to the rituals. The result of these errors is that many of the relatives of the living did not come to the sacrifices, but large numbers of other ghosts did. The ghosts would imbibe the sacrifices and then stay with the living, cursing them and making them sick:

34. Ming 1992: 46.50–51.

35. Ming 1992: 46.52.

As for the ordering of the funerals by those sending off the dead in middle antiquity, they partially lost the proper standard. They were unable specifically to direct their hearts toward it, and they lost the meaning. They on the contrary began to revere the dead and to put into practice the kinds of extravagance [for the dead] that in the end oppresses the living. Their hearts were only half-directed toward the dead, and only half of the ghosts of the dead [relatives] came to eat. The ordering of the funerals subtly deviated from the substance. They expanded the sacrifices, which at that time brought in the dangers. There was no way to know which ghosts and spiritual creatures were coming to eat the sacrifices, and [the ghosts] then remained to curse the living. Thus illnesses among the living little by little grew.³⁶

The living have been giving too many sacrifices to the dead, thus unintentionally empowering the ghosts.

In late antiquity (the period the authors believed themselves to be living in), this has reached a point of extreme danger:

Those in late antiquity have again inherited and carry on the small errors of middle antiquity, and they increasingly make them into ever greater errors. . . . When it comes to summoning the dead, ghosts are not able to come and eat constantly, and yet the sacrificial offerings were nonetheless greatly increased, thereby exceeding the proper standards. Yin grows and overcomes yang. No one knows which ghostly and spiritual creatures repeatedly come to gather together and eat, indulging themselves and having their way, acting like dangerous thieves and killing people without end. When they kill a person, [the ghosts] see an increase in the service [i.e., an increase in the sacrificial offerings] and see no punishments. Why should they not continue [killing the living] with all their strength? As a result, pernicious energies grow daily. It all turns back and attacks the giver of the sacrifices.³⁷

The living have been giving progressively more sacrifices to the dead, and the result of this is that the ghosts and spirits have become greatly empowered. It is not even that the ancestors of the living are coming to the sacrifices: the numbers are such that it is impossible to know who the ghosts and spirits are. They collect together to eat the sacrifices, indulge themselves, and kill the living—thus ensuring that yet more sacrificial offerings will be coming their way.

In other words, the very practices of the day—aimed at domesticating the dead through sacrifices—are precisely what is causing the problem the sacrifices were designed to solve: a cosmos populated by highly dangerous ghosts attacking

36. Ming 1992: 46.52–53.

37. Ming 1992: 46.53.

the living. Ghosts are therefore pervasive and at this point highly dangerous, but this is not an inherent part of the cosmos. Far from the cosmos being governed by dangerous ghosts and capricious or indifferent spirits, this section of the *Taiping Jing* asserts strongly that the cosmos is governed by entirely beneficent beings who have in fact given humans all the knowledge they possess. Moreover, the fact that dangerous ghosts exist is because the living have behaved badly—and this, of course, only proves that it is a moral cosmos. The reason things have become so dangerous now is that these errors have been accumulating over the past several millennia, and now the dangerous ghosts have accordingly been greatly empowered.

And how can the problem be solved? The text is clear that the problem cannot be solved by sending down yet another sage. This would simply re-create the same problem discussed above: errors would continue to accumulate and ultimately create yet a further danger. Accordingly, Heaven has now sent down instead a Celestial Master to give its revelations: “If they [Heaven and Earth] were to wish again to give birth to a sage, it would just be the same yet again. Heaven has been troubled for a long time. For this reason it sent me down to give its words as announcements to you, the Perfected.”³⁸ And what do these revelations consist of? Intriguingly, many of them involve an explicit attempt to prevent giving too much power to any one single authority—since this is part of what caused the gradual decline to begin with. Since proper teachings have been sent from Heaven, the key is to prevent considering any figure a perfect sage. On the contrary, the goal is to collect writings from all previous figures, and in their entirety, it is hoped, a single correct view will emerge:

If the sages of higher antiquity missed something, the sages of middle antiquity may have obtained it. If the sages of middle antiquity missed something, the sages of lower antiquity may have obtained it. If the sages of lower antiquity missed something, the sages of higher antiquity may have obtained it. If one has these follow one other by category and thereby supplement each other, then together they will form one good sagely statement.³⁹

And the same holds true for the living as well: since no one from the past can be granted full authority, no one in the present can as well: “Therefore, Heaven does not again make a sage speak, as he would be unable to fully eradicate all of the problems. Therefore, it makes all of the people under Heaven speak, and it makes them collect the ancient writings and study them.”⁴⁰ The entire political order is thus organized around a claim that no one figure should be granted too much

38. Ming 1992: 91.350.

39. Ming 1992: 132.352.

40. Ming 1992: 91.356.

authority. All true knowledge is divinely revealed, but no one figure—a sage or sage ruler—should be granted full authority in interpreting that divine knowledge.

The solution to the growing disaster is thus designed to prevent any one human from being granted the power to create a new order, or to be deemed a sage with any singular authority. The goal is to create a pure meritocracy, and one in which particular humans are no longer granted singular authority by being deemed sages.

8.2. *A Society of Transcendents: The Xiang'er Commentary to the Laozi*

Also during the late Han era, the *Xiang'er* commentary to the Laozi was written.⁴¹ The Celestial Masters would later accept the text as one of their own, and indeed even attribute the authorship of the *Xiang'er* commentary to Zhang Lu, the grandson of Zhang Daoling, who the Celestial Masters believed had received revelation from the god Laozi in 142 CE. Although it is impossible to know if this attribution is accurate, the fact that the text was either written within the Celestial Masters movement or at least appropriated by it renders it an invaluable work for our purposes.

Very much like the Mohists and the *Taiping Jing* section discussed above, the Celestial Masters asserted that there existed a high deity that was noncapricious and good. The Mohists and the *Taiping Jing* authors called this deity “Heaven,” while the Celestial Masters called it “Laozi,” the “Way,” or the “One.” As in the earlier self-divinization movements and early imperial ritual system, the Celestial Masters were making an appeal to a deity more primordial and more powerful than Heaven.

The *Xiang'er* commentary reads the *Laozi* as having been an earlier revelation from this One. This high deity ruled over a pantheon of spirits—including Heaven and Earth—that were also noncapricious and good. The pantheon rewarded good behavior among humans and punished bad behavior, so the cosmos was, for humans at least, fully moral: “Heaven and Earth model themselves on the Way. They are humane to those who do good, and inhumane to those who do bad. Therefore, when they bring to an end the badness of the myriad things, they do not love them but see them as grass and as dogs.”⁴² Humans were accordingly called on to follow the dictates of the high god and the pantheon of lesser gods, rather than trying to domesticate and transform the gods for the purposes of the living.

Unlike the Mohists and the *Taiping Jing* section, however, the Celestial Masters defined this pantheon as being above and superior to the ghosts of popular worship. Indeed, death itself was created by the Way as a punishment for bad

41. The *Xiang'er* commentary was discovered in Dunhuang (S 6825). It consists of commentary to chapters 3 through 37 of the Laozi. For outstanding studies of the *Xiang'er* commentary, see Rao 1991; Ófuchi 1991; Bokenkamp 1993 and 1997; and Boltz 1982.

42. *Xiang'er*, lines 32–34.

behavior. If one follows the precepts of the Way, one will achieve long life and never become a ghost:

The Way established life in order to reward the good, and established death in order to punish the bad. As for death, this is what all men fear. The transcendent rulers and nobles, like the common people, know fear of death and enjoyment of life; it is what they practice that is different. . . . Although the common people fear death, they do not try to trust in the Way, and they enjoy committing bad acts. Is it surprising that they are not yet trying to escape from death? The transcendent nobles fear death, trust in the Way, and hold fast to the precepts. Therefore they join with life.⁴³

Those who follow the precepts of the Way enjoy long life. Those who fail to follow the precepts are called the vulgar. It is they who die:

The Great Yin is where the Way accumulates. It is the place that refines forms. As for the worthies: if the world has no place where they can reside, they feign death and pass into the Great Yin. They return to the other side and are reborn. They end but are not destroyed. The vulgar are unable to accumulate good deeds; when they die it is a true death. They are taken away by the earth officers.⁴⁴

The concern was not to domesticate ghosts and spirits and build a pantheon of ranked divinities: the spirits were already beneficent and already organized into a pantheon, and the ghosts were under the control of, and already being punished by, the earth officers of the Way. Thus, the Celestial Masters opposed the sacrificial practices that lay at the heart of the common religion of the day: “Those who practice the Way live; those who lose the Way die. The correct method of Heaven does not reside in sacrificing, praying, and offering. The Way therefore forbade sacrifices, prayers, and offerings.”⁴⁵ The proper ordering of the world, therefore, was not dependent on a human domestication of the natural and divine realms, but rather a following of the beneficent precepts of the Way. Indeed, proper rulership consisted simply of following the Way and introducing the practices of the Way to the officials and populace below:

The ruler grasps the correct method and models himself on the great Way. All under Heaven returns to him. . . . As for the Way’s transformation, it descends from on high. When it indicates the one to be called the ruler, it distinguishes the one man. In ruling there are not two rulers. That is why the thearchs and kings always practice the Way. Only thus will it reach the

43. *Xiang’er*, lines 299–303. Here and below, my translations of the *Xiang’er* commentary have been aided deeply by the superb translation given in Bokenkamp 1997: 78–148. I follow Bokenkamp in referencing the line number of the commentary as given in the photographic copy of the manuscript in Ōfuchi 1991: 421–34.

44. *Xiang’er*, lines 227–230.

45. *Xiang’er*, lines 374–5.

officials and people. It is not that only nobles of the Way can practice it, with the ruler being excluded. Rather, the great sage ruler follows the Way and fully puts it into practice so as to educate and transform. Once all under Heaven is thus ordered, the omens of Great Peace will accumulate in response to the merit of humans. The one who brings this about is a ruler of the Way.⁴⁶

If the theology of the text represents a reversal and rejection of the religious practices of the day, the cosmology does as well. As we saw above, one of the constant concerns underlying the practice was that ghosts and spirits became difficult (and increasingly so over time) to control after death occurred and they left the body. Hence the emergence of self-divinization techniques, in which one would avoid death, cultivate the spirit within oneself, transcend into the heavens, and get ever closer to the One. The *Xiang'er* reverses the cosmology. Not only is it the One that directs the process, but the One in fact created bodies (both the cosmos as a whole as well as human bodies at a microlevel) precisely in order to cultivate spirits. Moreover, it only did so reluctantly: “I’ refers to the Way. Its desire is to be without a body. But it desires to nourish spirits. That is all. And it desires that humans model themselves on this.”⁴⁷ If the spirits are nurtured, the body (in this case, the cosmos) will also last long. And humans are called upon to model themselves on this, also using their bodies to accumulate essence and thus complete spirits: “The Way teaches humans to congeal essences and complete spirits.”⁴⁸ If humans follow these admonitions, then they will become transcendents and their bodies will live long:

Humans should only preserve their bodies; they should not love their bodies. What does this mean? By maintaining the admonitions of the Way, we accumulate goodness and complete accomplishments; accumulate essences and complete spirits. When spirits are completed, the transcendents live long. This is why we treasure our bodies.⁴⁹

But why was the Way’s creation of bodies reluctant? Because this creation has its dangers as well. With human bodies, the dangers are clear. Most humans will not use their bodies to cultivate spirits. They will on the contrary misuse their bodies, copulate too much, waste their essence, dissipate their spirit, and die. And since this is the case, the Way has to allow this copulation to create yet new bodies, so that hopefully some of them will be used properly. Thus, the Way also had to create, again reluctantly, not only bodies but also copulation, families, and even ancestral sacrifices for the dead:

46. *Xiang'er*, lines 527–33.

47. *Xiang'er*, lines 154–5.

48. *Xiang'er*, line 87.

49. *Xiang'er*, lines 161–3.

Now this [copulating to reproduce] produces great calamities. Why did the Way create it? The Way values ancestral sacrifices and values that the species does not end. It desires that humans join their essences and generate life; therefore [the Way] teaches it. . . . However, humans with utmost power . . . are able to not unite and produce life. From a young age they stop this [i.e., the losing of their essences through copulation] and they are able to complete good spirits earlier. These are called the essences of the Way. Thus, Heaven and Earth have no sacrifices, dragons no offspring, transcendents no wives, the Jade Maiden no husband.⁵⁰

The transcendents do not waste their essence through excessive copulation, but instead use it to complete spirits. Like Heaven and Earth, they become transcendents, become autonomous from family life, never die, and never give or receive sacrifices. In short, they become autonomous from the religious practices of the day.

But most humans fail to do this. Instead of completing their spirits and themselves becoming transcendent, they deplete their spirit and die; instead of helping the cosmos to last long, they instead do the opposite. This is why the entire cosmos is now in danger, and why the Way is giving more revelations.

It is clear how a society formed along the lines of these teachings would be organized. Just as the cosmos was a moral one, in which the good are rewarded and the bad punished, so would a community be based on the same principles. The hierarchy of the community would be based not on birth, but rather on merit, with merit being defined as the degree to which one was adhering to the dictates of the high god Laozi. The leader of the movement would simply be the one who has most fully followed these dictates. Those below would be promoted in the hierarchy based on the degree to which they successfully followed these precepts and cultivated themselves accordingly. The result would be a society of humans utilizing their bodies to cultivate spirits and thereby progressively helping to preserve the larger cosmos. The most successful of these would rise in the ranks of the community and ultimately become a transcendent.

The *Xiang'er* has thus appropriated key elements of previous religious movements.⁵¹ Like the imperial system of the First Emperor and Emperor Wu, the *Xiang'er* claims access to a higher deity than Heaven. Laozi is also called the “Way,” or the “One”—clearly related to the Great One worshipped under the imperial system. Moreover, Heaven is explicitly one of the spirits under the One. Also as in the imperial system, the adept will achieve transcendence. Thus, in the *Xiang'er*, the goal was to achieve this same purity and this same autonomy from the domestication practices of the religions of the day as one sees in the early imperial system.

50. *Xiang'er*, lines 57–63.

51. For a fuller discussion of the cosmology of the *Xiang'er* commentary and the ways it was appropriating earlier materials, see Puett 2004.

But like the Mohists, the *Xiang'er* asserts that the cosmos is moral, guided by a moral high deity presiding over a pantheon of moral and noncapricious spirits. Thus, not only is the ruler achieving transcendence over the domestication practices of the day but those domestication practices are themselves posited as unnecessary and indeed destructive of the moral cosmos: the cosmos is ruled by spirits who do not consume sacrifices, and the world of sacrifice is part and parcel of the highly destructive activities of humans that are endangering the cosmos.

Accordingly, the techniques of self-divinization are not a product of human attempts to gain more power for themselves—to gain for humans (or those few humans who undertake the cultivation) powers that only the spirits above possess, or for the emperor, to gain a transcendence from the inherent dynastic decay built into the sacrificial system at the state level. On the contrary, the techniques of transcendence were a product of divine revelation from the One itself. Furthermore, following these revelations aids not just the adepts, but also the entire cosmos.

And society as well. Increasing degrees of divinization entail higher ranks in the social hierarchy, rather than a complete break from and power over the rest of society. And transcendence entails autonomy from the religious practices of sacrifice, but not autonomy from (or power over) the social world.

Perhaps most importantly, defining both the cosmos and the social world in the form of a moral, meritocratic system like that of the Mohists meant that, although the ruler continues to be a divine figure, the order below him is far more meritocratic than had been the case even at the height of the Western Han Empire. And the possibilities of divinization were thus granted to all on a purely meritocratic basis: anyone could undertake this divinization (the more the better), and doing so would grant one ever higher ranks in the social hierarchy.

The Celestial Masters, who accepted the *Xiang'er* as one of their texts, withdrew from the Han Empire to create an autonomous society.⁵² Meanwhile, the Han state successfully put down the Taiping rebellion in the east, but at such a cost and with such a yielding of power to the military that the Han state was weakened dramatically. The dynasty was overthrown in the early third century. The Celestial Masters gave their support to Cao Cao, whose son thereafter started the Wei Dynasty. The Celestial Masters became a major force in the Wei Dynasty.

9. ORGANIZING THE DEAD: RELIGION AND POLITICS IN EARLY CHINA

I have thus far explored several different models of political theology—of how to organize the social and political worlds, the worlds of the ghosts, and the worlds of the spirits.

52. On the Celestial Masters, see Ófuchi 1991; Kleeman 1998 and 2007.

The first is based on a claim of radical creativity—a pure sage who breaks completely from the past and creates an entirely new order, who becomes the ancestor to the populace, who ultimately transcends Heaven and Earth and never dies. A claim, in short, of divine emperorship.

The second is a proclaimed ritual order, purportedly representing a return to the Bronze Age system of the Zhou as mediated by the texts put together by Confucius. In this system, the ruler is distinctly human, but is ideally the most cultivated human, connecting the various entities of the cosmic and social order in the form—ritually speaking—of a patriarchal lineage.

The third is from the millenarian movements, in which self-divinization reappears, but with calls for the full population to follow. Relatedly, calls are made for a more fully meritocratic form of governance. In the version seen in the *Taiping Jing* section discussed above, there is no single sage who is allowed to create a new order, nor is there even a body of texts from previous sages that are designated as authoritative. Rather, all innovation and accurate knowledge about how to build a proper order are posited as coming from Heaven, which is itself entirely good. The political order that will best reflect this pure realm above is one in which no one figure (either alive or dead) is granted too much power. Knowledge is obtained by having a free circulation of all ideas. In the version seen in the *Xiang'er*, there is indeed a clear set of teachings to be followed, but these teachings are ascribed to a high deity—the One. But here too the new order called for is a pure meritocracy, in which anyone, through self-cultivation, is capable of transcending the world of ghosts and becoming a transcendent.

The second of these political theologies, of course, is the one that we tend to associate with classical Chinese political order: the ruler as a Son of Heaven, presiding over a dynasty that gradually loses its potency over the generations, as the descendants become further and further removed from the ancestral founder.

But the other two continue to have an equally long history as well in China. First, the ritual system of divine emperorship developed by the First Emperor and consolidated by Emperor Wu would be appropriated by the later Daoist church, which would continue to perform versions of the rituals for the rulers.⁵³ And the claims of a ruler effecting a radical break with the past and creating an entirely new order continues as well in later Chinese history. Most famously, Mao Zedong explicitly compared himself to the First Emperor when he was attempting to wipe out what he called feudalism once and for all and give birth to a new society.

Moreover, the views we have seen playing out in the millenarian movements repeat themselves in later Chinese history as well.⁵⁴ Several dynasties would be

53. The ritual of the early Japanese state was based on this divine model of emperorship, rather than the humanistic son of Heaven model. For excellent studies of the early Japanese ritual system and its connections to China, see Ooms 2008; Como 2008 and 2009.

54. Ownby 1999.

brought down because of the emergence of millenarian movements, usually involving claims of divine revelations from a high and benevolent deity, calls for radical meritocracy, and proclamations concerning the divine potentials of all humans.

As we have already seen in the interplay of the Qin–early Han imperial system and the Celestial Masters, the first and third of these political theologies are mirror images of each other: both are based on claims for the creation of a radically new order, both involve claims for the transcendence of the practices of the day, and both involve claims of divinization. The primary difference is the degree to which these claims of divinization are opened to significant portions of humanity. The close interplay among these two political theologies helps to account for their historical connections—the fact that later Daoist ritual will build on the imperial ritual system, the fact that so many of the millenarian movements both help to bring about the end of a dynasty (in the case at hand, the Han) and help to bring about the rise of the next dynasty (in this case the Wei) through their support.

To help explore the implications of these political theologies, it will be helpful to return to the larger comparative context.

10. COMPARATIVE CONSIDERATIONS

In both Rome and China, claims of divine kingship emerged in direct connection with the rise of empire. In both cases, the concern was to assert a form of rulership that transcended both earlier forms of sovereignty and the religious practices within which those forms operated.⁵⁵ In part because these claims of divine rulership marked such a break from earlier forms of sovereignty, repeated efforts were also made to reassert claims of human sovereignty as well, and many of the complexities of the political theologies of the empires revolved around the competing claims of divine and human rulership vis-à-vis the religious practices of the day. Moreover, these claims of divine rulership, and the claims to transcendence that they involved, also helped to create the grounds for millenarian movements that would build on the claims of possible human divinization and try to expand such possibilities to the rest of the populace. These millenarian movements began in strong opposition to the empire, but in both Rome and China one of these movements (Christianity and Celestial Masters, respectively) was ultimately appropriated by the state and transformed into a new imperial ideology.

Not only are the religious and political visions that flourished in early China every bit as variegated as those that flourished in Rome, but they are in fact

55. On the divinization of the Roman emperors, see Taylor 1931; Pollini 1990; Weinstock 1971; Yavetz 1983; and Zanker 1988.

extremely comparable, emerging for comparable reasons and under comparable circumstances.

But allow me to return momentarily to the contrast, mentioned earlier, that is often made about the different legacies that would appear to be left to Europe and China respectively from these two empires. A legacy of republic-monarchy-empire on the one hand, and monarchy, or perhaps imperial-monarchy, on the other. Given the striking similarities, how are we to account for the different legacies that the two empires appear to leave?

The first point to emphasize is that the contrast is empirically incorrect. As I have already noted, the legacy of what was above termed the first and third political theologies was to be appropriated constantly by later movements. But it is certainly true that the second of these political theologies (the one developed in the ritual reforms of the 30s BCE) would be picked up repeatedly by later dynasties, and this is why we tend to associate it with Chinese political theory in general—a Son of Heaven ruling as a dynastic monarch, mediating Heaven and Earth and connecting the different elements of the realm.

Indeed, when the Tang successfully re-created a full empire in China in the seventh century, they modeled their ritual system on a variant of that which was developed in the 30s BCE. While re-creating the Qin-early Han imperial system, and also actively supporting the Daoist church, the Tang ruler also made the ritual claim to be a Son of Heaven, mediating between Heaven and Earth, connecting the realm, and continuing the dynastic tradition of the Bronze Age.⁵⁶ While what I have termed the first and third (in its institutionalized, nonrevolutionary form) political theologies were fully present, the dominant public rituals were very much based on the second vision.

And, politically speaking, this was a wise choice. As we have seen, the vision that underlay the 30s BCE ritual reform was hardly based on an assumption of a harmonious cosmos. The attempts by recent scholars to characterize it as such, rather than as a claim within a complex debate, has resulted in it being misconstrued. On the contrary, the claim of this position is precisely that the world is *not* inherently harmonious, or inherently linked at all. Heaven and Earth are indifferent, the spirits are capricious, and the populace divided into different lineages competing for power. But all of these are domesticated through ritual, and all come to be defined as linked into a single lineage, with the ruler as the center of the familial network. Far from its being an assumption, we should read the claim of the ruler being a Son of Heaven, unifying the cosmic and political realms into a single lineage, as being a ritual statement: how things should operate if the world really functioned according to the ritual—which, of course, it does not. Reading it as an assumption is to take a ritual statement and read it as a view of the cosmos as it really is.

56. See Wechsler 1985; McMullen 1987.

The point must be emphasized for several reasons. To begin with, the ritual reform was a very successful appropriation of the religious practices of the day, which helps to explain part of its cultural resonance and success. In contrast, both the divine emperorship model and the millenarian movements depend for their power on a rejection of the practices of the day, a fact that helps to explain why they tend to appear historically with tremendous power, but also to be less popular over the long term.

Second, the ritual basis of the order helps to explain part of its malleability. Since the ruler is called on to create a successful order by harmonizing all that exists, it also means that any new set of institutions or practices that arise can and must be dealt with by the ruler. Thus, to give a significant example, meritocracy—so strongly pushed by the Mohists and later by the millenarian movements—later comes to be an increasingly significant component of the imperial state as overseen by a Son of Heaven.

In short, the claim was not that the world is inherently harmonious and that the ruler accords with that larger harmony. The claim, building on the religious practices of the day, is that the ruler must domesticate and transform all that exists such that a harmonious order of constructed familial relationships can be built. The political theology that resulted was an extraordinarily supple one for domesticating innovations and, indeed, just about anything that came from the outside. The result was in a sense an endless balancing act, trying to contain claims of divine emperorship and meritocracy within a claim of human kingship modeled on that of the Bronze Age monarchies. Ultimately, it would prove to be an extraordinarily successful imperial ideology.

In this set of debates concerning political and religious order in early China and ancient Rome, the parallels between earlier monarchical notions, the emergence of divine claims to emperorship, and the development of millenarian movements have been striking. And equally striking are some of the very different legacies that these competing orders have left.

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