

**Rethinking the Axial Age in Ancient China:
The Role of Religion in Governance from the Shang to the Early Han**

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Abstract

The Axial Age is a term often used to describe an intellectual golden age that occurred in the first millennium Before the Common Era. Thinkers in civilizations across the globe at that time contributed to a philosophical movement that is sometimes portrayed as an evolution from superstition to reason. However, this thesis focuses on the changing role of religion in regards to governance in Ancient China. Beginning with the first evidence of writing on oracle bones in the Shang Dynasty, religious ideas and practices were relied on by the Shang royal court. The spread of these religious artifacts is a testament to the growing power of the Shang. By claiming supernatural influence with the spirits and deities, the authority of the Shang king was strengthened. As the ritual of divining and crafting oracle bones became more routinized, these religious practices became politically important as well. The Zhou conquered the Shang and justified their newfound rule by claiming to be favored by Heaven. Their concept of Heaven incorporated all of the Shang spiritual pantheon, thereby reinforcing Zhou legitimacy. Zhou kings were expected to uphold the Mandate of Heaven not only by pleasing the spirits but also by providing for the people. Divination and ritual continued but did not have as much of an impact on governance as it did in the Shang. As the central Zhou state began to lose power, various states favored practical measures to strengthen their own political authority. Might determined right as states preferred military power instead of religious influence. Assimilation of outside peoples paired with increased social mobility also contributed to the waning influence of the Zhou state. The philosophical trends of the Hundred Schools of Thought mirrored this development. The idealistic ritual-based rule of the early Confucians was later displaced by the pragmatic

law-based rule of the Legalists. Although the Qin state succeeded in uniting the warring states by utilizing clear laws and strict punishments, their reign was short-lived. The Han Dynasty inherited the legal bureaucracy from the Qin but fused that with religious ideas to serve as an ethicopolitical framework for their rule. This legacy served as a blueprint for dynastic rule that lasted over two thousand years.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Table of Contents	v
Introduction	1
Chapter One: The Shang Dynasty	14
Chapter Two: The Western Zhou.....	32
Chapter Three: The Eastern Zhou	51
The Spring and Autumn Period	52
The Warring States Period	58
The Hundred Schools of Thought.....	62
The Qin	69
Conclusion.....	72
Bibliography.....	81

Introduction

In ancient China,¹ there is often thought to be a pivotal period in the first millennium BCE² in which religion gave way to philosophy. However, it was not that religion was eradicated or replaced by reason; instead, its role in society and governance changed during this time. As Emile Durkheim points out, “If philosophy and the sciences were born in religion, it is because religion itself began by serving as science and philosophy.”³ In light of the overwhelming evidence that religion still continued throughout the Zhou, the reality of this transformation period is much more complicated than religion simply giving way to philosophy. Throughout this period, religion continued but had less of a direct impact on governance and instead formed the basis for the ethical and political norms of society. To better understand this momentous change in ancient China, this thesis will address religion’s changing role in governance from the Shang through the Zhou up to the Early Han.

Many historians support an idea known as the “Axial Age.” The general idea for this pivotal period is that there was a time in the first millennium BCE when ancient civilizations all experienced an intellectual breakthrough. A few paradigmatic personalities in China, India, and the West were said to have a sort of spiritual awakening

¹ I use the word “China” not only out of convenience, but also because we can confidently assert that from the written records of the late Shang there was “a civilization that was incipiently Chinese in its values and institutions.” David N. Keightley, “The Shang: China’s First Historical Dynasty,” The Cambridge History of Ancient China : From the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C., ed. Edward L. Shaughnessy Michael Loewe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 232.

² All dates will be Before the Common Era unless otherwise stated.

³ Emile Durkheim, The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: The Free Press, 1995) 8.

thereby forming “the spiritual foundations of humanity... upon which humanity still subsists today.”⁴ This has been described in an evolutionary framework wherein thought developed from religion to philosophy. Examples of thinkers across the world at that time have been said to include the Greek philosophers Socrates, Thucydides, Parmenides, Heraclitus, and Archimedes; the prophets Elijah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah; the authors of the Upanishads; the Buddha Siddhartha Gautama; the Daoists Laozi and Zhuangzi; and the main focus of this thesis, Chinese thinkers like Confucius, Mozi, and Mencius as well. To be sure, this was a rich time for human thought in the major civilizations of the time, but the extent to which the various regions and philosophies have anything in common has been disputed. I will first present a few influential interpretations of the “Axial Age” and later discuss my approach to this transformative era, which of course shall focus on China.

The “Axial Age” is a term coined by Karl Jaspers to indicate that early civilizations across the globe participated in a philosophical revolution in the first millennium. He claims that from c. 800-200, transcendental human consciousness arose independently in China, India, and the West (Greece, Persia, and Palestine). In many ways, Jaspers describes the nature of this “spiritual phenomenon” as a peculiar instance of human consciousness awakening independently within these three ancient societies.⁵ Chinese philosophers like Feng Youlan have adopted this framework to argue for ancient

⁴ Karl Jaspers, Way to Wisdom: An Introduction to Philosophy (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1951) 98.

⁵ Karl Jaspers, "The Axial Period," The Origin and Goal of History (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959).

China's shift from ignorance and superstition towards humanist rationalism.⁶ Others like Heiner Roetz claim that the breakdown of political power c.800 in China was the impetus for thinkers to "turn inward" and thereby achieve transcendence and rationality.⁷ Max Weber (although he predates Jasper) has claimed that only the West achieved rationalization at this time because it divested itself of magic and separated itself from the divine, whereas China incorporated magic into its ideology and made no distinction between the human and the divine.⁸ Benjamin Schwartz, on the other hand, agreed that in ancient China there indeed was a harmony rather than opposition between the human and divine, but instead argued for a "this-worldly" transcendence.⁹

Although there may be merits to each viewpoint, there are a few qualifications worth making. First, it is clear that a momentous change occurred at the time, regardless of how we define "transcendence" or "enlightenment." The dispute concerns how best to make sense of this transformation. Second, this development cannot simply be the progression from religion to philosophy or from superstition to reason, due to the historical evidence we have of the prominence of religion throughout the Zhou Dynasty and continuing well after. Third, in ancient civilizations there were no categorical

⁶ Feng Youlan, A History of Chinese Philosophy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1937) 24.

⁷ Heiner Roetz, Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age : A Reconstruction under the Aspect of the Breakthrough toward Postconventional Thinking (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993) 39.

⁸ Max Weber, The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism, trans. Hans H. Gerth (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1951) 226.

⁹ Benjamin I. Schwartz, "The Age of Transcendence," Daedalus 104.2, Wisdom, Revelation, and Doubt: Perspectives on the First Millennium B.C. (1975): 3.

distinctions dividing the divine realm, human society, and the natural world.¹⁰ That is, religion was not a distinct sphere of ancient society that could be analyzed by itself. For instance, there was no precise conceptual separation of religion and governance then as there is the separation of church and state today.

First, I must discuss what is meant by religion. For the purposes of this thesis, I adopt C.K. Yang's interpretation of religion, which is a combination of the structural aspect of Joachim Wach's definition and the functional aspect of Paul Tillich's definition: "the system of beliefs, ritualistic practices, and organizational relationships designed to deal with ultimate matters of human life."¹¹ From Wach, religion necessarily contains the structural components of the following: theoretical (myth or doctrine; beliefs), sociological (system of social relations), and practical (e.g. ritual, worship, sacrifice).¹² From Tillich, religion must have the purpose of dealing with the "Ultimate Concern."¹³ I follow Yang's lead in interpreting Tillich's "Ultimate Concern" as dealing with the sacred, numinous, or holy instead of the ordinary and profane. Since the supernatural component was undisputedly prominent in ancient Chinese religion, this seems to be appropriate.

¹⁰ Bruce G. Trigger, Understanding Early Civilizations: A Comparative Study (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 442.

¹¹ Yang gives examples of these to be "the tragedy of death, unjustifiable sufferings, unaccountable frustrations, uncontrollable hostilities that threaten to shatter human social ties, and the vindication of dogmas against contradictory evidences from realistic experience." See C.K. Yang, Religion in Chinese Society: A Study of Contemporary Social Functions of Religion and Some of Their Historical Factors (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1961) 1.

¹² See Joachim Wach, The Comparative Study of Religion (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966).

¹³ See Paul Tillich, Christianity and the Encounter of World Religions (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963) 4.

The importance of discussing religion in relation to a specific people and time period must not be overlooked. Religion, as Talal Asad argues, cannot be divorced from its historical and cultural context: “there cannot be a universal definition of religion... because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific.”¹⁴ That is, although we may use the word “religion” in a universal or trans-historical sense; it must ultimately be understood as a historical phenomenon specific to an actual culture. “Religious symbols,” he continues, “cannot be understood independently of their historical relations with nonreligious symbols or of their articulations in and of social life.”¹⁵ Any following discussion of religion will take into account the historical and cultural context in which they existed.

To further elucidate the meaning of religion, I use Ninian Smart’s description of religion: “[A]ny definition of religion needs two legs to stand on. One leg is knowledge about the manifestations of religion; the other is knowledge of religion, as it were, from the inside.”¹⁶ Durkheim makes a similar contrast: “Religion is not only a system of practices but also a system of ideas whose object is to express the world... One is turned toward action which it elicits and regulates; the other toward thought, which it enriches and organizes.”¹⁷ Simply put, one must look at both what religion is/does and also what it means. For the purpose of this thesis, Smart’s first leg involves the religious practices and artifacts that were conducted and used in China from the Shang to the Early Han.

¹⁴ Talal Asad, "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category," Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993) 116.

¹⁵ Asad, "The Construction of Religion," 129.

¹⁶ Ninian Smart, The Philosophy of Religion (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979)

3.

¹⁷ Durkheim, The Elementary Forms of Religious Life 430.

Although we can never truly know the subjective sensations that people experienced when performing religious rituals, we can investigate what these rituals signified for those involved. As such, Smart's second leg of religion involves what these practices meant to the people who performed and witnessed them. As Smart explains, "the philosophy of religion must not be pursued in the abstract: it has to be tied back to religion and religions as they manifest themselves."¹⁸ For this, we must analyze the religious artifacts and historical context in order to understand the significance of religion at the time.

To place my understanding of religion in terms of this historical and cultural context, I will focus on C.K. Yang's description of the four main elements of "classical religion" specific to China during the Shang, Zhou, and Early Han periods: "ancestor worship, the worship of Heaven and its subordinate system of naturalistic deities, divination, and sacrifice."¹⁹ Although popular religion was a prominent part of life for the common people, this thesis will focus on this "classical religion" of the state. Yang ascribes the historical underestimation of the role of religion in China to the lack of a centrally-organized religion and the lack of a struggle between organized religion and the state, as well as an emphasis on the rationalistic features of Confucianism.²⁰ This led both Western and Chinese scholars to exaggerate the rational or secular nature of

¹⁸ Smart, The Philosophy of Religion 4.

¹⁹ Marcel Granet regards these elements as "feudalistic official religion as distinct from peasant religion" but this thesis is concerned with official religion rather than peasant religion. See Yang, Religion in Chinese Society 106.

²⁰ For more, see Yang, Religion in Chinese Society 1-27.

Confucianism and Chinese culture while downplaying the impact of religion.²¹ Yang explains this misinterpretation:

In China, as in other cultures, the state was never a purely secular and utilitarian structure or a cold mechanical apparatus operated by empirical knowledge and for materialistic interest alone. The machinery of government was always propelled by value systems intricately interwoven with dogmas and myths and other non-empirical beliefs rooted in religion. Consequently, neither the structure nor functioning of government was independent of religious systems.²²

I follow Yang's lead in eschewing the oversimplified separation of religion and governance because religious ideas have evidently influence governance.

It is not that religion was eradicated or displaced by reason, but rather that religion in regards to governance gradually took on a different role. It changed from divination directly impacting Shang governance to forming the ethicopolitical basis for morality by the Early Han. Instead of studying either religion or governance in isolation, we ought instead to look at the interactions between the two fields in order to enhance our understanding of the whole of society at that time. As the philosopher Georg Hegel said, "truth is the whole," meaning that it is impossible to comprehend anything by investigating just one of its many parts.²³ Hence, to better understand this ancient transformative period which many dub the "Axial Age," we should look at the changing relationship between religion and governance instead of looking at either *in vacuo*.²⁴ Additionally, we must keep in mind that distinct concepts are not usually entrenched

²¹ Such scholars include James Legge, Herbert Giles, and Derk Bodde as well as Liang Qichao 梁啟超 and Hu Shih 胡適.

²² Yang, Religion in Chinese Society 104.

²³ Georg Hegel, Phenomenology of Mind (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977) 81-82.

²⁴ In order to obtain a fuller understanding of ancient China, I was inspired to look at the interaction between religion/culture and governance found in Isaac D. Balbus, Governing Subjects: An Introduction to the Study of Politics (New York: Routledge, 2010).

divisions of that specific era, but rather a result of later historians categorizing similar things together. For instance, it is easy for a reader in the twenty-first-century to discern the different aspects of religion and governance, whereas an aristocrat in the Zhou Dynasty three thousand years ago may have found the distinction imperceptible. Therefore, in order to gain a fuller appreciation of the culture of that time, it is important not to isolate one phenomenon, but rather to look at the relationships among various aspects of society. For this reason, this thesis investigates the changing relationship between religion and governance, or more specifically: religion's changing role in governance from the middle of the Shang Dynasty up to the Early Han.

Due to the indistinct division between religion and governance, the term governance must also be defined.²⁵ This thesis will not merely focus on the state apparatus or institutions of an established government, but will discuss the three aspects of the “state,” as explained by Clifford Geertz:

“That master noun of modern political discourse, *state*, has at least three etymological themes diversely condensed within it: status, in the sense of station, standing, rank, condition—*estate*; pomp, in the sense of splendor, display, dignity, presence—*stateliness*; and governance, in the sense of regnancy, regime, dominion, mastery—*statecraft*.”²⁶

This definition is particularly useful for ancient China: the estate would include the status of the king and those in the royal court; the stateliness would involve the elevated ceremony of royal ritual; and, the statecraft would depend on the various laws and institutions.

²⁵ I use "governance" instead of "government" because the word "government" is too closely associated primarily with merely the state apparatus, as is explained in Balbus, Governing Subjects 243n1.

²⁶ Clifford Geertz, Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) 121.

It is not that religion's role in governance became absent during and after the "Axial Age," but rather it just took on new meaning. First of all, religion was used for personal rather than public purposes. Although rulers were still religious, they practiced religion in their personal lives and usually in dire straits, much like the Chinese saying *ren qiong ze hu tian* 人窮則呼天, people only cry to Heaven only when they've reached their limits. Additionally, religious ideas and practices formed the foundation for ethicopolitical norms. As Yang explains, "the effective operation of the ethicopolitical order depended partly on religious influence, especially in a traditional society such as the Chinese."²⁷ Although religion didn't achieve the status of a dominant, independent moral institution, according to Yang, it nevertheless acted as a "supernatural sanctioning agent" of the moral order utilized by those in power.²⁸ Even at the end of the "Axial Age," religion was still very much a prominent feature of ancient Chinese society.

One issue with comparative histories of early civilizations—such as those who discuss the "Axial Age"—is that they are so far removed from primary sources. Bruce Trigger points this out:

"It is clear that the 'facts' about early civilizations, especially those that are derived from secondary or heavily interpreted primary sources, are to a large extent consensually established rather than scientifically demonstrated. It is also clear that many interpretations are ideologically or theoretically driven."²⁹

Although my approach is not exactly "scientific" per se, this thesis will aim to demonstrate the changing role of religion in governance based on the usage of available primary sources. This thesis admittedly makes use of numerable secondary sources, of

²⁷ Yang, Religion in Chinese Society 138.

²⁸ Yang, Religion in Chinese Society 278.

²⁹ Trigger, Understanding Early Civilizations: A Comparative Study 66.

which I am humbly appreciative, but I try to present evidence from primary sources in order to validate their claims. I use the modern concepts of “religion” and “governance” but try to take care to apply these concepts to their historical and cultural context. By focusing on primary sources and trying to construct a view of society at that time, I hope to avoid any ideological bias and thereby bring more of an emic rather than etic insight to ancient China. In order to understand the changing nature of Chinese society as it existed c. 3250 to 2200 years ago, I split this thesis up into three chapters ordered chronologically.

Chapter one will introduce the prominent role religion had in governance during the dawn of historical records in the Shang Dynasty. Even before the introduction of writing in China, evidence of divination and sacrifices can be found on oracle bones. The earliest Chinese writing dating to c.1250 was found on such oracle bones, which were divination tools used by the Shang royalty. Their inscriptions convey the Shang’s belief system of a supernatural pantheon of *Shangdi* 上帝 the “Supreme Deity” lordling over the lower ancestral and nature spirits. Because the spirits were thought to have power over nature and human society, the Shang sacrificed to them in a *quid pro quo* relationship in exchange for favorable earthly conditions, or at least in order to be spared from disaster. The influence of religion on Shang governance was paramount as divination was consulted for virtually every decision. The Shang king sat at the apex of both political and religious authority as his religious power made him more powerful politically and his political power strengthened the Shang’s religious influence. The Shang’s political authority benefited from their “spiritual imperialism” as only the Shang king was believed to have supreme influence in the spiritual realm. Earlier oracle bones were

prepared in a variety of methods without a uniform standard, whereas the standardization of later oracle bones illustrate the expanse of a centralized, state-controlled divination. The Shang state also produced numerous ritual bronzes which also illustrated the breadth of Shang religious and cultural influence. Utilizing this cultural hegemony, the spread of the Shang's royal system of oracular divination reinforced their political authority. Although oracle bones were originally used primarily for religious purposes, they later were used for the political benefits of reinforcing Shang legitimacy and authority. By the late Shang, divination and sacrifices were used more for the Shang's display of extending political authority and legitimacy than their erstwhile purpose of pleasing the spirits. This is shown by the manner of oracular divinations being recorded according to set formulas and sacrifices being performed according to a specific routine. The original religious significance of divination as a channel to communicate with the spirits diminished, instead becoming more important as a bureaucratic technique for maintaining cultural influence while upholding political legitimacy and authority.

Chapter two will focus on the close relationship between religion and governance in the Western Zhou Period. The Zhou people were not a unified people until after they conquered the Shang and adopted many of their cultural and religious customs. Most prominent among these customs was the widespread usage of ritual bronzes which had inscriptions memorializing their purpose and owners. These ritual vessels and their accompanying religious practices of sacrifice and worship promoted a cultural unity which in turn helped strengthen the Zhou government. The Zhou looked to their religious concept of *tian* 天 or "Heaven" as the source of all power. This supernatural deity incorporated the Shang ancestral spirits and *Shangdi* 上帝 "Supreme Deity," thus

granting legitimacy to Zhou governance. As the *tianzi* 天子 “Son of Heaven,” the Zhou king’s religious and political authority were one and the same. Having inherited the right to rule from the Shang, the Zhou had to uphold *tianming* 天命 the “Mandate of Heaven” by serving both above and below. It was not enough to worship and sacrifice to the spirits above, but the king also had to provide for the common people below him. This Mandate of Heaven depended on the king’s *de* 德 “Virtue,” which was given from Heaven but had to be preserved by providing tangible benefits for the populace. Divination still continued as a religious practice but it was no longer exclusively relied on for decision making in governance. Although there are many examples of divination being practiced by those in power, it was no longer believed to be as effective since it was often ignored.

Chapter three will illustrate the waning influence religion had on governance during the Eastern Zhou. The Spring and Autumn Period saw a weakened central Zhou state give rise to various states seeking greater power, which created an atmosphere in which practical measures outweighed religious concerns. Although Zhou culture was initially celebrated, it was soon diluted by the integration of new peoples and their cultures. Newfound social mobility also contributed to the mitigating influence of centralized Zhou power. Rituals and divinations continued but their focus shifted from explicitly pleasing the spirits to addressing the affairs of the living. The Warring States Period was a time in which might determined right, leaving little room for religion’s influence on governance. Further assimilation of non-Zhou cultures paired with increased social mobility both contributed to the diminished influence that Zhou religion had on political matters. Despite this, Zhou religion was still appealing, but it was no longer very

influential. Although ritual bronzes were still being cast and covenant texts were introduced, these ostensibly religious artifacts had expressly political purposes.

The intellectual atmosphere of the Hundred Schools of Thought similarly reflected a trend from idealistic ritual-based rule of the early Confucians to Legalism which was dominated by pragmatic law-based rule. Confucius revered the golden age of the early Zhou but looked to morality rather than the supernatural. Mengzi supported concepts like Heaven but reframed it as objective natural law rather than some anthropomorphic deity. Xunzi believed religion was important culturally but had no role in governance. Han Feizi and Shang Yang were influential Legalists who ignored the importance of religion or culture and instead supported pragmatic laws and punishments. Embracing these Legalist ideas, the Qin state eventually unified the warring states and established the Qin Dynasty. The Qin's First Emperor was indeed very religious, but his governance relied primarily on practical matters. The Qin Dynasty lasted a mere fifteen years until the Han Dynasty succeeded them. While Han rulers inherited the structured bureaucracy and Legalist governance from the Qin, they incorporated religious notions from the Zhou in the form of a morality framework and ethicopolitical order. This legacy of the Han would serve as a blueprint for dynastic rule that would last over two thousand years.

Chapter One: The Shang Dynasty

The earliest excavated evidence of writing in what is modern-day China is found on oracle bones dated to the 13th century which were actually animal scapulae and turtle plastrons that had early versions of Chinese characters carved onto their surfaces. For the purpose of divination, they were heated in order to produce cracks in a practice known as pyro-osteomancy. This practice was actually quite common even before the advent of writing: types of these oracle bones have been found in North China dating to the previous two millennia before the appearance of writing.³⁰ However, after the development of writing, inscriptions are found on oracle bones that document their purpose.³¹ Although some scholars assert that writing may have developed as a means of communication with the spirits, there are no known oracle bones that were directly addressed to anyone, let alone to the spirits. Rather, they document what they were used for. Instead of a means of communication with the spirits, the oracle bones contained inscriptions which acted as record-keeping.³² An example of an oracle bone transcription is as follows:

丁巳卜尹貞王□父丁
升伐羌三十劉五牢亡尤

On the day *ding-si* we made cracks and Yin divined about whether if the King were to perform a guest ritual for Father Ding and offer to him thirty captives

³⁰ Adam Daniel Smith, "Writing at Anyang: The Role of the Divination Record in the Emergence of Chinese Literacy," University of California, 2008, 148.

³¹ Although the inscriptions on oracle bones resembles a formal report of the ritual, it has been suggested that these inscriptions were necessary for the ritual to be efficacious. See Mark Edward Lewis, Writing and Authority in Early China (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999) 369n3.

³² Smith, "Writing at Anyang," 150-51.

from the Qiang nomad tribe as well as five penned sheep these actions would be without fault.³³

The oracle bones were used in sacrifices, offerings, and divine fortune-telling, and the inscribed texts themselves acted as formal records of the practice, describing what took place.

After the advent of writing, inscriptions on Shang oracle bones included evidence of their spiritual pantheon of various ancestral and natural spirits as well as the supreme deity Di 帝.³⁴ Spirits of recent ancestors were considered the least powerful, as they only reigned over particular people or events. The more distant, higher ancestors, however, wielded influence over the entire Shang state. Keightley explains this tiered system of ancestral influence:

Where, for example, the good fortune of particular individuals or of the king's hunts was involved, the ancestor to whom appeal was made might be relatively junior. Where larger, dynastic topics, like harvest, enemy invasions, or victory in battle were concerned, the pyromantic appeal for religious action was frequently to the senior ancestors.³⁵

The following is an example of a certain sacrifice to a lowly ancestor about a particular matter in a single instance:

We shall *yu*-sacrifice to Father *Yi* on account of a stomach ailment.³⁶

³³ Note that the symbol “□” represents an undistinguishable character. Robert Eno, *Early China Readings, History G380* <<http://www.iub.edu/~g380/Readings.html>> (2010), Indiana University, accessed Apr 18, 2013, 3.3, 4-5.

³⁴ For a more in-depth discussion of how political authority and bureaucratic administration was based on the writing of religious ritual in both the Shang and the Zhou, see Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China* 13-52.

³⁵ Keightley, "The Shang," 247.

³⁶ Eno, *Early China Readings*, 3.6, 2.

There were also nature spirits which referred either directly to a physical object like a specific mountain or river, or to the general forces of nature like the earth, wind, rain, or sun, each of which had power over their respective domains.³⁷ For instance,

Crack-making on *xin-hai* day, Zhong divining: We shall pray for harvest to (at?) Yue Peak; fire sacrifice three sheep and pigs; decapitate three oxen. Second month.³⁸

This example of a sacrifice to a nature spirit had a broader subject than the ancestral spirits had, in this case that of the harvest. Senior ancestors had more influence than junior ancestors, but nature spirits had even more influence than any ancestral spirit.

Whereas the ancestral and nature spirits had limited influence the Supreme Deity Di reigned over all of nature as well as human society. Di had direct control over nature in regards to the rain, wind, drought, and harvest. Additionally, Di could affect human or societal events in such ways as providing military support, protection or destruction for established cities, and directly influencing the state.³⁹ Examples of Di's various powers are found in the following two oracle bones:

[We] should . . . call out; Di will send down food and provide support.⁴⁰
Rain. Di greatly . . . sends down disaster upon this city.⁴¹

Although the precise conception of Di is not entirely clear, since Di is portrayed as having more power than the other spirits, Di is often thought of as being at the apex of the Shang spiritual pantheon with the other spirits playing lesser, subservient roles. In numerous oracle bones in the mid-Shang period dating back to the rule of King Wu Ding

³⁷ Keightley, "The Shang," 253.

³⁸ Eno, *Early China Readings*, 3.6, 8.

³⁹ Keightley, "The Shang," 252-53.

⁴⁰ Eno, *Early China Readings*, 3.6, 5.

⁴¹ Eno, *Early China Readings*, 3.6, 6.

武丁 (1250-1196), Di was portrayed as powerful enough to cause or alleviate natural disasters, and could also influence human and military affairs. For instance, the Supreme Deity Di was considered in control of whether or not the crops would receive ample precipitation:

Di will order rain sufficient for harvest;
Di perhaps will not order rain sufficient for the harvest.⁴²

Di was portrayed as in control of drought, winds, clouds, and other natural phenomena. In addition to controlling nature, Di was seen as able to intervene in human affairs as well.

When divining about military campaigns, one such oracle bone read:

As for attacking the Qiong-fang, Di will provide us support.⁴³

While this divination aims for the political goal of military support, an emphasis is placed on Di's power and ability or willingness to alter various conditions that influence society. Although the manner of support is unspecified, the Supreme Deity Di was believed to be powerful enough not only to affect natural phenomena, but also to intervene in human affairs.

Because the spirits were thought to be powerful enough to affect natural and human circumstances, the Shang rulers naturally sought to attain their favor, or at least to avoid their wrath. The relationship between the rulers and the spirits was portrayed as *quid pro quo* insofar as the rulers had to provide for the spirits in the form of sacrifices in order to receive tangible benefits from the appeased spirits. That is, the spirits would be provided for via the sacrifices, and the people would receive favorable conditions by

⁴² Eno, *Early China Readings*, 3.6, 5.

⁴³ Eno, *Early China Readings*, 3.6, 5.

averting disaster when the spirits were pleased. The following oracle bone inscription illustrates this conditional nature:

Crack-making on bing-wu day, Xing divined about whether if on the next ding-wei day we make yi-sacrifice to Father Ding there will be no misfortune.⁴⁴

The occurrence of misfortune here depends on whether or not certain sacrifices were made to the ancestral spirit of Father Ding. The divination of many oracle bones indicate that Shang rulers believed in this *quid pro quo* relationship between giving proper sacrifices to the spirits and receiving favorable results from them in return. Numerous oracle bones mention the performance of a certain sacrifice first and then a favorable condition that is being prayed for, like a great rain or harvest. For instance,

[Sacrifice] to Di's minister. There will be rain.⁴⁵

The implication was that the sacrifice would be sufficient to persuade Di to provide aid for the people. Di was portrayed as providing approval or disapproval on specific government actions, such as the building of cities, with the result of Di either supporting them or bringing destruction:

The King will establish a town; *Di* will approve.⁴⁶
Di shall perhaps bring an end to this city.⁴⁷

In these early oracle bones, the religious aim of appeasing an all-powerful deity was key to the Shang rulers and diviners.

As the goal of divination lay in providing for the spirits, oracular divination can be considered primarily a religious or spiritual means with which to appease them. There

⁴⁴ Eno, *Early China Readings*, 3.6, 7.

⁴⁵ Eno, *Early China Readings*, 3.6, 6.

⁴⁶ Eno, *Early China Readings*, 3.6, 6.

⁴⁷ Eno, *Early China Readings*, 3.6, 6.

are two main reasons for this inference. First, there was no regularity of methods for divination in the mid-Shang starting in the 13th century.⁴⁸ Initially, there was such a variety of methods to prepare oracle bones, that attention was placed less on the production of the medium than on the act of divination, or the actual message to the spirits. This lack of focus on production of the divinatory tools meant that they were secondary in importance to the actual act of divination. At this early stage, it seems that kings genuinely wished to please the spirits instead of producing lavish divinatory artifacts that reflected their own prestige and power. Second, Shang rulers divined about mundane subjects that directly affected their well-being. Many oracle bones divined about such things as diagnosing the king's toothache:

[The king] has a toothache; it is [caused by] Father Yi.⁴⁹

A king who wanted to use divination merely as a political tool to strengthen his own power would not be as likely to use it in order to alleviate his own personal pain. On these grounds, Shang rulers were shown to employ divination as a method to seek the approval of the spirits in order to achieve the desired results. As their primary goal was to appease the spirits, the original intent of oracular divination was thus more religious than political.

With unmatched power in Shang society, the religious and political authority of the Shang king was intertwined. "All modern scholars agree that the Shang state was a 'Bronze Age theocracy,'" states Mark Edward Lewis, "in which the state was inseparable from the king and the royal lineage, and these in turn drew their power from ancestral

⁴⁸ Rowan K. Flad, "Divination and Power: A Multiregional View of the Development of Oracle Bone Divination in Early China," *Current Anthropology* 49.3 (2008): 413.

⁴⁹ Eno, *Early China Readings*, 3.6, 2.

cult.”⁵⁰ The king had the last say when interpreting divinations. Keightley explains that although the diviners were the ones who performed the divinatory rituals, “with few exceptions, only the king—who is occasionally referred to in the bones as ‘I, the one man’ *yu yi ren* 余一人—had the ability to read the cracks.”⁵¹ With the unique role atop the political hierarchy, only the king had the religious ability and authority to interpret the cracks and make judgments based on them. For instance, one oracle bone divined:

Crack-making on gui-wei day, Que divining: These ten days there shall be no disaster. The King prognosticated saying, “There shall, however, be misfortune.” On the sixth day thereafter, wu-zi, the King’s son X died. In the First Month.⁵²

The role of being king granted him the power to be the only one who could make proclamations based on the oracular divinations. Essentially, the king’s ultimate political authority granted him the highest authority on religious matters as well. Because the king held the unique power of interpreting oracle bones, he functioned as the sole line of communication between humans and the spirits.

Not only did the king have special access to the higher gods, but the king’s political authority was similarly supported by his breadth of influence in the spiritual sphere which grew as the Shang integrated the spirits of those who fell under the Shang’s political sphere. These spirits were incorporated into the Shang pantheon of spirits which was under the purview of the Shang royal lineage, so the Shang king’s religious authority expanded. “The worship of the non-dynastic Powers, whether natural or human,” argues Keightley, “presumably strengthened the king’s position by enlarging the scope of his

⁵⁰ Lewis, Writing and Authority in Early China 15.

⁵¹ Keightley, "The Shang," 247.

⁵² Eno, *Early China Readings*, 3.8, 2.

influence in the spiritual world.”⁵³ Because spirits were thought to affect certain situations on earth, as increasingly more spirits came under the purview of the Shang royal court, not only did the Shang king’s influence with the spirits grow, but consequently his earthly power was similarly strengthened. As the king’s religious authority expanded, so did his political authority. As the Shang conquered or annexed neighboring groups, they adopted the gods of conquered peoples in order to ensure their alliance, or at least their acquiescence to Shang rule, as Eno explains, “Shang rulers co-opt[ed] the loyalties of conquered groups by finding a place in the Shang pantheon for their deities.”⁵⁴ Due to the nature of this expansion of power, Keightley calls this idea “spiritual imperialism.”⁵⁵ Since political and religious authority were fused in the role of the king, expansion of religious power meant greater political power and vice versa.

As the high priest who alone had the authority to interpret divinations, the king’s unique religious role granted him greater power politically as well. The king’s ancestors, spirits directly associated with the royal family, were considered more important and influential than the ancestors of the common people or of lower officials. First, oracle bones from the Shang royal court “were carefully thinned and polished and contained symmetrical lines of paired divination hollows and attendant chisel marks” whereas oracle bones from caches that are not associated with the royal family were not as

⁵³ David N. Keightley, "The Making of the Ancestors: Late Shang Religion and Its Legacy," *Religion and Chinese Society*, ed. John Lagerwey, vol. *Ancient and Medieval China* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2004) 6.

⁵⁴ Robert Eno, "Was There a High God *Ti* in Shang Religion?," *Early China* 15 (1990): 15.

⁵⁵ Keightley, "The Making of the Ancestors: Late Shang Religion and Its Legacy," 6.

carefully prepared.⁵⁶ Second, oracle bones that divined to non-royal ancestors were considered not as influential or important as those associated with both the royal ancestors and the higher spirits. Because those who were not associated with the Shang king only divined to a portion of the spirits to whom the Shang royal court divined, this shows “that in matters of state... the king held a monopoly on oracular privilege” and “that among the Shang elite, at least, worship of Powers beyond the Shang lineage was a matter of state.”⁵⁷ In other words, only the Shang king could divine to the higher ancestral and nature spirits whereas people of lower rank only divined to lower, more recent ancestral spirits. This illustrates the king’s unique power as the only one who could appeal to the higher spirits. The king’s political authority gave him the religious authority to have the final say on interpreting divinations while also being the only one who could divine to the more influential higher spirits. Because the royal family was believed to enjoy a higher status both on earth and in the afterlife, the king was in the unique position of being the only embodiment of the continuation of this royal lineage and so he enjoyed more legitimacy with both political and religious authority.

The standardization of oracle bones in the Shang illustrates both the diminishing importance of the religious intent which were present on early oracle bones, and the growing political authority of the Shang court. Whereas divination was initially used for the religious reason of actually getting the spirits not to inflict suffering on the people, oracle bones later came to be used more for political ends like legitimacy and reinforcing

⁵⁶ Flad, "Divination and Power," 413.

⁵⁷ Robert Eno, "Shang State Religion and the Pantheon of the Oracle Texts," Early Chinese Religion. Part One: Shang through Han (1250 Bc - 220 Ad), ed. John Lagerwey and Marc Kalinowski, vol. 1 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2009) 80.

authority. This is evident by looking at the method in which the oracle bones were prepared. The earliest finds of oracle bones exhibited a heterogeneity of practices for preparation and usage. For instance, early to mid-Shang oracle bones included a range of animal bones, including sheep, pig, dog, bear, camel, and deer scapulae. Additionally, some were pretreated while others were not, and some were burned directly whereas others had pre-drilled hollows on the back.⁵⁸ The initial diversity of the various methods used to prepare and use the oracle bones indicates a couple factors at that early stage. First, there was initially no central figure that wielded the power or influence to regularize the methods of divination. Only after the Shang sufficiently strengthened their centralized power could they develop a consistent standard of oracle bone preparation. Second, the importance of oracle bones at the outset lay primarily in the religious aspect of divination rather than their incidental function as a symbol of cultural or political influence. Only later did these methods of preparing oracle bones become more standardized, which illustrates that Shang leadership centralized their power and spread their method of oracular divination. In the late Shang, cattle scapula and turtle plastrons became the standard medium, and the vast majority of oracle bones employed a “double-hollow” technique which led to more predictable divinatory results.⁵⁹ Whereas oracular divination previously used all kinds of animal bones which were prepared according to various local or arbitrary techniques, it later came to be used according to specific, uniform Shang standards and regulations. Although many regions used oracle bones, the

⁵⁸ Flad, "Divination and Power," 411-3.

⁵⁹ Flad, "Divination and Power," 413.

growing expanse of a specific, uniform method shows the expansion of Shang power with their norms and cultural standards.

The spread of ritual objects in the late Shang illustrates the growing influence of the Shang court. Not only was there a spread of the oracle bones that were systematically prepared according to the royal Shang specifications, but other groups outside of Shang's direct influence began to imitate Shang methods of divination. One example of this is the variable method of drilling holes: some oracle bones were found with "combinations of three circular drill marks" instead of the Shang standard of two, which Flad estimates "may be an example of an attempt to appropriate the Shang divination process by local diviners who were aware of but not trained in it."⁶⁰ Because groups on the periphery tried to adopt the Shang style, this spread of cultural norms likely occurred voluntarily. If the Shang forced people to adopt their standards of divination, then it would be improbable for outsiders voluntarily to embrace those same standards. However, while the Shang style was imitated by those on the outskirts of Shang territory, these adaptations were not as refined or perfected as the oracle bones which were prepared by those who directly under the tutelage of official Shang diviners. Even though many did not perfect the practice, Shang divination was clearly very attractive to many people at the end of the second millennium. "A codified version of the practice [oracle bone divination]," Flad continues, "was one component of an elaborate ritual system that expressed the exclusiveness of the Shang elite and their monopoly of an important form of ritual knowledge."⁶¹ The exclusivity of the Shang elite and their refined skill of divination were

⁶⁰ Flad, "Divination and Power," 418.

⁶¹ Flad, "Divination and Power," 413.

admired by many, which contributed to the legitimacy of the Shang. Poo Mu-chou argues that this legitimating function of oracle bones could only have been possible with a broad societal engagement in divination. Some oracle bones were polished and painted which indicates that they may have been put on display for the people to observe how cultured and advanced the Shang rulers were.⁶²

Accompanying the spread of oracle bones was the spread of religious ideas which showed the willingness of others to adhere to Shang rule. Because people willingly adopted the standards of divination set forth by the Shang, they were more likely to accept other aspects of Shang rule as well. The Shang did not need to force people to submit to their religious standards, because they instead developed certain standards that were attractive enough to inspire others to willingly adapt to the Shang way of doing things. As Roy A. Rappaport argues, “The primary function or metafunction of liturgical performances is not to control behavior directly, but rather to establish conventional understandings, rules and norms in accordance with which everyday behaviour is supposed to proceed.”⁶³ The Shang method of divination and the Shang interpretation of religious ideas became *the* standard for other groups to follow—not by forcing them to follow but by inspiring them to follow. This is what Sarah Allan calls “cultural hegemony” which is the supremacy of one group over others through cultural means rather than political or military means.⁶⁴ It is this cultural hegemony of expanding

⁶² Eno, "Shang State Religion and the Pantheon of the Oracle Texts," 81.

⁶³ Roy A. Rappaport, Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 123.

⁶⁴ For more on the cultural hegemony of the Shang, see Sarah Allan, "Erlitou and the Formation of Chinese Civilization: Toward a New Paradigm," The Journal of Asian Studies 66.2 (2007).

religious authority that contributed to political hegemony. Therefore, the king's power in either of the religious or political realms reinforced his authority and legitimacy in the other.

This cultural hegemony was also reflected in the widespread usage of ritual bronze vessels. The earliest bronze vessels that were used for ritual date back to the Erlitou Culture 二里頭文化 (c. 1860-1545), but their "cultural descendants" would later follow the Shang model in both form and decoration.⁶⁵ Whereas bronze weapons and agricultural tools had obvious technological benefits, bronze vessels were important culturally and religiously in that they were used to make sacrifices to the ancestors. Although it would be shortsighted to assume that Shang political authority extended beyond the Central Plains simply because of the Shang-style vessels which were unearthed on the outskirts, the attraction of the Shang culture is evident. Although there was regional diversity in the various bronze vessels, they nonetheless were forged to emulate the central standard of the Shang state.⁶⁶ Allan argues that these cultural representations spread from the dominant Shang state outwards to the weaker communities surrounding them.⁶⁷ This example of cultural hegemony illustrated both their cultural appeal as well as their growing political influence.

Whereas in the middle Shang, oracle bones illustrated a genuine desire to avert suffering and were used as a means of decision-making, by the time of the late Shang this ritual had been routinized and was used less for those initial purposes. Divination had previously been used by Shang kings to determine whether or not to take a certain

⁶⁵ Allan, "Erlitou," 487.

⁶⁶ Allan, "Erlitou," 490.

⁶⁷ Allan, "Erlitou," 470.

action—such as invading a neighboring area—but this aspect of divination was no longer present in the late Shang. In the late Shang, ancestors received cult according to a set schedule. Because of this, the focus of the rituals was simply that they were being carried out instead of being used to inform the actions of the Shang rulers. It was still important for them to perform divinatory rituals, but the underlying motivation changed. Upholding the routine was therefore more important than prognosticating political or royal events.

Keightley highlights this aspect of divination in the late Shang:

Most Period V divinations focused on the performance, according to strict schedule, of ancestral cult, apotropaic wishes for ‘no harm’ in the next ten-day week, and queries about the royal hunts, which were now divined on the same five days... in every ten-day week.⁶⁸

Divinations were performed formulaically according to a set schedule and were very predictable regarding which topics would be divined on which days. Not only was the procedure of divination set according to a routine, the content of those divinations also became phrased in a standard manner as well. Whereas previous divinations were worded in various ways and included both favorable and unfavorable prognostications, the divinations of the late Shang were essentially almost all the same, as Keightley explains, “Royal prognostications, which under Wu Ding [c. 13th century B.C.] had forecast both good fortune and bad, and could on occasion be lengthy, were now uniformly auspicious and brief.”⁶⁹ Because all of the divinations of the late Shang were auspicious, the procedure of performing the divination was merely to preserve the routine rather than to acquire spiritual information to make better decisions.

⁶⁸ Period V is at the end of the Shang Dynasty (c. 1105-1045). Keightley, "The Shang," 243.

⁶⁹ Keightley, "The Shang," 245.

According to this trend of routinization, the king no longer acted as the high priest who had an intimate influence with the higher spirits to appease them and persuade them not to inflict suffering on him and his people; he instead became a sort of bureaucrat whose position was atop the political system. The routinization of divination in the late Shang not only shows that divination no longer had the role of assisting decision makers, but it also was no longer used as a means to appease the spirits. In other words, the religious power of divination diminished in importance. All sorts of topics that the spirits supposedly had control over that were divined about in the middle Shang—including the king's toothache, the weather, and farming—were absent in late Shang oracle bones. As Keightley again explains, "Charges about what the Powers might do to the Shang, about receiving or not receiving millet harvest and many of the other topics that Wu Ding's diviners had addressed... had vanished from the record."⁷⁰ The fact that these issues were no longer divined about is shown by the excavated artifacts, but the reason why they stopped is not as clear. There are several potential reasons that divination became more routinized. First, perhaps the spirits were viewed as more predictable, and not as capricious as they once were portrayed. Instead of constantly worrying about whether or not the spirits were satisfied enough not to inflict suffering on the people, perhaps the spirits came to be viewed as predictably appeasable. If the Shang abided by the set schedule and divined to the spirits according to the standard formula, that could have been considered sufficient to appease the spirits. Second, perhaps the Shang no longer believed in the almighty power of the spirits. Although divinations were still being done in the late Shang, they were much more regularized, and thus the rulers may have had

⁷⁰ Keightley, "The Shang," 243.

less faith in their power. Third, the later Shang kings were possibly not as superstitious as their predecessors. The aforementioned King Wu Ding was the first king with a significant cache of oracle bones that divined about a multitude of topics. Perhaps he just happened to believe in the spirits more than his successors. Fourth, maybe the kings came to value being seen as always doing the right thing more than appeasing the spirits. Because the oracle bones from the late Shang are all auspicious, the king would always go along with what was prognosticated which was supposedly what the spirits supported. Whereas there were some inauspicious divinations in the middle Shang, later divinations show that the spirits are unconditionally supportive of every action the king took in regards to divination. Fifth, as the Shang dynasty progressed, more Shang leaders died and had to be sacrificed to. Because so many ancestors needed to receive cult, an organized schedule could most efficiently accomplish this task, according to Smith:

As successive kings died, they and their wives were incorporated into a growing list of potential recipients of sacrifice. By the end of Shang rule at Anyang, six generations after the earliest divination records, 31 kings and their wives were each assigned multiple slots in a year-long roster of sacrificial procedures.⁷¹

Setting up a schedule for all of these spirits to receive cult was the best way to ensure they were all provided for. Sixth, divination as standard procedure was simply easier to understand than complex and arbitrary divinations. Perhaps there was a tendency to simplify and regularize the act of divination because kings (and the people) wanted more predictability rather than relying on the inconsistencies of interpreting the random cracks of pyromancy. On this point, Keightley notes “the way in which scheduled rituals

⁷¹ Smith, "Writing at Anyang," 146.

transform the ‘complex world of experience’ into ‘an orderly world of symbols.’”⁷²

Whatever the reason or reasons that caused routinization of oracular divination, the result is that oracle bones came to be used more for reinforcing political power and less for religious soothsaying and superstitious prognosticating.

Accompanying the lessened spiritual influence of increased routinization of oracular divination was the king’s growing political power. Before, his decision-making was subject to the perceived whims of the spirits, but by the late Shang the king had more political control. One such later inscription illustrates the king’s growing authority:

If the king orders the Many Yin [*Duo Yin* 多尹 officers] to open up fields in the West, [we] will receive crops.⁷³

Earlier in the Shang, favorable conditions were seen as resulting from avoiding the capricious wrath of the spirits, but later, as in this oracular inscription, conditions were determined by actual actions the king took. This is an example of the fading importance of the religious or spiritual element being replaced by more practical concerns. Instead of harvests being determined by the capricious spirits, it is portrayed as a result of the concrete action of opening up more fields. Additionally, this shows the king’s growing power and authority. Instead of appealing to a higher power for assistance, the king’s orders alone were sufficient to create the favorable conditions for such events such as harvesting crops.

In sum, the practice of divination and its impact on governing changed throughout the Shang dynasty. Beginning under the reign of King Wu Ding in the 13th century,

⁷² David N. Keightley, *The Ancestral Landscape : Time, Space, and Community in Late Shang China, Ca. 1200-1045 B.C.* (Berkeley: University of California, Berkeley ; Center for Chinese Studies, 2000) 17.

⁷³ Keightley, "The Shang," 279.

oracle bones were used for the superstitious or religious purposes of appeasing the spirits and predicting future events. The king's unique role atop both the political and religious hierarchy of the Shang granted him the sole human influence in the spiritual realm. This religious authority in turn strengthened the Shang's political power in terms of cultural hegemony and spiritual imperialism. As the Shang Dynasty progressed, oracular divination shed its original religious intent and came to reinforce political power. This process of osteo-pyromancy strengthened the Shang's political influence and legitimacy. A similar trend from religious importance to more political ends occurred after the Zhou conquered the Shang, establishing their own dynasty.

Chapter Two: The Western Zhou

Based on excavated artifacts, the pre-dynastic Zhou were not a clearly defined group of people until after the takeover of the Shang in the 11th century. “[A]rchaeological evidence has yet to establish the place of origin of this formidable people [i.e. the Zhou], who dominated northern central China for nearly 300 years,” Jessica Rawson explains. Although the origins of the Zhou have yet to be conclusively confirmed, they are believed to have come from present-day Shaanxi province.⁷⁴ The artifacts from that area that predate the conquest, such as bronzes and pottery, are a different style from those after the conquest. Additionally, before the conquest, there was greater variation among different regions in their styles of bronzes and other artifacts. Rawson continues, the fact that “regional variety is fairly common... suggests that before the conquest Shaanxi was inhabited by a number of loosely related groups of people, who had their own slightly different skills and customs.”⁷⁵ Edward Shaughnessy gives one example of the Proto-Zhou culture (mid-12th to 11th century) being a combination of at least a couple subtypes: each subtype made their own unique type of *li* 鬲, which is “a lobed tripod with hollow legs.”⁷⁶ The presence of these different types of *li*, “as well as many other heterogeneous cultural artifacts, ... does suggest a cultural mixing that would

⁷⁴ Jessica Rawson, "Western Zhou Archaeology," The Cambridge History of Ancient China : From the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C., ed. Edward L. Shaughnessy Michael Loewe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 375.

⁷⁵ Rawson, "Western Zhou Archaeology," 379.

⁷⁶ Edward L. Shaughnessy, "Western Zhou History," The Cambridge History of Ancient China : From the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C., ed. Edward L. Shaughnessy Michael Loewe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 306.

be consistent with the movement of a new people into a new area.”⁷⁷ There is not enough available archaeological evidence to definitively define a single group from Shaanxi as uniquely Zhou. Nick Vogt explains, “A consensus has not been yet reached as to precisely which elements of these various cultures, if any, can be taken as indicative of a pre-conquest ‘Zhou’ culture in its least adulterated form.”⁷⁸ However, oracle bone inscriptions from the pre-dynastic Zhou capital in Shaanxi show that the Zhou were, according to Li Feng, “doubtless one of the local groups that performed sacrifices to the Shang ancestral kings and might have also at some point of time participated in the loose federation of the Shang state.”⁷⁹ Despite the Zhou not having a unified culture before the conquest, their unification post-conquest demonstrated their growing influence both politically and culturally.

In contrast with the pre-conquest Zhou, the dynastic Zhou were demonstrably a single group with unified and consistent standards of certain religious and cultural elements. As with the cultural hegemony of spreading religious standards with oracle bones in the mid-Shang dynasty, the Zhou likewise sought to spread their cultural influence. To do so, they adapted certain aspects of Shang culture. For instance, “the Zhou kings capitalized on the use of inscribed bronzes in ancestral-ritual and feasting events—a practice derived from the Shang before them—as a key mechanism for the promulgation of royal ideology.”⁸⁰ These inscribed bronzes were used in sacrifices at

⁷⁷ Shaughnessy, "Western Zhou History," 307.

⁷⁸ Paul Nicholas Vogt, "Between Kin and King: Social Aspects of Western Zhou Ritual," Columbia University, 2012, 7-8.

⁷⁹ Li Feng, Bureaucracy and the State in Early China : Governing the Western Zhou (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 30.

⁸⁰ Vogt, "Between Kin and King," 2.

royal banquets where the ancestors were believed to consume the food and wine that was in the vessels.⁸¹ Due to the religious nature that they were used, Lothar von Falkenhausen claims that “the bronze inscriptions must be understood as essentially religious documents.”⁸² However, since the reason these bronze vessels were cast was to commemorate the life events of the caster, “it was no longer an instrument in a ritual communication with deities [as in the Shang], but a proof of glory and achievement in this life.”⁸³ The usage of these bronzes attests to the complex nature that both supernatural and earthly aspects were integrated into the Zhou culture. In this way, the Zhou utilized aspects of Shang religion in order to unify their culture.

Another aspect of the Zhou’s attempts to solidify rule involved connecting together the larger geographical space they reigned over. While the Zhou was initially based in the West, specifically around the Wei River 渭河 valley with capitals at Feng 豐 and Hao 鎬, the eastern capital was in the former Shang stronghold to the east with a capital at Luoyi 洛邑 (modern day Luoyang 洛陽) in the Luo River 洛河 valley.⁸⁴ Li Feng explains the importance of this geographical link, “The construction of Luoyi as the eastern administrative and military center was clearly a strategy to offset the geographical disadvantages of the Western Zhou capitals being located in the west... [which] created an axis of power that linked the two regions.”⁸⁵ Accompanying the establishment of

⁸¹ Rawson, "Western Zhou Archaeology," 364.

⁸² Lothar von Falkenhausen, "Issues in Western Zhou Studies," *Early China* 18.18 (1993): 146.

⁸³ Wu Hung, *Monumentality in Early Chinese Art and Architecture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995) 63.

⁸⁴ Li Feng, *Landscape and Power in Early China : The Crisis and Fall of the Western Zhou, 1045-771 Bc* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 30.

⁸⁵ Li Feng, *Landscape and Power* 89.

government centers across Zhou territory was the spread of their culture. The consistent features of inscriptional artifacts of Zhou elites found across the expanse of North China allows for a confident identification of a 'Zhou culture' at an elite level.⁸⁶ In the early Western Zhou, the non-elite pottery culture in the east was completely different from the west, but the highly developed bronze cultures of the Zhou elite in both locations were identical. Despite this initial separation of non-elite pottery cultures, the unified elite culture led to the merging of the two pottery traditions during the late Western Zhou.⁸⁷ The intimate relationship between government and culture was reflected in the process of first establishing an administrative and military center at Luoyi, then establishing elite culture identical to their western capital, which ultimately led to the non-elite culture being unified throughout the Western Zhou realm. Although it is unlikely that the Zhou directly controlled the entire area, material culture was very similar in various places ranging from Shaanxi to Beijing. This "similarity of material implies centralized direction not only of political relations, seen in royal gifts and the implements of war, but also of practical matters, such as the organization of foundries, and of ideological ones, such as ritual and belief."⁸⁸ This expanse of uniform material culture is a testament to the influence and control of the Zhou.

After the Zhou conquered the Shang and founded their own dynasty in the 11th century, they introduced several religious concepts relating to the supernatural power known as *tian* 天. Often translated as "Heaven," *tian* was the supreme authority that ruled over everything and was the source of both otherworldly and earthly power. Many Zhou

⁸⁶ Vogt, "Between Kin and King," 10.

⁸⁷ Li Feng, Landscape and Power 81-82.

⁸⁸ Rawson, "Western Zhou Archaeology," 353.

inscriptions refer to *tian*, but some scholars speculate that *tian* appears in even earlier Shang texts. However, others dispute that these instances merely appear as *tian* only because of the variation of handwriting for the character *da* 大, which looks somewhat similar but has the meaning of “big” or “great.” In these few occurrences, the character in question ostensibly refers to a place name rather than a deity.⁸⁹ Herlee Creel believes in this reasoning for *tian* to appear in texts only after the Zhou takeover, but Sarah Allan remains skeptical.⁹⁰ She believes that *tian* can be interchanged with *da* as in such place names as *da yi* 大邑 “great settlement” and *tian yi* 天邑 “celestial settlement” as well as with the phrases *da yu* 大雨 “it will greatly rain” and *tian yu* 天雨 “the sky will bring rain.” Allan also presumes that the Shang must have had a word for “sky”, and given the linguistic continuity from the Shang to Zhou, it is very likely for *tian* to have meant “sky” (or “the heavens”) in the Shang as well.⁹¹ While Allan may be right that the character in question on Shang oracle bones could also be read as *tian*, the examples she gives do not refer to *tian* as a deity—this would come later in the Zhou. Thus, whether or not the term *tian* actually appeared in Shang inscriptions, the significance of the term as a supernatural phenomenon or deity occurs only after the conquest. This religious concept came to serve as the foundation and justification for Zhou political power.

In order to assimilate the newly conquered Shang and other groups into the Zhou society, the Zhou conception of *tian* incorporated the Shang notion of Shang Di 上帝, the

⁸⁹ Ruth H. Chang, "Understanding Di and Tian: Deity and Heaven from Shang to Tang Dynasties," *Sino-Platonic Papers* September.108 (2000): 11.

⁹⁰ Sarah Allan, "On the Identity of Shang Di and the Origin of the Concept of a Celestial Mandate," *Early China* 31 (2007): 27.

⁹¹ Allan, "On the Identity of Shang Di," 28-29.

Supreme Deity. This theory, which stems from the research of Guo Moruo and Herrlee Creel in the 1930's CE, is still widely accepted today.⁹² There are mentions of Shang Di in Zhou bronzes dating to King Wu 周武王 (1045-1043):

Tian Wang 天亡 aided the King [Wu], who then performed a grand sacrifice to the King's great and brilliant father, King Wen 周文王, who pleases with service Di, Lord on High [Shang Di]. King Wen looks down from above. With the great and brilliant King [Wen] surveying above, the great and upright King [Wu] carried on below and brought to a close the sacrifice to his father."⁹³

In this early Western Zhou bronze known as the Tian Wang Gui 天亡簋, the founder of the Zhou Dynasty, King Wu, performs a sacrifice to his late father, King Wen, a loyal servant of Shang Di. This depiction of the king's late father serving Shang Di implies that the newly founded Zhou rule was approved by the Shang's Supreme Deity.

Another theory of the incorporation of the Shang ancestral spirits and Shang Di into the Zhou concept of *tian* is hypothesized by Sarah Allan. She proposes that Shang Di was regarded by both Shang and Zhou as the paramount spirit represented by the pole star, reigning over the ten suns that represented Shang ancestors. *Tian*, literally "sky," was the realm not only of the pole star Shang Di, but also of the numerous other spirits, including the Shang ancestral spirits. Thus, the term *tian* became "a euphemism for Shang Di or, more broadly, for Shang Di and all the celestial phenomena and spirits who were under his aegis."⁹⁴ *Tian* was thought of as the domain of both celestial objects and supernatural spirits. As the venue of the spirits, *tian* subsumed all spirits including that of Shang Di, thereby incorporating Shang religious beliefs into the Zhou ideology.

⁹² Allan, "On the Identity of Shang Di," 2.

⁹³ Eno, *Early China Readings*, 3.10, 6. See also Allan, "On the Identity of Shang Di," 31.

⁹⁴ Allan, "On the Identity of Shang Di," 3.

In direct relation to *tian* was the king, who was known as *tianzi* 天子, or “Son of Heaven.” The Western Zhou king was commonly referred to as *tianzi* in numerous bronzes beginning under the reign of King Kang 周康王 (r. 1005-978).⁹⁵ A later bronze, known as the Shi Qiang Pan 史牆盤, cast under King Gong 周共王 (r. 922-904) embellished how the Son of Heaven was glorified:

Guardian of the peace, this Son of Heaven [*tianzi*], he carries forth the lasting merit of [kings] Wen and Wu; may he live forever as a standard for all above and below, as a beacon for those far and near, shining without end. May Di on High [Shang Di] watch over the Son of Heaven, and protect his receipt of the Mandate. With many blessings and fruitful harvests, may there be no distant tribes or Man 蠻 peoples in the South who do not come to acknowledge his suzerainty.⁹⁶

This bronze inscription describes the king, *tianzi*, as “guardian of peace” who enjoys the blessing of Shang Di as the epitome of an ideal ruler. Although the Shang king was similarly seen as the highest earthly political and religious power who received authority from above, this relationship between deity and ruler was stronger in the Zhou. In fact, “there is no such close relationship between the Shang king and *di*, no ‘son of *Di*,’ indicating a difference between *tian* and *di*.”⁹⁷ As the Son of Heaven, only the Zhou king could worship “universal deities, particularly the most powerful and politically active deity, Heaven... while local deities, particularly those of the ‘altars of soil and grain’ were worshipped by the regional lords only.”⁹⁸ Not only was the king at the apex of the

⁹⁵ Eno, *Early China Readings*, 3.10, 18.

⁹⁶ Eno, *Early China Readings*, 3.10, 44.

⁹⁷ Chang, "Understanding Di and Tian," 15.

⁹⁸ Yuri Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire : Chinese Political Thought of the Warring States Era* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009) 17.

Western Zhou government, but he enjoyed the blessings from Heaven as well. In this way, his political and religious influence reinforced each other.

As the Son of Heaven, the king inherited *tianming* 天命, the Mandate of Heaven, and was expected to uphold it in order to be considered a just king. The Mandate of Heaven was considered a decree from *tian* that justified the legitimacy of Zhou authority. Due to their virtue, Heaven bestowed upon the Zhou kings the right to rule, which they inherited from the unworthy Shang. That is how the Mandate of Heaven came to be viewed, but the origins of *tianming* are still not entirely clear. One theory on the origin of *tianming* involves Sarah Allan's view of *tian* as the sky along with all the celestial bodies located there. She believes that originally *tianming* was literally an astronomical event witnessed by those at the end of the Shang.⁹⁹ She points out, "All Western Zhou inscriptions and received texts agree that the celestial mandate [*tianming*] was given to King Wen. No text ever states that it was given to his son Wu, the ruler who, they agree, actually overthrew the last Shang king."¹⁰⁰ She says that this—along with her previous analysis of *tian* as the sky—suggests that *tianming* (literally "celestial mandate") was originally a unique astronomical event that happened during the rule of King Wen, which his son King Wu interpreted "as a supernatural sign, which established his legitimacy as a ruler after he had conquered the Shang."¹⁰¹ Prior to Allan, David Pankenier first argued that *tianming* was specifically the unusual occurrence of the five brightest planets appearing very near to each other in the night sky. He cites a passage from the *Bamboo Annals*—"the five planets gathered in Room" 五星聚于房 where "Room" is a part of the

⁹⁹ Allan, "On the Identity of Shang Di," 6.

¹⁰⁰ Allan, "On the Identity of Shang Di," 38.

¹⁰¹ Allan, "On the Identity of Shang Di," 38.

Scorpio constellation—as evidence of this rare astronomical event occurring in 1059.¹⁰² Whether or not the origin of *tianming* was actually a rare celestial occurrence, it nonetheless came to mean the Mandate of Heaven, a celestial decree granting the Zhou kings the right to rule because of their virtue. Allan and Pankenier may disagree with others about the origins of the term *tianming* but they still agree with this standard interpretation.

The Mandate of Heaven was described in a manner similar to royal mandates from the king. In an early Western Zhou bronze known as the Xing Hou Gui 邢侯簋 dating to the rule of the third Zhou king, King Kang (1005-978), not only the king but those below him also all had to be diligent in their duties and respectful to those above and below:

After being appointed by the king as minister in charge of three subjected peoples, the Marquis of Xing 邢侯 [Xing Hou] states, “I knelt and kowtowed. Because of the generous beneficence received from the magnanimous celestial child [*tianzi*], I will be avid in my duties above and below, that Di will not bring an end the mandate of the Zhou. I will pursue my filial duties to the ancestors, and dare not be remiss. To fulfill my gratitude for such generosity, I will serve the celestial child [*tianzi*].¹⁰³

Although this bronze discusses the actions of the Marquis of Xing [Xing Hou], one of the king’s subordinates, Allan notes, “the parallel between the royal mandate given to Xing Hou, who had the vessel cast, and the celestial mandate given to the Zhou, is implicit. Moreover, this inscription makes clear that Shang Di’s approval could not be taken for

¹⁰² David W. Pankenier, "The Cosmo-Political Background of Heaven's Mandate," *Early China* 20 (1995): 129.

¹⁰³ Allan, "On the Identity of Shang Di," 36. See also Eno, *Early China Readings*, 3.10, 18.

granted and that he might end the mandate of the Zhou.”¹⁰⁴ Just as the ministers had to serve their ruler above and the subjects below them, so too did the Son of Heaven have to serve the spirits above and the people below.

Another way that the Zhou attempted to legitimize their authority was to explain that the previous Shang rulers lost the mandate because they were too wicked and unworthy to rule. In an early Zhou bronze from King Kang’s reign (1005-978) known as the Da Yu Ding 大盂鼎, the king appoints a man named Yu 盂 in charge of new land, and explains how the Zhou were more virtuous than the Yin 殷, another name for the late Shang:

Yu! Shining King Wen received the great mandate from Heaven. When King Wu succeeded Wen, he created a state, opening hidden lands, possessing all the four quarters, and setting right their peoples. In ceremonial affairs involving wine, oh!—he permitted no excess; at sacrificial rites, he permitted no drunkenness. Hence Heaven in its greatness watched closely over its sons and protected the former Kings in their possession of the four quarters. I have heard that the Yin loss of the mandate was due to the fact that its greater and lesser lords and the many officials assisting the Yin sank into drunkenness and so were bereft of their city.¹⁰⁵

The inscription on this bronze explained that the Shang lost the mandate in large part due to the drunkenness of their lords and officials. In contrast, the Zhou kings were portrayed as virtuous, allowing no excesses, which attracted the protection and blessings bestowed on them from Heaven. In the *Shaogao* 召告 (Proclamation of Shao) chapter of the *Shangshu* 尚書—named for Shao, the half-brother of the Zhou Dynasty founder, King

¹⁰⁴ Allan, "On the Identity of Shang Di," 36.

¹⁰⁵ Eno, *Early China Readings*, 3.10, 23. See also Allan, "On the Identity of Shang Di," 39.

Wu—the Zhou are portrayed as inheriting the same decree from *tian* that the Shang had previously held, but later lost due to lack of reverence:

惟不敬厥德，乃早墜厥命。

今王嗣受厥命，我亦惟茲二國命，嗣若功。

The fact simply was, that, for want of the virtue of reverence, the decree [for the Shang] in its favour fell prematurely to the ground. The [Zhou] king has now inherited the decree - the same decree, I consider, which belonged to those two dynasties. Let him seek to inherit [the virtues of] their meritorious [sovereigns].¹⁰⁶

The Zhou takeover was justified because they inherited the Mandate of Heaven from the undeserving Shang rulers. In this way, their right to rule came by way of this religious decree from Heaven.

The Zhou's proclaimed reason for inheriting the Mandate of Heaven is that they were more worthy and virtuous than the Shang. However, there was also the implication that if the Shang lost the decree, then the Zhou were also vulnerable to lose it if they were likewise disrespectful of their *de* 德. It must be noted that while *de* is often translated as "virtue," this is "to be understood as in "The virtue of cyanide is to poison" rather than in "Virtue is its own reward" and refers to "the power, whether benign or baleful, to move others without exerting physical force."¹⁰⁷ In other contexts, *de* can also best be thought of as "favor" or "grace" whose ultimate source is Shang Di or *tian*.¹⁰⁸ For instance, the aforementioned bronze inscription of the Shi Qiang Pan (King Gong r. 922-904) which

¹⁰⁶ Shang Shu, *Book of Documents*, trans. James Legge, vol. III (1879) Shaogao, 9. Although the *Shangshu* is a received text, certain chapters including the "Proclamation of Shao" 召告 are written in the archaic language dating to early Western Zhou bronzes. For more see Michael Nylan, *The Five "Confucian" Classics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) 133-5.

¹⁰⁷ A. C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao : Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1989) 13.

¹⁰⁸ Sarah Allan, *The Way of Water and Sprouts of Virtue* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997) 104.

elaborates the notion of *tianzi* also describes the nature of *de* as a gift bestowed from Shang Di:

Of old, when King Wen first brought harmony to governance, the Lord on High [Shang Di] sent down beautiful virtue [*de*] to guard him as he came into possession of all above and below, convening and receiving many states.¹⁰⁹

The bronze then praises the great rule of successive rulers—Kings Wu, Cheng 周成王, Kang, Zhao 周昭王, and Mu 周穆王—who inherited both throne and virtue according to their patrilineal heredity from King Wen, who was initially graced with *de* directly from Shang Di. Also, the typical Western Zhou bronze described King Wen receiving the Mandate of Heaven, but this bronze described him receiving *de*, thus showing “a functional correspondence between *de* and *ming* 命 [mandate].”¹¹⁰ *De* was not only received from above, but it was also meant to be protected and preserved in this world.

The meaning of *de* as a gift bestowed on the Zhou from *tian* meant more than just a free blessing from Heaven; it entailed a responsibility for the king to provide concrete benefits for the populace. The *Dagao* 大告 (Great Proclamation) chapter of the *Shangshu* also explained how a ruler was to honor the Mandate of Heaven. The Zhou portrayed *tian* as having rulers help and protect the common or “inferior people”:

天祐下民，作之君，作之師，惟其克相上帝，寵綏四方。

Heaven, for the help of the inferior people, made for them rulers, and made for them instructors, that they might be able to be aiding to [Shang Di], and secure the tranquility of the four quarters [of the kingdom].¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Eno, *Early China Readings*, 3.10, 43.

¹¹⁰ Vassili Kryukov, "Symbols of Power and Communication in Pre-Confucian China (on the Anthropology of "De"): Preliminary Assumptions," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 58.2 (1995): 321.

¹¹¹ Nylan, *The Five "Confucian" Classics* 133-5.

Here, *tian* was described as having rulers and teachers protect the inferior or common people. In other words, the welfare of the inferior people was the goal that those in authority were meant to uphold by providing “tranquility” for them. Although the political authority came from the supernatural source of *tian*, the ruler still had to rule in the pragmatic interests of the people by providing stability in order to maintain power.

Worthy rulers were those who provided tangible benefits for the realm. For instance, the *Huan* 桓 hymn in the *Shijing* 詩經 praised a king because he provided peace and prosperity:

綏萬邦、婁豐年。

天命匪解。

桓桓武王、保有厥士。

于以四方、克定厥家。

於昭于天。

皇以間之。

There is peace throughout our myriad regions;
There has been a succession of plentiful years:
Heaven does not weary in its favour.

The martial king Wu,
Maintained [the confidence of] his officers,
And employed them all over the kingdom,
So securing the establishment of his Family.
Oh! glorious was he in the sight of Heaven,
Which kinged him in the room [of Shang].¹¹²

The security of the king’s position and authority was determined by how well he ruled. In this instance, King Wu is praised for providing peace and prosperity while earning the trust of his numerous subordinates. Inscriptions on a multitude of Zhou bronzes likewise

¹¹² James Legge, *The Chinese Classics: Shijing*, vol. IV (1898) Huan, 1. This hymn is part of the Zhou Hymns, which “most specialists today see ... as the oldest section” of the *Shijing*, dating “several centuries earlier than... the mid-Chunqiu period.” Nylan, *The Five "Confucian" Classics* 86-7.

recognize the importance of earthly achievements. For instance, one such bronze cauldron from the rule of King Cheng (r. 1042-1006 BCE) reads:

“The King charged Qian to suppress the rebel Eastern Yi. From the first, Zhi followed Qian in the campaign. He was superior in battle, none was his equal. Surveying the corpses, Zhi took a halberd as booty. Wherefore was cast this precious sacrificial vessel; may Zhi’s descendants treasure it forever.”¹¹³

This vessel makes no mention of spirits or blessings, but instead focuses on actual military victories. Instead of being used to communicate with the deities, these bronzes set a standard for human behavior and acted as records of achievement.¹¹⁴

As opposed to the Shang rulers, the early Zhou kings did not blindly follow the divinations, although they indubitably continued using them. After the first Zhou king Wu died, his younger brother, the Duke of Zhou 周公, claimed regency because King Wu’s eldest son, later known as King Cheng, was too young to govern.¹¹⁵ The other brothers and sons of the late King Wu did not acquiesce so easily, and a short civil war followed. In the early *Da Gao* 大告 “Great Proclamation” chapter of the *Shang Shu*, King Cheng’s advisors warn him against attacking his uncles even though the divination of the turtle shells deem it auspicious:

『予得吉卜，予惟以爾庶邦于伐殷逋播臣。』爾庶邦君越庶士、御事罔不反曰：『... 越予小子考翼，不可征，王害不違卜？』

I have obtained a favourable reply to my divinations. I will go forward with you from all the states, and punish those vagabond and transported ministers of Yin. (But) you the princes of the various states, and you the various officers and managers of my affairs, all retort on me, saying, "... We little ones, and the old

¹¹³ Eno, *Early China Readings*, 3.10, 9.

¹¹⁴ Li Feng, *Landscape and Power* 10.

¹¹⁵ Shaughnessy, "Western Zhou History," 311.

and reverend men as well, think the expedition ill-advised; why does your Majesty not go contrary to the divinations?"¹¹⁶

This passage lets us know that divination was not blindly followed by Zhou rulers, even at the beginning of their reign. As an advisor to King Cheng, the Duke of Zhou argued for the primacy of earthly accomplishments over the importance of divination in the

Junshi 君奭 (Lord Shi) chapter of the *Shang Shu*:

嗚呼！君已曰時我，我亦不敢寧于上帝命，弗永遠念天威越我民；罔尤違，惟人。天命不易，天難諶，乃其墜命，弗克經歷。嗣前人，恭明德。

Oh! you have said, O prince, "It depends on ourselves." I also do not dare to rest in the favour of God [*Shang Di ming*],¹¹⁷ not forecasting at a distance the terrors of Heaven in the present time, when there is no murmuring or disobedience among the people; [the issue] is with men... The favour of Heaven [*tianming*] is not easily preserved; Heaven is difficult to be depended on. Men lose its favouring appointment, because they cannot pursue and carry out the reverence and brilliant virtue [*De*] of their forefathers.¹¹⁸

Here the Duke of Zhou is describing how difficult it is to uphold *tian*'s decree. Although the Zhou inherited the right to rule from the Shang, they did not idly expect to maintain power without actively "reverencing Heaven above and the people below." Instead of depending on Heaven or the spirits, the Duke of Zhou proclaimed that responsibility lay with those in power. This necessitated that they uphold the *de* they inherited from their ancestors.

¹¹⁶ *Shang Shu*, *Book of Documents* Da Gao, 4.

¹¹⁷ This passage is also important because of the phrase *Shangdi ming* 上帝命, which substitutes the Shang concept *Shangdi* for the more typical *tian* in the phrase *Tianming*. This is another instance of the Zhou incorporating Shang culture for political legitimacy.

¹¹⁸ *Shang Shu*, *Book of Documents* Junshi, 1. This chapter links the Duke of Zhou and the Duke of Shao, "being a statement of political philosophy made by the former to the latter" and "is an important source for early Western Zhou conceptions of government." Shaughnessy, "Western Zhou History," 294.

Although the pyromantic traditions involving oracle bones are usually associated with the Shang dynasty, divination still occurred after the Zhou takeover but in a different form. Similar to the routinization in the late Shang, “as the intercourse with the ancestors became increasingly ritualized and formularized, divinations lost part of their importance, remaining primarily a means of ‘resolving doubts,’ but not as a source of routine political guidance.”¹¹⁹ Divination certainly continued in the Western Zhou, but its method and purpose both changed. Although oracle bone finds dating to the Western Zhou are much less numerous than those from the Shang, they have been found throughout the Zhou realm. Although these scant Western Zhou oracle bone finds demonstrate that pyromancy was much less important to the dynastic Zhou, it nonetheless shows the expanse of Zhou power. However, similar to the Shang, the bone preparation was elaborate and uniform, meaning that this form of divination was still closely tied to a centralized political power.¹²⁰ Despite pyromancy being less prominent in the Zhou, they still used other forms of divination such as yarrow sticks. Oracle bones required “specialized expertise, considerable preparation time, and expenditure of resources” and became less popular after the Shang fell, while “hexagram-based divination with the help of the *Classic of Changes* [*Yijing*], which conventionally involved the manipulation of yarrow stalks... was far more economical.”¹²¹ The practice of divination changed from an elaborate centralized system in the Shang to a simpler form using readily available yarrow stalks.

After the Shang’s usage of oracle bones abated, the most popular form of divination in the Zhou involved using yarrow stalks (or milfoil/reeds) and consulting the

¹¹⁹ Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire* 16.

¹²⁰ Flad, "Divination and Power," 415.

¹²¹ Flad, "Divination and Power," 422.

Yijing 易经—also known as the *I Ching*, *Zhouyi*, or the *Classic of Changes*. As far as the dating of the *Yijing* is concerned, “its literary development and linguistic usage show the *Zhouyi* to be a product of the latter stage of the Western Zhou dynasty... most probably, during the last two decades of the ninth century, B.C.”¹²² However, even though the *Yijing* text could be dated to the late Western Zhou, “[t]his book derived from a type of divination employing the counting of stalks, and the text does indeed reflect this divinatory origin.”¹²³ This means that the *Yijing* is based on even older divinatory practices that may date back to the Shang. “Excavations show that the Shang-Yin and Zhou rulers, both before and after the Zhou conquest of Shang,” explains Michael Nylan, “practiced several kinds of divination, including one method that relied on counting bamboo stalks and another on manipulating milfoil. This mixture of methods continued, even as divination by milfoil came gradually to be used outside the court.”¹²⁴ Regardless of the exact nature or origin of using yarrow stalks as divinatory tools, it is almost certain that divination was practiced during the Western Zhou. Other contemporaneous texts such as the *Shangshu* and *Shijing* both attest to this. In the *Hongfan* 洪范 (Great Plan) chapter of the *Shangshu*, officers were “chosen and appointed for divining by the tortoise-shell and the stalks of the Achillea [i.e. milfoil/yarrow stalks],” which were to be consulted along with the high ministers, officers, and the common people, but when the shell and stalks went against the people then inaction was preferable.¹²⁵ This shows that these divinatory tools were still depended on as a major factor in decision making. In a

¹²² Edward L. Shaughnessy, "The Composition of the Zhouyi," Stanford University, 1983, 49.

¹²³ Shaughnessy, "Western Zhou History," 296.

¹²⁴ Nylan, *The Five "Confucian" Classics* 216.

¹²⁵ *Shang Shu, Book of Documents* Hongfan, 9.

minor court song *Di Du* 杅杜 of the *Shijing*, the author distresses that nobody is coming to his aid but then rejoices due to the divination:

卜筮偕止、會言近止、征夫邇止。

Both by the tortoise shell and the reeds have I divined,

And they unite in saying he is near.

My soldier is at hand! ¹²⁶

Examples like these show that divination was still quite prevalent in the Western Zhou. However, not only did divination take a different form in the Western Zhou—using yarrow stalks and the *Yijing* instead of oracle bones—but later divinations were performed by lower classes, whereas the pyromancy of oracle bones was primarily reserved for the royal Shang court.

The Western Zhou marked a change in terms of religion in governance from their predecessors of the Shang. Divination and other religious phenomena did not end in the Shang, but instead took a different form under the new leadership of the Zhou. Although the pre-dynastic Zhou were not a clearly defined group, they adopted certain Shang practices as a form of cultural hegemony to strengthen and expand their rule. For instance, they barely used oracle bones for divination, but expanded the usage of ritual bronze vessels. Despite being used in ritual ceremonies, these bronzes were inscribed to document political appointments, military victories, and other worldly accomplishments. Additionally, the Zhou introduced several religious concepts revolving around the central concept of *tian* or Heaven, which also reinforced their political authority. They claimed to inherit *tianming*, the Mandate of Heaven, which was a supernatural blessing that granted them legitimacy after they conquered the Shang. This concept involved them

¹²⁶ Legge, *The Chinese Classics: Shijing* Xiaoya, Didu, 4.

receiving *de* or virtue from Heaven, which they actively had to foster in order to maintain their rule. While these concepts of *tianming* and *de* were based in religious beliefs, this ideology came to hold much greater political meaning as the rulers were expected to provide tangible benefits for the populace. Divination and other religious practices were still being practiced after the Shang, but they were much less influential under the Zhou than with their predecessors. Religion still played a major role in the Zhou but it began to be utilized to strengthen political power.

Chapter Three: The Eastern Zhou

The changing influence of religion on governance was a byproduct of the declining power of central Zhou authority in the Eastern Zhou. Two facets of this decline in authority involve first, their own decline, and secondly, the rise of the states that sought to assert their own power. The relocation of the weakened Zhou from the west to the east contributed to a new political environment in which the influence of the central Zhou state was mitigated. Although the Zhou still maintained some power, their influence was greatly diminished when they moved from their erstwhile capital in the Wei River 渭河 valley in the west to Chengzhou 成周 (modern-day Luoyang 洛阳) in the east. This fall of the Zhou was a result of many causes both from within and external to the Zhou royal court. Eastern garrison states in the east became less willing to support the central court; social mobility led to nobles becoming poor and commoners becoming richer which undermined the Zhou feudal structure; foreign invaders drained Zhou resources and led to increased demographic pressure; natural disasters also weakened the economy and morale of the people.¹²⁷ After King You 周幽王 (r. 781-771) was killed by an alliance of vassal states and the tribe Quan Rong 犬戎, his son became King Ping 周平王 (r. 770-720) and moved the capital east to Chengzhou to avoid the desolation in the west

¹²⁷ Cho-yun Hsu, "The Spring and Autumn Period," The Cambridge History of Ancient China : From the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C., ed. Edward L. Shaughnessy Michael Loewe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 546.

caused by war and natural disaster and to be nearer to his political supporters.¹²⁸ The *Shi Ji* 史記 explains:

After King Ping was enthroned, the capital was moved eastward to [Luoyi] in order to avoid invasions by the [Quan Rong tribe]. During the reign of King Ping, the [Zhou] court fell into decline. Among the feudal lords, the strong annexed the weak. [Qi, Chu, Qin, and Jin] emerged as major powers, and national policies were made by the local lords.¹²⁹

As a result of this, “King Ping enfeoffed Duke Xiang [of Qin] 秦襄公 as a feudal lord” and gave Qin control over land if Qin could drive the Quan Rong tribe out.¹³⁰ A weakened Zhou state offered land to the outsider state of Qin in exchange for protection from barbarian tribes. In the next few centuries, Qin would slowly build up its strength to conquer all the other states.

The Spring and Autumn Period

The rise of burgeoning states in the Spring and Autumn Period diminished the importance of a centralized Zhou state. The *fengjian* 封建¹³¹ system of the Western Zhou included as many as 148 “states”, most of which were very small and later annexed by one of the fifteen major states of the Spring and Autumn Period.¹³² The Zhou were initially the undisputed head of this feudal system but gradually lost influence as each of

¹²⁸ Hsu, "The Spring and Autumn Period," 545-6.

¹²⁹ *Shi Ji, The Grand Scribe's Records: The Basic Annals of Pre-Han China*, trans. Zongli Lu Tsai-fa Cheng, William H. Nienhauser, Jr., and Robert Reynolds, ed. Jr. William H. Nienhauser, vol. I (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) 74.

¹³⁰ *Shi Ji, The Grand Scribe's Records: The Basic Annals of Pre-Han China* 90.

¹³¹ Literally “assign and establish,” this term is often translated as “feudal.” For a discussion of the so-called “feudalism” in first millennium China, see Herrlee Glessner Creel, *The Origins of Statecraft in China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970) 317-87.

¹³² Hsu, "The Spring and Autumn Period," 547.

these states asserted their own power. There was a “hegemon” 霸¹³³ system wherein the leader of one state was considered the preeminent. This began in 679 B.C. when Duke Huan of Qi (r. 685-643) was first considered hegemon.¹³⁴ As Zhou authority broke down even further, leaders of various states proclaimed themselves as king, effectively rendering the Zhou king inept: As early as 706, a leader of the state of Chu declared himself king.¹³⁵ The weakened Zhou state compelled other states to pursue their own power without concern for the central authority.

Despite their diminished political power, the Zhou culture was initially still attractive mainly to the central states, but this appeal slowly faded as outside peoples became more integrated with the various states. Despite the growing political disunity of the Spring and Autumn Period, there remained a homogenization of Zhou culture. After the fall of the Zhou, various people in different regions still respected the common Zhou culture and adhered to their regulated ritual system.¹³⁶ People who did not subscribe to this common Zhou culture were portrayed as outsiders and uncivilized. The existence of these outsiders gave the Zhou states reason to extol their own culture as superior to others.¹³⁷ Lothar von Falkenhausen notes that “such archaeologically observable phenomena as the use of more or less uniform sets of ritual paraphernalia, and the adoption of largely comparable burial customs throughout a wide area, may reflect an

¹³³ For more on the hegemon system, see Hsu, "The Spring and Autumn Period," 551-62.

¹³⁴ *Shi Ji, The Grand Scribe's Records: The Basic Annals of Pre-Han China* 75.

¹³⁵ Hsu, "The Spring and Autumn Period," 556.

¹³⁶ Li Feng, *Landscape and Power* 294.

¹³⁷ David Schaberg, *A Patterned Past: Form and Thought in Early Chinese Historiography* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001) 132.

underlying shared system of politicoreligious values.”¹³⁸ After the Zhou’s political power weakened, the inherited Zhou culture of the central states temporarily remained.

This lingering cultural homogenization was gradually diluted by various non-Zhou peoples each of whom had their own cultures on the periphery. The tribal groups that did not follow Zhou culture were known as “barbarians”—Man 蠻, Yi 夷, Rong 戎, and Di 狄—who occupied the outskirts of the middle states. In addition to these tribal groups was the formation of a few non-Zhou states such as Chu 楚, Wu 吳, and Yue 越 in the south and southeast. What was previously mostly homogenous in terms of culture became much more pluralistic due to interstate commerce, integrated transportation networks, intermarriage, military collaboration and other cultural exchanges. The assimilation of non-Zhou peoples and cultures had led to their cultural differences becoming much more muddled than they once were.¹³⁹ An example of this integration can be found in the *Zuo Zhuan* 左傳: In 530, the non-Zhou state of Chu defeated the state of Xu 徐 and the Chu king remembered that the Zhou had previously shunned the Chu because they lacked the royal Zhou background. The Chu king explained:

Long ago, the other feudal lords regarded me as someone far away and feared the state of [Qin]. But now I have built huge walls around the capital cities... and each is capable of supplying a thousand war chariots... Will the other feudal lords fear me now?¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ Lothar von Falkenhausen, "The Waning of the Bronze Age: Material Culture and Social Developments, 770-481 B.C.," *The Cambridge History of Ancient China : From the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C.*, ed. Edward L. Shaughnessy Michael Loewe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 544.

¹³⁹ Hsu, "The Spring and Autumn Period," 549-80.

¹⁴⁰ *Zuo Zhuan, The Tso Chuan*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) 164-66.

Whereas the previous king of Chu, as an uncivilized outsider, loyally served the Son of Heaven, King Ling of Chu demanded respect from the Zhou and neighboring states due to his newfound military successes.

The influence of Zhou as a central state decreased not only due to the increased interaction between Zhou and non-Zhou but also due to increased social mobility. The distinction between the “people of the field” (*ye ren* 野人) and the “people in the state” (*guo ren* 國人) blurred as greater social mobility led to “nobles becoming impoverished and commoners becoming wealthy,” which eventually undermined the Zhou feudal system.¹⁴¹ Both the Shang and the Western Zhou enjoyed a cultural hegemony such that cultural and religious standards spread outward from a central power, but this centralization no longer existed with a weakened Zhou in the Spring and Autumn Period.

The usage of bronze vessels in ceremonial rituals continued but was used more for entertainment, as Constance Cook explains,

[G]roups of spirits and guests which mingled during these performances were filled not only with good food and drink but also with joy from fine music and dance. The solemn exchange of prayer and ancestral approval evident in statements of awards or musical performances recorded by the Western Zhou elite was muted.¹⁴²

One example of this is the ending of an inscription on a set of twenty-six bells (the Wangsun Gao-*yongzhong* inscription) found in a Chu cemetery dating to the mid-sixth century:

¹⁴¹ Hsu, "The Spring and Autumn Period," 549, 46.

¹⁴² Constance A. Cook, "Ancestor Worship During the Eastern Zhou," Early Chinese Religion. Part One: Shang through Han (1250 Bc - 220 Ad), ed. John Lagerwey and Marc Kalinowski, vol. 1 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2009) 253.

Glistening are the harmonizing bells. With them I feast in order to please and make happy the king of Chu, the various lords, and the fine guests, as well as my fathers and brothers and the various gentlemen. How blissful and brightly joyous! For ten thousand years without end, forever preserve and strike them.¹⁴³

In the Western Zhou, such an inscription would have lauded the ancestors, but here, the focus is on the here-and-now by making the living ritual community happy as well as professing one's loyalty to his superiors. Other bronzes in the 6th century were used to declare law codes in the states of Zheng and Jin.¹⁴⁴ These ritual bronzes, which were once used exclusively for ritual sacrifices to the ancestral spirits, focus almost entirely on the needs and desires of the living instead.

Although divinations were performed in the Eastern Zhou, they no longer influenced the rulers of the state for several reasons: (1) divination no longer held exclusively royal status; (2) divination was no longer viewed as responsible for affecting earthly conditions; (3) divination findings were often ignored; (4) divination was primarily used in a personal manner and in dire straits. First, divination using the pyromancy of turtles and the hexagrams of yarrow stalks continued in the Eastern Zhou, but were either done anonymously or done without official sanction by the ruler.¹⁴⁵

Whereas the Shang king interpreted divinations, by the time of the Spring and Autumn Period, "no remnants of the ruler's exclusive prerogative to interpret divination results

¹⁴³ Lothar von Falkenhausen, Chinese Society in the Age of Confucius (1000-250 Bc) : The Archaeological Evidence (Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, University of California, 2006) 296-97.

¹⁴⁴ Lewis, Writing and Authority in Early China 20.

¹⁴⁵ Marc Kalinowski, "Diviners and Astrologers under the Eastern Zhou: Transmitted Texts and Recent Archaeological Discoveries," Early Chinese Religion. Part One: Shang through Han (1250 Bc - 220 Ad), ed. John Lagerwey and Marc Kalinowski, vol. 1 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2009) 368.

are traceable.”¹⁴⁶ Second, divinations were not taken as seriously in the Eastern Zhou, because they were no longer viewed as being able to determine the weather or other earthly conditions. For instance, during a summer drought in the state of Lu 魯, the Duke opted for more practical measures instead of obeying the diviners:

夏，大旱，公欲焚巫覡，臧文仲曰，非旱備也，脩城郭，貶食省用，務穡勸分，此其務也。... 公從之，是歲也，饑而不害。

Due to a great drought in the summer, the duke wished to burn the shaman. Zang Wenzhong said, “That’s improper preparation for droughts. Instead, repair the walls, lessen food and economize. Work hard and advise division of labor, that is the best preparation.” ... The duke followed his advice and that year the famine was not harmful.¹⁴⁷

At this time (639 BCE), divination was already not viewed as important as practical measures the state could enact. Third, when divinations were done, they were often ignored, as Yuri Pines notes: “only a few of the eighty-odd instances of divination recorded in the *Zuo [Zhuan]* deal with political problems, usually matters of appointments and military undertakings. Even then, the results of the divination could be ignored or reinterpreted to conform with political needs.”¹⁴⁸ For instance, there are several examples of the diviner ignoring the results of the divination:

The duke divined to see if Ch’ing Cheng should be his right-hand attendant when he mounted his war chariot, and the response was “lucky,” but... he refused to employ him. (645 BCE)¹⁴⁹

[W]hen King Chao was ill, divination was made by the tortoiseshell and the answer given: “The Yellow River is exercising a malign influence.”

The King, however, declined to perform sacrifices to the Yellow River. (489 BCE)¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁶ Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire* 226n9.

¹⁴⁷ *Zuo Zhuan*, 14, (Xi 21) 26b (Legge, p. 180)

¹⁴⁸ Yuri Pines, *Foundations of Confucian Thought : Intellectual Life in Chunqiu Period, 722-453 B.C.E.* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2002) 270n17.

¹⁴⁹ *Zuo Zhuan*, *The Tso Chuan* 31.

In these examples, the diviners did not consider what the divination portends, but instead took a different course of action. Fourth, religion was not completely abandoned, but was used more in personal situations, primarily in dire straits.¹⁵¹ For these reasons it is clear that divination was no longer as influential as it was in the Western Zhou.

The Warring States Period

As the name implies, the Warring States was a time of intensifying warfare as might determined right in both interstate and intrastate power struggles. Notably absent in much of this focus on power in governance is the influence of religion. The *Lüshi Chunqiu* 吕氏春秋 laments the absence of the central, unifying force of the Zhou:

“without the Son of Heaven, the strong overcome the weak, the many lord it over the few, they use arms to harm each other having no rest.”¹⁵² Traditionally, the beginning of the Warring States Period begins in 403 with the breakup of the state of Jin 晉 into Han 韓, Wei 魏, and Zhao 趙, making seven major states along with Qin 秦, Qi 齊, Chu 楚, and Yan 燕. Each of these states allied with whomever proved useful at the time.¹⁵³

Whereas the Zhou king previously claimed authority bestowed from above and adopted the title of Son of Heaven to reinforce his power, kings of the warring states took more practical measures to centralize their authority not only against other states but against competing clans within their state. Yuri Pines lists a few of these political measures:

¹⁵⁰ *Zuo Zhuan*, *The Tso Chuan* 213.

¹⁵¹ Pines, *Foundations of Confucian Thought* 62.

¹⁵² Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire* 19.

¹⁵³ Mark Edward Lewis, "Warring States: Political History," *The Cambridge History of Ancient China : From the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C.*, ed. Edward L. Shaughnessy Michael Loewe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 617.

limitations on hereditary office-holding and its replacement with recruitment based on talent; abolition of hereditary allotments, instead of which officials henceforth received ranked salaries paid in grain, or, in rare instances, in precious metals; and replacement of the allotments' autonomy with centrally ruled 'commanderies and counties.'¹⁵⁴

All of these reforms had their sole goal as seizing and maintaining power. Other actions were taken with the same aim in mind. For instance, the Tian lineage of the Qi assassinated heirs of rival lineages and the head of the Tian lineage personally seized control of the Qi state in 481.¹⁵⁵ Without a central Zhou force, the seven major states of the Warring States Period did whatever necessary in order to strengthen their own grasp on power.

The assimilation of non-Zhou peoples through expanding territorial powers contributed further to the breakdown of the cultural and religious influence of the Zhou state. States and tribes on the periphery of the Zhou cultural sphere would be conquered and absorbed by more powerful states, thus mitigating Zhou influence while expanding social diversity. For example, the Qin conquered the so-called "barbarian" tribes of the Rong 戎, Shu 蜀, and Ba 巴, and absorbed them into their populace.¹⁵⁶ Qin was originally an outsider state and their eventual unification of "all under Heaven" would at least in part result from their being removed from the tradition of Zhou culture.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire* 25.

¹⁵⁵ Lewis, "Warring States: Political History," 598.

¹⁵⁶ Lewis, "Warring States: Political History," 596.

¹⁵⁷ Falkenhausen defines "Qin culture" as "a regional phase of Zhou culture," noting its place in the Zhou framework even when considering uniquely distinct and idiosyncratic aspects of the Qin. See Lothar von Falkenhausen, "Mortuary Behavior in Pre-Imperial Qin: A Religious Interpretation," *Religion and Chinese Society*, ed. John Lagerwey, vol. Ancient and Medieval China (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2004) 155.

Not only did assimilation continue in the Warring States Period, but increased social mobility also contributed to further diversity which began to displace the unified Zhou cultural legacy. Most notable in regards to the social mobility of the Eastern Zhou was the rise of the *shi* 士 class,¹⁵⁸ which was a social class at first but then became a term for worthy men.¹⁵⁹ The *shi* began as a class of men in the lower aristocracy¹⁶⁰ and later “offered their services as specialists in government and who were valuable because they were not simply members of a court.”¹⁶¹ The *Zhanguo Ce* 戰國策 “makes it quite clear that even those ‘from the meanest alleys of poverty’ could hope to rise rapidly if they were skilled enough and if they could gain the ear of someone in power.”¹⁶² The growing importance of the *shi* was a huge development in Chinese society, because the role of elites changed as ones abilities were supposed to play a more prominent role than his birth.¹⁶³ The rise of the *shi* would become an example of “elevating the worthy” 尚賢 which was a popular meritocratic idea for the Confucians, Mohists, Daoists, and Legalists.

Religious practices continued throughout the Warring States Period but were utilized for pragmatic ends. Excavated bronze inscriptions and covenant texts attest to this. An example of this is that bronze inscriptions end with warnings to future generations rather than with prayers to the ancestors.¹⁶⁴ Religious practices continued but

¹⁵⁸ For a more detailed analysis of the *shi*, see Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire* 115-86.

¹⁵⁹ Hsu, "The Spring and Autumn Period," 583.

¹⁶⁰ For burial evidence of social stratification of the *shi* class in excavated tombs, see Falkenhausen, "The Waning of the Bronze Age: Material Culture and Social Developments, 770-481 B.C.," 518-19.

¹⁶¹ Jr. J. I. Crump, *Intrigues: Studies of the Chan-Kuo Ts'e* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1964) 7.

¹⁶² J. I. Crump, *Intrigues* 4.

¹⁶³ Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire* 119.

¹⁶⁴ Cook, "Ancestor Worship During the Eastern Zhou," 261.

often had an explicitly political goal. The usage of covenant texts or sacrificial oaths were similarly a testament to this.¹⁶⁵ Mark Edward Lewis describes these covenants as “forms of oaths in which all parties pledged to uphold a certain set of rules or pursue a certain course of action.” They were accompanied by sacrificial ceremonies in which “the presence of the gods and ancestors [acted] as witnesses who would punish any breach or nonobservance.” He further claims that these covenants “reflected a decline in royal power and an increasing reliance on force.”¹⁶⁶ These are examples of religious practices continuing but having a more practical objective. The goal was the compliance of subordinates but the deities served as a moral sanctioning agent.

Interestingly enough, there is evidence that the appeal of Zhou religion continued even after they were finally conquered by the Qin in 256. However, this religious influence did not translate into any political implications for the Qin rulers. Jade tablets have recently surfaced, which include inscriptions of King Huiwen of Qin 秦惠文王 (r. 337-311) and his prayer to the spirit of Mount Hua 華山.¹⁶⁷ In this inscription, the king laments not only his worsening physical condition but also his ignorance of the proper Zhou rituals:

“My body had contracted a disease,
Making me worried and sorrowful,
Over and over the infection returns,
There is no pausing, no recuperation.

...

¹⁶⁵ Lewis, "Warring States: Political History," 599.

¹⁶⁶ Mark Edward Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990) 45.

¹⁶⁷ Poo Mu-Chou, "Religion and Religious Life of the Qin," *Birth of an Empire: The State of Qin Revisited*, ed. Lothar von Falkenhausen Yuri Pines, Gideon Shelach, and Robin D.S. Yates (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014) 319n5.

The generations of the Zhou have reached an end,
Their statutes and laws are scattered or lost.
Panic-stricken [am I], the little boy,
Wishing to serve heaven and earth,
The four apices, and the three luminaries;
[to serve] the spirits and altars of mountains and streams,
the five sacrificial recipients and the deceased ancestors,
but their [appropriate] methods do not come to hand.”¹⁶⁸

Despite the king’s lack of knowledge of the proper Zhou rituals, the inscription continues with a description of lavish sacrifices and a promise that ten thousand generations of his descendants will continue these sacrifices if the king recuperates.¹⁶⁹ When compared to Shang oracle bones or early Zhou bronzes, these jade tablets help elucidate the changing role of religion in governance. Religious authority and political authority were no longer so intimately related. Ritual and sacrifice were still practiced by those in power, but were personally conducted rather than utilized to influence governmental actions.

The Hundred Schools of Thought

The burgeoning era of intellectual creativity known as the Hundred Schools of Thought also followed this trend from idealistic ritual-based rule of early Confucians to the more pragmatic law-based rule of Legalism. Generations of philosophers discussing and disputing different ways to rule culminated with the Qin state employing strict Legalism in order to unify the empire in 221, but it would begin with the influential thought of Confucius at the very end of the Spring and Autumn Period. It was not necessarily the case that the thinkers would invent a framework for governing and the

¹⁶⁸ Wolfgang Behr, "Orison in Jade: Reading the Zengsun Yin 曾孫駟 Inscriptions," *Second Hamburg Tomb Text Workshop* (2004): 8-10.

¹⁶⁹ For more analysis of this inscription, see Yuri Pines, "The Question of Interpretation: Qin History in Light of New Epigraphic Sources," *Early China* 29 (2004): 4-12.

rulers would choose whether or not to implement it; rather, it was a more complex relationship wherein the thinkers reflected on old and new ways of ruling. Instead of innovating new concepts of governance, Pines says, “thinkers often reacted to and rationalized extant regulations; and their major contribution to the ruler-centered state was not providing it with a direct blueprint but rather creating an intellectual atmosphere that was conducive to its emergence and development.”¹⁷⁰ It was this intellectual atmosphere in the Warring States Period that the idealistic moralism of the Confucians shifted to the strict reliance on laws and punishments of the Legalists.

Like all thinkers, Confucius, or Kongzi 孔子 (c. 551 – c. 479) as he was known, did not live in a vacuum; his thought was a product not only of those who preceded him but also of his historical context. The collection of his thought and sayings are gathered in a work entitled *Lun Yu* 論語, commonly translated as *The Analects*. In this, he made no claim to be an innovator but rather a transmitter of the wisdom of the ancient sages.¹⁷¹ Wanting to revive the waning influence of Zhou culture in his lifetime, he proclaimed a “fondness for antiquity” 「好古」¹⁷² and yearned for people like the Duke of Zhou 周公.¹⁷³ This put him in the position of wanting to continue this philosophical tradition dating back hundreds of years before him.

Although Confucius revered the Western Zhou, unlike them, he did not resort to justifying anything on supernatural grounds. When asked about topics like how to serve the spirits and the afterlife, Confucius countered with “You are not able even to serve

¹⁷⁰ Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire* 25-6.

¹⁷¹ Lunyu, *The Analects*, trans. D.C. Lau (London: Penguin Books, 1979) VII.1.

¹⁷² Lunyu, *The Analects* VII.20.

¹⁷³ Lunyu, *The Analects* VII.5.

man. How can you serve the spirits?” 「未能事人，焉能事鬼？」 and “You do not understand even life. How can you understand death?” 「未知生，焉知死？」 respectively.¹⁷⁴ Rather than worry about the supernatural, which is by its very nature impossible to comprehend, Confucius contemplated the best course of action for the here and now. Wisdom, said Confucius, is “to work for the things the common people have a right to and to keep one’s distance from the gods and spirits while showing them reverence” 「務民之義，敬鬼神而遠之」.¹⁷⁵ This passage is important for several reasons: (1) the people have rights to certain things and they should be worked towards; (2) he acknowledges that the gods and spirits must be shown reverence; but (3) the gods and spirits ought to be kept at a distance. In other words, people and rulers should do the right thing by striving to benefit the people instead of worrying about the supernatural.

Without a basis in the supernatural, Confucius instead believed that the ruler should be a virtuous role model who would automatically inspire his subjects to follow him. He explained this with a metaphor: “The rule of virtue can be compared to the Pole Star which commands the homage of the multitude of stars without leaving its place”

「為政以德，譬如北辰，居其所而眾星共之」.¹⁷⁶ If the king were virtuous, Confucius believed that the people would naturally follow his lead and not stray from that virtuous path. He preferred this political model over what would later serve as the legalist model:

道之以政，齊之以刑，民免而無恥；道之以德，齊之以禮，有恥且格。
Guide them by edicts, keep them in line with punishments, and the common people will stay out of trouble but will have no sense of shame. Guide them by

¹⁷⁴ *Lunyu*, The Analects XI.12.

¹⁷⁵ *Lunyu*, The Analects VI.22.

¹⁷⁶ *Lunyu*, The Analects II.1.

virtue, keep them in line with the rites, and they will, besides having a sense of shame, reform themselves.¹⁷⁷

This praise for the method of ruling by virtuous example was repeated when he said, “To govern is to correct. If you set an example by being correct, who would dare to remain incorrect?” 「政者，正也。子帥以正，孰敢不正？」¹⁷⁸ Confucius believed that, when provided with an upright leader or role model, the people could not help but be virtuous.

A later philosopher named Mozi 墨子 (c. 470 - c. 391) agreed with Confucius about the moral leadership of the king who should uphold the Mandate of Heaven, but also realized the importance of using punishments. Mozi thought that “the most worthy and able man in the world was selected and set up as Son of Heaven” 「故選天下之賢可者，立以為天子」.¹⁷⁹ Mozi thought of the emperor as the ultimate source of morality. Continuing the tradition of the Mandate of Heaven, Mozi also believed that Heaven was “both the source of ultimate morality and the politically active deity in charge of proper maintenance of the sociopolitical order.”¹⁸⁰ Whereas Confucius focused on the ideal that the people would automatically follow the moral example of the king, Mozi understood that the king also needed the power to inflict punishment on those who were disorderly:

古者聖王為五刑，請以治其民。譬若絲縷之有紀，罔罟之有綱，所連收天下之百姓不尚同其上者也。

¹⁷⁷ *Lunyu, The Analects* II.3.

¹⁷⁸ *Lunyu, The Analects* XII.17.

¹⁷⁹ *Mozi, Mozi*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963) III.11, 34.

¹⁸⁰ Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire* 33. For more, see Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* 47-51.

In ancient times the sage kings devised the five punishments¹⁸¹ so as to bring order to the people. These were like the main thread binding a skein of silk or the main cord controlling a net, by which the sage kings bound and hauled in those among the people of the world who failed to identify themselves with their superiors.¹⁸²

This was a step in the direction of more pragmatic means of ruling the people instead of purely relying on the inspirational influence of the ruler. Legalists would later forego the moral inspiration of the leader and instead focus primarily on laws and punishments to keep the people in order.

Mengzi 孟子, also called Mencius (c. 372 – c. 289), was a follower of Confucius and played an influential part in interpreting and developing ideas originally found in *The Analects*. Like Confucius, Mengzi wished for a benevolent ruler, but went a step further by offering concrete suggestions for tangible problems. For instance, he recommended specific solutions concerning taxes, irrigation, harvests, land ownership, and division of labor.¹⁸³ This focus on worldly solutions to societal problems is also reflected in his portrayal of *tian* Heaven and *de* Virtue. He used many anecdotes and analogies to make this point, but he explicitly claimed that human activity is more important than blessings from above:

天時不如地利，地利不如人和。
Heaven's luck is not as good as earthly advantages;
Earthly advantages are not as good as human cooperation.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸¹ The five punishments are said to be "tattooing, cutting off the nose, cutting off the feet, castration, and death." *Mozi*, Mozi 38n2.

¹⁸² *Mozi*, Mozi III.11, 38.

¹⁸³ Mengzi, "Mengzi," trans. D.C. Lau, (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1970), vol., 3A3.

¹⁸⁴ Mengzi, "Mengzi," vol., 2B1.

Mengzi believed that rulers already had sufficient *de* to rule the kingdom, they just needed to nurture this virtue and apply it to governance.

Xunzi 荀子 (c. 312 – 230) was a philosopher who continued the tradition of Confucian moralists but also inspired later Legalists. He was emblematic of this transition in Warring States (Zhanguo 戰國) thought, as Yuri Pines explains: “While early to middle Zhanguo thinkers focused on ritual, ethical, and later cosmological justifications of monarchical power, by the second half of the Zhanguo period a new strand of pro-monarchical argument ensued: emphasis on the ruler’s importance for the maintenance of the sociopolitical order.”¹⁸⁵ The basis of the ruler’s power thus shifted from a religious and ritual basis into one based on the pragmatic demands of providing order for the realm.

Xunzi upheld the importance of Heaven, but believed it was objective and constant: “Heaven plays a role in our lives, [t]hough without bias or caprice, and with no involvement whatsoever in the daily progression of human history.”¹⁸⁶ He did not, however, discount the importance of ritual or divination but instead repurposed them as cultural practices rather than methods of governance:

日月食而救之，天旱而雩，卜筮然後決大事，非以為得求也，以文之也。故君子以為文，而百姓以為神。以為文則吉，以為神則凶也。

Rescuing the sun or moon from eclipse, praying [for rain] in time of drought, deciding great affairs only after reading cracks and casting stalks are not because one expects to get what he asks, but to manifest refined culture. Hence, superior men consider these as refined culture, while the people consider these as dealing

¹⁸⁵ Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire* 44.

¹⁸⁶ Paul Rakita Goldin, *Rituals of the Way: The Philosophy of Xunzi* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999) 73.

with deities. To consider them refined culture is auspicious, to consider them as dealing with deities is baleful.¹⁸⁷

Xunzi did not advocate for the abolition of ritual or religion but merely recognized that although it was important culturally, it had no place in determining any course of action.

Xunzi believed in the moral superiority of the ruler, but he also thought that there should be a legal system to rely on. He agreed with the Confucians regarding the moral superiority of the ruler:

天子者，執位至尊，無敵於天下，夫有誰與讓矣？道德純備，智惠甚明，南面而聽天下，生民之屬莫不震動從服以化順之。天下無隱士，無遺善，同焉者是也，異焉者非也。夫有惡擅天下矣。

The Son of Heaven is the most respectable in terms of his power and position and has no rivals under Heaven... His morality is pure; his knowledge and kindness are extremely clear. He faces southwards and makes All under Heaven obedient. Among all the people, there is none who does not politely hold his hands following him, thereby being compliantly transformed.¹⁸⁸

This description of the ruler is reminiscent of the Confucian ideal of the morally upright king who automatically inspired those below to be obedient to him and follow his example. However, Xunzi also understood that not every ruler would be a paragon of moral virtue, so he provided for the very real possibility that the ruler would be average at best. He believed the ruler had the obligation to provide social order by placing restrictions on his subjects and by enforcing the hierarchical social pyramid, but this was “not linked to his moral qualities.”¹⁸⁹

Han Feizi 韓非子 (c. 280 – 233) went a step further than his former teacher Xunzi by abandoning morality and ritual in favor of strict laws and punishments. Han Feizi was

¹⁸⁷ Pines, *Foundations of Confucian Thought* 55.

¹⁸⁸ Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire* 86.

¹⁸⁹ Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire* 83.

primarily concerned with “how to deal with actual challenges to the ruler’s authority, and practical advice to the rulers.”¹⁹⁰ With a stark departure from the morality of earlier Confucians, Han Feizi upheld the importance of clear laws as more important than the personal virtues of the ruler. Instead of relying on the ruler’s subordinates to automatically follow him, “they cast away personal abilities and relied on laws and [administrative] methods examining rewards and punishments.”¹⁹¹ As Pines explains, “Impartial laws, a proper combination of checks and double-checks of ministerial actions, strict surveillance of the relation between ‘names’ and ‘forms’ (that is, between the tasks assigned to a minister and his actual performance), all these are the sine qua non for proper rule.”¹⁹²

The Qin

The Qin embraced this practical approach to rule and employed strict Legalist ideas leading to their eventual unification of the warring states and establishment of the Qin Dynasty. Considering the penal nature of codified law along with other administrative reforms, “the whole hearted adoption of such ideas and techniques by [Qin] was undoubtedly a major reason why it was able to move from state to empire.”¹⁹³ Qin’s appreciation of strict legal code extends back to 746 when “the punishment of three

¹⁹⁰ Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire* 97.

¹⁹¹ Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire* 101.

¹⁹² Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire* 102.

¹⁹³ Derk Bodde, "The State and Empire of Ch'in," *The Cambridge History of China*, ed. Denis Twitchett and John K. Fairbank, vol. 1 *The Ch'in and Han Empires, 221 B.C. - A.D. 220* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 27.

kindred was first written into law.”¹⁹⁴ Eventual Qin unification could not have happened without radical reforms enacted under Duke Xiao of Qin 秦孝公 (r. 361-338) and his influential advisor Shang Yang 商鞅 (d. 338).¹⁹⁵ According to the *Shi Ji*, despite opposition, Duke Xiao enacted Shang Yang’s proposals “to change the laws, impose penalties, encourage agricultural pursuits within the state, and on the foreign front to reward those who would fight and die in battle” as well as other administrative and tax reforms.¹⁹⁶ In the *Zhanguo Ce*, the efficacy of these legal reforms are attested to:

Everywhere his laws were carried out to the letter and there was justice without favour. Punishment applied equally to the great and the powerful and reward was not limited to the favoured and the well-born... Qin’s arms and armies were mighty and all the lords feared her. But punishments had become harsh and mercy scarce; the law existed only to bend the people to it.¹⁹⁷

These radical reforms were possible in part due to the Qin’s being on the outskirts of the former Zhou domain. Their “relative freedom from the cultural traditions of the more purely ‘Chinese’ states,” according to Derk Bodde, “made it easier to institute radical innovations.”¹⁹⁸ Being relatively cut off from the Zhou traditions and the Confucian literati enabled the Qin to take more practical measures to rule without being constrained by past conventions.

Although the First Emperor Qin Shihuang 秦始皇 was notoriously superstitious in his private life, he single-mindedly pursued strict Legalism to unify “all under

¹⁹⁴ The “punishment of three kindred” includes the families of the father, mother, and wife of the guilty. *Shi Ji*, The Grand Scribe's Records: The Basic Annals of Pre-Han China 91.

¹⁹⁵ Bodde, "The State and Empire of Ch'in," 34.

¹⁹⁶ *Shi Ji*, Records of the Grand Historian: Qin Dynasty, trans. Burton Watson (Hong Kong: Columbia University Press, 1993) 24.

¹⁹⁷ *Zhanguo Ci*, Chan-Kuo Ts'e, trans. Jr. J.I. Crump (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970) 54.

¹⁹⁸ Bodde, "The State and Empire of Ch'in," 47.

heaven.” Poo Mu-chou explains that the First Emperor supported religious cults for the two explicit goals of prolonging his own life and prolonging his own rule.¹⁹⁹ His advisors declared “Your Majesty has raised troops to punish the evil and remiss, brought peace to the world, made the entire area within the seas into provinces and districts, and insured that laws and rulings shall proceed from a single authority.”²⁰⁰ The Qin king renamed himself “Huangdi” 皇帝, or “August Emperor,” which adapts the same character for *di* 帝 from the Shang’s Supreme Deity, Shang Di. He celebrated his new role by erecting several stones with inscriptions extolling his various achievements:

The August Emperor mounted the throne, issuing edicts, clarifying laws, which
his subjects observe and obey...
All under heaven are of one mind, single in will.
Weights and measures have a single standard, words are written in a uniform
way...
Evil and wrongdoing are not permitted; all practice goodness and integrity...
Through righteous punishment, trustworthy acts, he displayed his might in all
quarters, till there were none who failed to submit...
The black-headed people have undergone transformation, near and far share a
single rule, an achievement far surpassing antiquity...
The host of officials praise his magnificence, begging leave to inscribe this stone,
that his example may be made known to future ages.²⁰¹

Notably absent in all of these inscriptions is any mention of Heaven, the spirits, or any deities. Unlike the Shang and Zhou before them, the Qin Dynasty did not rely on religious ideas for political authority.

¹⁹⁹ Poo Mu-Chou, "Religion and Religious Life of the Qin," 192.

²⁰⁰ *Shi Ji, Records of the Grand Historian: Qin Dynasty* 42-43.

²⁰¹ *Shi Ji, Records of the Grand Historian: Qin Dynasty* 46-52.

Conclusion

The First Emperor Qin Shi Huang and the Shang king Wu Ding, over a thousand years earlier, clearly had very different approaches to religion. The early Shang kings divined about almost every matter, whether or not it had any impact on their governance, whereas the Qin rulers utilized a Legalist framework to bolster their political power. This changing role of religion in governance changed gradually, but noticeably, from the earliest evidence of Chinese writing up to a millennium later with the Qin unification of the warring states. The Shang's divinatory and sacrificial rituals showed an intimate relationship between religion and governance, as these were not seen as distinct spheres of society. The Shang used oracle bones to divine about every aspect of their lives. Their spiritual pantheon included various ancestral and nature spirits as well as the Supreme Deity Shang Di, who were all believed to influence both nature and human society. As the Shang kings' religious influence extended, so too did their political authority. Shang religion strengthened the Shang's governance. Later, the Shang rulers standardized oracle bones and routinized sacrifices according to a formulaic schedule. The spread of the Shang's cultural hegemony contributed to their political authority. In the form of divination, ritual, and sacrifices, the role of religion greatly influenced the governance of the Shang dynasty.

After the Shang were conquered by the Zhou, the Zhou similarly used religious ideology to solidify their political legitimacy and authority. The Zhou not only used political means to solidify their rule over a growing territory, but they also used religious and cultural standards which helped create a more unified social group. The widespread usage of ritual bronzes showed the close relationship between religion and governance in

the Western Zhou. In order to justify their takeover of the Shang, the Zhou appealed to the will of Heaven. Their concept of Heaven was the source of all power in the supernatural, natural, and human realms. This idea of Heaven also co-opted the Shang spirits including their Supreme Deity Shang Di, thereby inheriting political and religious legitimacy from the Shang. The Zhou king acted as the Son of Heaven, which was a unique role that granted him sole power to influence Heaven and the spirits. He also had to uphold the Mandate of Heaven, which meant that he had to please the spirits above and provide for the people below. These religious ideas dealing with Heaven were employed by the Zhou in order to grant them more political power. Although the cultural and religious appeal of Zhou standards continued for centuries, their hold on centralized power gradually weakened.

As the central political power of the Zhou weakened, more practical solutions were sought out by the various states in the Eastern Zhou. Increasing assimilation of outside states coupled with growing social mobility beginning in the Spring and Autumn Period led to a dilution of the central Zhou culture. Ritual bronzes used in ceremonial rituals continued but they came to focus on the living rather than merely pleasing the supernatural spirits. Divination also continued but no longer influenced governance the way it once did. With the lessening influence and power of the Zhou, individual states began to rise up and assert their own power. Might determined right as cultural influence did not matter as much as military strength and political power. This emphasis on the temporal world was reflected in the thought of philosophers during the Hundred Schools of Thought. Confucius stressed governance based on upright morality but his successors gradually came to favor providing tangible benefit for the people. Mengzi portrayed

Heaven as the objective, natural law instead of an anthropomorphic and capricious deity. Xunzi valued religion but thought it only had cultural value and should not be used in governance. This trend culminated with the Legalists influencing the Qin state to eschew morality or religion as a basis for government and instead to depend on the pragmatism of the legal system and political bureaucracy. The First Emperor of the Qin was indubitably religious, but his governance relied instead on clear laws and strict punishments. The Qin's short reign was succeeded by the Han who continued the Qin's harsh legal practices and extensive bureaucracy but also used the importance of religion to reintroduce morality in governance. This framework left a huge impact on the dynastic tradition which lasted for over two thousand years.

The millennial change that is often called the "Axial Age" should not be oversimplified as simply religion yielding to rationalism or humanism. Despite the gulf between the early Shang kings and the First Qin Emperor, they were both unmistakably religious. The difference instead rests in the nature in which religion influenced their governance. Religious activities directly affected Shang governance in the second millennium as the kings used divination and sacrificial rituals as aids for decision-making. Religious ideas such as the Mandate of Heaven in the first millennium affected Zhou governance by granting them legitimacy and authority. As the warring states sought to solidify their power, the Qin overlooked the importance of religion and instead relied primarily on Legalist notions like strict laws and punishments. This overemphasis on power and force could help explain the fall of the short-lived Qin Dynasty (221-206) and the subsequent founding of the Han Dynasty. C.K. Yang suggests that the Qin Dynasty was so short-lived at least partially due to its lack of religious vitality despite its

unmatched strength in power politics.²⁰² The Han, however, learned that a system based on “might makes right” can only last so long, so they recognized the importance of a moral framework for governance. Just as the hegemon system of the Spring and Autumn Period lacked the moral authority that the Zhou kings had in their Mandate of Heaven, the Qin emperor was a realistic ruler without moral authority. Thus, Han rulers soon made conscious efforts to revive religious ideals in order to provide a moral backing for their rule.²⁰³

Although the interpretation of the “Axial Age” as religion giving way to reason may be too simplistic, perhaps a more accurate explanation is that elements of religion were somehow conflated into governance. For instance, Benjamin Schwartz argued that there was a harmony between the human and divine, and concluded that there was a type of “this-worldly” transcendence.²⁰⁴ Schwartz rejects Weber’s notion of rationalization necessarily being coupled with the “disenchantment of the world” and argues that “transcendence” and “world negation” are not mutually exclusive.²⁰⁵ For Schwartz, the harmony of human society with Heaven and nature did not preclude ancient China from achieving transcendence in the “Axial Age.” The harmony of Heaven and humanity shows the influence of the divine on human affairs, or of religion on governance.

²⁰² Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society* 109.

²⁰³ Michael Loewe, "The Heritage Left to the Empires," *The Cambridge History of Ancient China : From the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C.*, ed. Edward L. Shaughnessy Michael Loewe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 990.

²⁰⁴ He uses the etymological meaning of transcendence: “a kind of standing back and looking beyond—a kind of critical, reflective, questioning of the actual and a new vision of what lies beyond.” Schwartz, "The Age of Transcendence," 3.

²⁰⁵ Schwartz, "The Age of Transcendence," 2-3.

Religious ideas like the harmony of Heaven and humanity provided a moral foundation that was utilized by those in power to provide stability for the populace.

The philosophical concept of the harmony between Heaven and humanity is often credited to Han philosopher Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (d. 104 BCE). He introduced the moral concept of *tianrenganying* 天人感應 “interaction between Heaven and man,” which became influential for the next two millennia. In *The Book of Han* 漢書, he is quoted as saying:

視前世已行之事，以觀天人相與之際，甚可畏也。
國家將有失道之敗，而天乃先出災害以譴告之。...
以此見天心之仁愛人君而欲止其亂也。

In previous ages, the interactions between Heaven and man were feared and respected. If the state lost the Way, then Heaven would send out disasters to condemn it... Therefore, the sovereign who looks to the benevolence of Heaven’s will seeks to stop its chaos.²⁰⁶

According to this concept, turmoil on Earth would disrupt the universal harmony and prompt Heaven to counteract this unrest with catastrophe. Because everything rested on the universal harmony of human society with Heaven and nature, the ruler was expected to obey the will of Heaven in order to avoid disaster. As Yang explains Dong’s theory, “Heaven represented not merely a powerful but also a morally meaningful body of forces, operating on ethical principles which were fully binding on man as an integral part of the universe.”²⁰⁷ This is what is meant by religion providing the ethicopolitical basis for governance, because governing by state power alone lacks such a moral foundation. Yang describes this ethicopolitical order as “the moralization of power” which made the

²⁰⁶ Anthony E. Clark, *Ban Gu's History of Early China* (Amherst, NY: Cambria, 2008) 153.

²⁰⁷ Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society* 139-40.

government more stable than it could be by force alone. According to Yang, religion could “inspire awe, respect, and a sense of overwhelming universal destiny” and thereby provide the basis for morality “that was internalized into the conscience of the people.”²⁰⁸ Society needs an ethicopolitical order, or to put it another way, governance needs a moralizing force, and religion provides that moral foundation.

Although the Qin lacked a moral framework for their authoritarian rule, the Han did adopt many things from the Qin. Most notably, the Qin’s Legalist ideology provided an actual model for practical rule. The Han adopted many practical aspects of governance from the Qin, including their structure of government, bureaucratic divisions of commanderies and counties, stratified administration, military organization, legal procedures, and punishments.²⁰⁹ The Qin is often demonized by later dynasties including the Eastern Han, despite bestowing a long-lasting legacy for future generations. In fact, the early Han did not differ too much from Qin rule in regards to strict laws, harsh administration, and highly centralized power.²¹⁰ Due to the idea that humanity was in harmony with Heaven, criminals disrupted that balance and therefore punishment was necessary in order to restore cosmic harmony.²¹¹ These punishments consisted of the following: hard labor, often for life; mutilation punishments, including amputations and castration; and the death penalty, which was done either by beheading or by “cutting in

²⁰⁸ Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society* 138.

²⁰⁹ Loewe, "The Heritage Left to the Empires," 1005-22.

²¹⁰ Michael Nylan, "Classics without Canonization: Learning and Authority in Qin and Han," *Early Chinese Religion. Part One: Shang through Han (1250 Bc - 220 Ad)*, ed. John Lagerwey and Marc Kalinowski, vol. 2 (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2009) 766-67.

²¹¹ A.F.P. Hulswé, "Ch'in and Han Law," *The Cambridge History of China*, ed. Denis Twitchett and John K. Fairbank, vol. 1: *The Ch'in and Han Empires, 221 BC–AD 220* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 522.

two at the waist.”²¹² Although the Han would continue harsh legal practices like these from the Qin, they also would adapt religious ideas for a moral framework.

The Han used moral aspects of religion in order to have an ethicopolitical order for their power. This philosophical idea was also shown in actual measures that the Han state enacted. For instance, the Han modeled themselves on the Shang and Zhou rulers whose position as a link between supernatural and humanity granted them supreme authority.²¹³ The religious system that the Han devised was one in which the central power of the emperor was emphasized, correct interpretation of the Classics was reserved for the literati, sacrificial sincerity and ritual purity were paramount, ancestral rituals were inherited from the Zhou, Heaven and humanity shared the same essence and nature, and heterodox deities were eliminated.²¹⁴ This new religious system invoked aspects of the past in order not only to strengthen the influence of the imperial religion but also to consolidate monarchical political power. Han emperors perpetuated ancient religious traditions by making sacrifices at sacred sites that were venerated by the locals, thus enjoying not only divine sanction but also the people’s support.²¹⁵ The central component of imperial Han religion was the sacrifice to Taiyi 太一 “The Great One,” a legendary divinity who represented “the undifferentiated unity which precedes the individuation of beings” and also came to be associated with the concept of Heaven.²¹⁶ Again, the unity or harmony of all things was vital to Han ideology. Additionally, the Han established an

²¹² Hulsewé, "Ch'in and Han Law," 532-33.

²¹³ Loewe, "The Heritage Left to the Empires," 978.

²¹⁴ Marianne Bujard, "State and Local Cults in Han Religion," Early Chinese Religion, Part One: Shang through Han (1250 Bc - 220 Ad), ed. John Lagerwey and Marc Kalinowski, vol. 2 (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2009) 777.

²¹⁵ Bujard, "State and Local Cults in Han Religion," 779.

²¹⁶ Bujard, "State and Local Cults in Han Religion," 791.

official ideology based on the so-called Five Classics.²¹⁷ Han ideology was in stark contrast to Qin ideology, because the Qin focused on Legalism and burned books of the Confucian tradition whereas the Han condoned these moral classics. This corpus became the standard curriculum for almost everybody involved in the Chinese imperial bureaucracy from 136 BCE up until 1905 CE.²¹⁸ Despite Qin governance not relying on religious ideas, the legacy of the Han ensured that religious morality would have a long-lasting effect on the governance of imperial China.

The formative period of the pre-Qin is vital to understand the imperial era from the Qin and Han up to the 20th century CE. The Han frequently invoked the past, as Michael Nylan explains, “Laws inevitably cite precedents, impressive liturgies seldom stray far from past formulae and respectable theories of legitimacy typically hearken back to a useable past.”²¹⁹ Every society is a product not only of its place in history, but also of the legacy that it inherits and the Han is no exception. Additionally, each aspect of society influences its other parts, and first millennium governance in China was impacted by changes in religious influence. Although some may be tempted to describe this change as religion giving way to reason, the historical context was much more complicated. The Han inherited the Qin bureaucracy, and they coupled that with a moral framework with roots in Zhou religion. The Han dynasty fused power and morality, or as Cho-yun Hsu described it, “a moralized orthodoxy was to be welded together with political

²¹⁷ These are the Shijing 詩經 *Book of Odes*, Shangshu 尚書 *Book of Documents*, Liji 禮記 *Book of Rites*, Yijing 易經 *Book of Changes*, and the Chunqiu 春秋 *Spring and Autumn Annals*.

²¹⁸ Nylan, *The Five "Confucian" Classics* 1.

²¹⁹ Nylan, "Classics without Canonization," 774.

authority.”²²⁰ In other words, the Han inherited a political and legal bureaucracy from the Qin, but endowed that with a moral framework and ethicopolitical order adapted from religious aspects of the Zhou. By utilizing certain aspects of Qin governance and Zhou religion, the Han established a dynastic tradition that lasted for over two thousand years.

²²⁰ Cho-yun Hsu, "Historical Conditions of the Emergence and Crystallization of the Confucian System," The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations, ed. Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt (New York: SUNY Press, 1986) 315-16.

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