

## AN INQUIRY INTO THE PRE-HISTORY OF CHINESE THOUGHT

BY H. G. CREEL, A. M.

THE task which it is proposed to carry out in this and succeeding articles is an investigation of the origins and development of Chinese thought, from the earliest period about which we can reasonably speculate down through the period of the classical philosophical systems. It will immediately be objected that such an undertaking is quite incongruous with a "series of articles," but is rather a labor for a lifetime of investigation deposited in a shelf of volumes. This would be true, if this study presumed to treat exhaustively of each separate period and each individual thinker as such. It does not. The modern emphasis on specialization for efficiency in scientific research carries with it, however, the necessity of correlation in order that perspectives may be preserved and enlarged. It is to this latter task that this study is directed.

We shall have occasion, to be sure, to go in some detail into the features of some of the most important developments in Chinese philosophy and religion, but always the emphasis will be rather on placing particular thinkers and ideas in their setting with relation to the main stream of Chinese thought than on any detailed description of these phenomena themselves. Indeed, we must go back still further, and ask if there is any such thing as a "stream" of Chinese thought, or if it is rather, as a few sinologists have seemed to feel, a kind of trough into which various individuals have from time to time poured ideas originated almost *in vacuo*, following which has ensued a period of degeneration. It may be confessed here that the general thesis of this study (arrived at, not *a priori*, but as the fruit of research) is that there does exist a definite and peculiarly Chinese world-view, the history of whose development

may be traced at least in outline. Further, each of the more important thinkers and ideas within our period has originated, not outside of nor in opposition to this background, but rather as an expression of it and a development within it.

At the outset may one be pardoned for recalling a platitude of modern historical method which, like other things taken for granted, may easily be neglected in practice? When we study any particular culture our most fruitful approach is to look at it, in so far as we possibly can, from the inside. In approaching things Chinese we must attempt, first of all, to appropriate to ourselves the Chinese point of view, so that we regard any particular thing not as a Westerner would, nor even as a Hindu, but as a Chinese.<sup>1</sup> This need is well illustrated by the Chinese word *hsing* 行, often translated "element." The five *hsing* are wood, fire, metal, water, and earth. Immediately the Western reader is likely to equate these with the Greek elements. But those were relatively inert; the *hsing* on the other hand are very active. Other meanings of the same character include: "road, conduct, behavior, actions, walk, move, perform, do." One is tempted, again, to make a hasty conclusion and to equate these "elements" with the very active electron-composed substances of modern physics. But again he would be mistaken, for *hsing* is a Chinese idea, equivalent to no Western idea, and must be thoroughly studied and understood in its own setting before it may intelligently be used as a concept.

Especial caution, that we may keep from reading in our own interpretations, is necessary in dealing with the Chinese thought-world. Ancient China enjoyed an unique physical isolation from the rest of the world. "Desert, mountain, and sea had conspired together and presented an almost insurmountable barrier to human intercourse."<sup>2</sup> This geographical separation has had its very definite intellectual counterpart. If one wished to make an extreme statement, he might even contend that ancient India, the Mesopotamian world, the Mediterranean world, and Europe shared (within the widest limits of variation) one system of human thought, while ancient China presents us with another. Here lies one of the greatest values of the study of Chinese history; many ideas which

<sup>1</sup> This does not mean, of course, that I carry the insistence on cultural atomism to the point to which Oswald Spengler does, holding that borrowing between cultures is absolutely impossible. This is to press a good principle entirely too far.

<sup>2</sup> James B. Pratt, "*The Pilgrimage of Buddhism*," p. 272.

have been thought "universal," and have been referred to the "psychological unity of mankind," must abdicate this position when the Chinese touchstone is applied.

The fact remains that many of the earlier studies of Chinese religion in particular were made by men who recognized but little the existence of a peculiar Chinese mode of thought, if indeed they did not deny the very possibility. Three reasons for this may be mentioned. The first is the inaccessibility of the country. The second is the difficulty of the language.<sup>3</sup> Third, since these conditions prevented the early entry of unbiased scholars, in any number, into the Chinese field, the initial task of interpretation of Chinese history, philosophy, and religion was left almost entirely to Christian missionaries, men who by their very calling were usually unqualified for the labor of objective and critical scholarship. As a result, the Chinese Classics are still known to the West largely through the translations of such men as James Legge. One can have only admiration for the conscientious industry which Legge gave to his pioneering tasks, but that does not prevent the wish that they might have been performed by some one less determined to harmonize Chinese history with the book of *Genesis*.<sup>4</sup> Ancient Chinese is a language which can not be translated literally into another tongue. The translator must be to some extent an interpreter. Such a situation is paradise for the man with a theory.

The unfortunate sequel has been that when more competent investigators, free from such bias, entered the field, they took over, to some extent, this distortion of Chinese ideas. Thus, for instance, M. Granet translates *shen* as "dieu," but since this does not fit in other places (it does not fit precisely, anywhere) he must translate the same word differently. The same is true of *shê* which he translates sometimes as "dieu du sol," sometimes otherwise, although the meaning in Chinese is the same. All this is most confusing. It is hoped that the reader will bear with the alternative which has been adopted for this study, of first defining such genuinely untranslatable terms and thereafter using the phonetic transliteration to denote them.

<sup>3</sup> This is partially due to the fact that the teaching of Chinese has not yet been developed to anything like the efficiency which prevails in the teaching of European tongues. It may be hoped that in the near future, as a result of labors now going forward, learning Chinese will be considered by no means an insurmountable task.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Legge, *Shu King* (in *Chinese Classics*) (referred to hereafter as *Shu*) p. 189.

In order to understand any Chinese idea or any Chinese thinker, we must have some comprehension of the Chinese thought-world as a whole, and of its history. Manifestly, this requires that we shall start with the very earliest data which we can find, and work from that point. We are faced with the difficult task of evaluating those of the Chinese records which pretend to tell us of remote antiquity.

Western scholars are very cautious in making any statement of fact for China prior to, say, the time of Confucius. Chinese scholars in general are, of late, hesitant about affirming anything concerning their early history. Almost any hypothesis may be proved or disproved on what may seem fairly good authority. Almost all documents are suspect. Granet throws overboard nearly the whole of early Chinese literature, in so far as it is supposed to record historical events.<sup>5</sup>

A hopeless situation? For accurate political history, perhaps. Certainly a discouraging situation, from any point of view. Yet, it is the obstacles to be overcome which give zest to any game, from chess to research. In any case, we are certainly faced with a situation calling for a peculiar method of approach. For myself, I am unable to place much faith in specific dates and events prior to the time of Confucius, and almost none in those anterior to the founding of the Chow dynasty (1122 ? B. C.). Yet this does not make the writing of cultural, intellectual, and religious history by any means impossible. For instance: If we find in the book called *The Tribute of Yu* that a certain tribe sent earth of five colors as a tribute, it may make little difference whether Yu or the tribe ever existed; the important point for us is that if we can establish an approximate date for the document, we shall know that the five colors as a concept existed at that time (barring later interpolation, of course). And at any rate this provides us with one more evidence of the existence, at whatever date, of an important element of the Chinese natural philosophy.

It is the first task of this study to set forth the complex of natural and religious philosophy as it existed in China a little before the time of Confucius. To do that, we shall have to go into remote origins, and there we shall be on doubtful ground. But this will not seriously endanger the final result, for, while the historical chronology of a people may be falsified and garbled past recognition in

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Marcel Granet, *Dances et Legendes de la Chine Ancienne* (noted hereafter as *Dances*) p. 1.

a literature, it is literally impossible that a literature of the scope and variety of the Chinese could be pervaded by a single type of philosophy if that philosophy had not been, as a matter of fact, a dominating factor in the life of the people.

No argument is required to show that the question of the original home of the Chinese people is of importance for our problem. If as Legge believes they are descendants of Noah who moved eastward after the incident at Babel, if they came from Egypt, or if they were immigrants from ancient Babylon, these facts will give us a key to the interpretation of their early philosophy. But even the question of when they entered the territory we know as China is one to which, as Henri Cordier wrote in 1915, we may never know the answer. It is comforting to reflect that we do have at least one specific date: according to Schlegel, the oldest astronomical observation in the world was made and recorded in China, that of the eclipse of the sun on May 7, 2165 B. C. This implies, of course, that the people making the observation had reached a very considerable degree of advancement.

A detailed summary of the more important research on the question of Chinese origins will be found in the *T'oung Pao* for 1915, pp. 577-603. Two general theories seem to have taken the field, one being that the Chinese have been in their present situation from highest antiquity, the other that they migrated to China from a previous westward home. With the latter theory is usually, but not always, combined the contention that they were herders during and prior to the migration.

These two theories are sometimes associated, and used to account for the undoubtedly composite origin of the Chinese. It is held, then, that a portion of the people came in as warlike, pastoral nomads, conquered the people they found in the land, and settled among them as a ruling caste. If we could accept this explanation it would certainly solve several of our knottiest problems, as we shall have occasion to see. But a theory is not correct *merely* because it is convenient.

The arguments for a pastoral "stage" in Chinese history are not convincing.<sup>6</sup> It used to be believed that, just as people passed first from marital promiscuity through the matriarchate, then

<sup>6</sup>In support of the pastoral theory see Kwen Ih Tai, *An Inquiry into the Origin and Early Development of T'ien and Shang-ti* (Ph.D. Thesis, Chicago), pp. 138-160. For the primitive agricultural theory, see H. F. Rudd, *Chinese Social Origins*, p. 55.

through a patriarchal stage, so they went from hunting to herding and thence to agriculture. Both are exploded theories, in so far as they were thought to be universally applicable. In aboriginal North and Middle America, herding never reached any development worthy of mention, while the agricultural achievements of the Indian are probably his chief contribution to civilization.

In regard to the whole question of the place of origin of the early Chinese and the mode of their early life, we must be willing to maintain suspended judgment. While this is written, researches are going forward which may, at any time, put our knowledge on firmer ground; when this happens we may expect that several other mysteries, of the greatest importance for the history of the whole human race, will be cleared up at the same time. But lack of dogmatic certainty on this point need not prevent us from building an interpretation of ancient Chinese thought which, we may be reasonably confident, will not be invalidated no matter what may be the results of future research in the field of origins. Good scientific theories should be constructed, when possible, on the plan of Japanese dwellings—flexible enough so that they can stand an earthquake or two in the substructure without being shaken completely to pieces.

After all, what precise difference would it have made in the world-view of the people, at the earliest time at which we know them, if they had been nomadic cattle-raisers in some remote antiquity? Even Dr. Tai, an enthusiastic proponent of the pastoral theory, tells us that the composition of the *Book of Odes* (which must have been well before the time of Confucius) "was after the Chinese people had occupied China and had adapted themselves to the geographical environment for several thousand years. We need not be surprised to find that *the agricultural civilization had by this time thoroughly permeated the thought and expression of everyday life.*"<sup>7</sup> (Italics mine).

We know well enough what happens to the religion and the philosophy of a pastoral people which settles down to an agricultural mode of life. Some elements of their old religion are re-interpreted to fit the new situation; those which do not adapt themselves are dropped. Such a transitional situation runs through almost the whole of the *Old Testament*. But we have an even more concrete example just south of China, in India. The religion of the *Vedas*

<sup>7</sup> Tai, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

is that of a group of pastoral nomads. They moved into India, and took over an agricultural and settled economy. Certain of the old gods, as Varuna, which had been very important to them as nomads, no longer contributed to their new way of living, and were practically forgotten. But Indra, who was unimportant when they were herders, brought rain; his importance to farmers is obvious, and he was, in fact, raised to a place of the first rank. On the basis of such facts, and with the independent knowledge of the Chinese situation which we possess, we are justified in laying this question of pastoral origin to one side for the present, and in proceeding to make our interpretation on the basis of an agricultural economy.

We have plenty of material, if we are willing to accept it all, to make a picture of Chinese life as it was at the beginning of the Chow dynasty. If we can accept the *Great Plan*, as it stands in the present text of the *Shu King*,<sup>8</sup> as actually dating from 1024 B. C. (a point which is far from being definitely established) we can even say that the whole foundation and a good deal of the superstructure of later Chinese philosophy and religion existed at that time. It is highly probable that this is the case. To penetrate beyond this date is difficult. We have many, too many, pieces of the puzzle; some we must reject as obviously incongruous. What shall we do with the remainder? We are in the realm of hypothesis, and must use deduction for lack of a better method.

Of the apparently genuine materials before us, which *seem* most likely to have appeared first? The five household *shên*<sup>9</sup> 神 and the Sacred Place (Granet's "Lieu Saint") appear to meet the specifications. The five *shên* are the outer door, the inner door, the well, the hearth, and the atrium.<sup>10</sup> These are the focal points of interest about the home, and most of them, at least, very soon take on

<sup>8</sup> *Shu King* means, literally, "Document Classic." This book is the collection of records which makes up the orthodox history of the Confucian school. Like most other ancient Chinese books, it has had a checkered history. Much of it, at least, is of doubtful age.

<sup>9</sup> *Shên* is a word of wide occurrence. It is sometimes translated "god" which is thoroughly misleading. "Spirit" is better, but still inaccurate in many contexts. It is sometimes used as an adjective, meaning "unusual" or "weird," though not "supernatural" in the Western sense.

In the present application the word means little more than the objects themselves, capable of acting to help or harm the household.

<sup>10</sup> It is impossible strictly to translate the Chinese phrase into English. This "atrium" is the space under the middle of the roof of the principal room, at which point was located an opening which served both as chimney and as window.

"super-usual" significance among any settled people. We find sacrifices, the beginning of which is unknown, made to them at specified times.<sup>11</sup> The Sacred Place (as representing Earth) is closely linked to the five *shên* both by Chavannes and by Wang Ch'ung<sup>12</sup> (I.510). This is to class the five *shên* as *yin*, since earth is the very essence of *yin*. In both cases, however, the classification is based on a considerable development of the *yin-yang* philosophy,<sup>13</sup> a fairly sophisticated set of ideas which, since we seek origins, we can hardly assume as an original datum. This association may more plausibly be explained on the assumption that both the five *shên* and the Sacred Place were, at an early period, part of a naïve agricultural cult closely bound to the earth. The elements of this cult would then have been loosely grouped with the Earth side of the later Heaven-Earth duality. In this later system, it must be remembered, Earth as *yin* is female, yet Wang associates the hearth (seat of fire, which is the essence of *yang*, the male principle) with it. Furthermore, the sacred mound, *shê* 社 which is the very focalization of the agricultural powers of earth, often figures as *masculine*.<sup>14</sup> Obviously, we have here certain tell-tale incongruencies which indicate very strongly that the more recent system was built on the basis of an earlier cult.

This mound, the *shê* just mentioned, appears to have been the center of the life of the tiny agricultural village, which comprised, the records tell us, twenty-five "families" (this family included a kinship group of considerable size, of course, as is the case in China today). There is reason to believe that the cult centering about the *shê* is very ancient indeed, that it is, in fact, the central element of the hypothetical agricultural cult of which we have already spoken,<sup>15</sup> which preceded the philosophical "Heaven-Earth, *yin-yang*" complex. The reasons for this are several. For one, the mound seems to have included a tree, or perhaps even a sacred

<sup>11</sup> Edouard Chavannes, *Le T'ai Chan*, p. 492.

<sup>12</sup> Wang Ch'ung, born 27 A. D., is one of the most interesting figures in the history of Chinese literature. In dealing with the popular religion we shall have occasion to consider him in detail. References in parenthesis refer to volume and page number of his *Lun Hêng* (in the English translation by Alfred Forke), one of our most valuable sources for the popular religion.

<sup>13</sup> This dual system of classification will be discussed in detail in the succeeding chapter.

<sup>14</sup> Chavannes, *op. cit.*, pp. 520-21.

<sup>15</sup> Chavannes, *op. cit.*, p. 437, p. 524. Granet, *La Religion des Chinois* (cited hereafter as *Religion*), p. 63.



grove.<sup>16</sup> But wood is that one of the five *hsing* which corresponds to the east, which is a *yang* region, which contradicts the *yin* status of the mound.

Furthermore, the place of the Earth in the later religion is decidedly subservient and secondary. But the *shê* of the ancient villages seem quite self-sufficient. They are gone to by the people for almost all of the things which they would have needed in a simple agricultural situation, such as crops, protection from drouth, and protection from floods. Further, the techniques used to gain these ends are easier to understand by themselves than to fit into the later philosophical scheme. Instances are the practice of putting five frogs on the mound to draw rain, and of moistening the mound from the irrigation ditch for the same purpose.<sup>17</sup> Water, like the *shê*, is classed as *yin*. When we find that recourse is had to the mound in case of high water, we may feel that here is a proof for the philosophical theory. But when we find that the *shê* was also appealed to in case of drouth, we begin to suspect that the mound was far more important than the later scheme would represent it to have been.

Indeed, Wang Ch'ung seems rightly to have described the situation, in so far as the people are concerned, when he said, "It is customary to sacrifice to the *shê*, which produce all things." (II, 337). Anciently, the common people looked, for the things they wanted, to Earth, not generically but in the form of the *shê*. In the documents, Heaven is respected, sometimes feared, but Earth is loved and venerated (I, 535; II, 337, 339, 376-7). From the very first appearance of Heaven in the literature, it is remote, just, ethical, almost a philosophical concept rather than an element of a simple religion. Heaven seems almost to be a transcendentalization of the governmental and regulatory function. Earth, on the other hand, is close, intimate, bountiful—the old concept of the *shê*, in fact, will not fit into the later cosmological scheme without that alteration which, as we shall see, it underwent.

But one of the chief reasons why it seems impossible that the *shê* originated simply as a personification of the *yin* comes from the fact that it is very easy to account for its origin in a manner which does not require that we throw the sophisticated philosophy of a later day back into a setting where it looks like a top-hat on a

<sup>16</sup> Chavannes, *op. cit.*, p. 466-70, p. 485. Granet, *Religion*, p. 68.

<sup>17</sup> Chavannes, *op. cit.* p. 495.

coolie.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, the *yin-yang* philosophy itself appears, without forcing, as a natural development out of the early village life and agricultural cult on the one hand, and the later political developments on the other.

The village life is very important, for it appears to be the archetype from which the entire Chinese conception of the world and even the cosmos grew. The village was, as has been said, small. It was based on agriculture. It was apparently a community of a peaceful regularity and a social solidarity beyond anything which we of the present day can imagine.<sup>19</sup> Rudd has summarized the climatic situation admirably.

The Chinese civilization appeared in a region of extensive plains and low hills, located in the temperate zone between the parallels of 30° and 40° north latitude. The earth offers but few such favorable situations for the development of great peoples. No other ancient civilization had such freedom for extensive and intensive development. The cold winters and hot summers offered stimulus and reward for personal effort. Industry was necessary in order to secure food and comfort. The soil was naturally productive. The rainfall was not abundant, but it came at the seasons when it was most needed for agriculture, and stimulated the effort to utilize it when it came.<sup>20</sup>

To this day, the sense of solidarity among the members of a Chinese "large family" has few parallels in the West. In these ancient agricultural villages there was "une sorte de gregarisme, une vie en groupes, en communautés où individus et familles doivent se perdre et ne comptent pas."<sup>21</sup> Again, "Une village enferme une vaste famille tres unie et très homogène."<sup>22</sup> This solidarity took on not alone a social but even a territorial aspect. Indeed, Granet

<sup>18</sup> That I be not thought wilfully to ignore the fact, let me acknowledge that the practice of putting a red cord about the *shê* in case of drought does appear to be an example of the *yin-yang* philosophy. But it can not be proved that this was early. To be sure, Chavannes (*op. cit.*, p. 485) says that the string was at first put about the tree rather than the mound, which seems to refer the practice to antiquity. But Chavannes' source for this dates from 500 A. D.

<sup>19</sup> I do not mention the nine-field scheme (cf. Maspero, *La Chine Antique*, p. 108-10) for three reasons. (1) Considerable doubt of its authenticity has been raised of late, especially in China. (2) It can not have been in existence at any time prior to the existence of fairly well-recognized government. (3) It is of no very great importance for this study.

<sup>20</sup> Rudd, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

<sup>21</sup> Maspero, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

<sup>22</sup> Granet, *Religion*, p. 4.

holds that the relations of the family group with the soil were originally so close that the corpse was deposited on the family ground, near the dwelling, during decomposition, and each new member of the family was considered a literal reincarnation of the substance of the ancestors.<sup>23</sup> He finds, also, an association of the fertility of the grain, which was stored near the conjugal couch, with that of the women.<sup>24</sup>

But the most striking fact about the life of the village-dweller was the division of his year into two seasons, according to which almost every phase of his existence was drastically altered.<sup>25</sup> In summer, the whole family went to the fields, and lived in little huts at the scene of the agricultural labors. The work in the fields was done by the men, the women and children preparing their meals and bringing them to the field. This condition continued all through the summer. After the harvest was gathered, the mode of life was changed altogether, the whole group going back to the home to spend the cold winter. Here it was the women, apparently, who did the large share of the work, making clothing, etc.<sup>26</sup>

The turn of the season, in spring and fall, would quite evidently be a time of great importance. It was the time, in each case, when the season of the labors of one sex had finished, and when that of another was to begin. In the spring there was all of the anxiety over the crops of the coming year, and the rejoicing at the return of vegetation; in the autumn there was gladness because of the harvest. Beyond doubt we have here the origin of the two great festivals of the ancient Chinese, which came approximately at the equinoxes. It is worthy of note that, at the spring festival, there were ceremonies celebrated at the Sacred Place (which was perhaps the early form of the *shê*)<sup>27</sup> in which, apparently, young men and young women danced opposite each other (dramatizing the opposition of the sexes), singing ceremonial songs. They finally paired off, the climax being sexual intercourse. This was followed by marriage if a child resulted.<sup>28</sup>

The opposition of the sexes in this ancient agricultural life is striking. It is so sharp, Granet opines, that it may be said to have

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27-28.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* p. 26.

<sup>25</sup> Maspero, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116. Granet, *Religion*, p. 3-4.

<sup>27</sup> Granet, *Dances*, p. 447-50.

<sup>28</sup> Granet, *Religion*, pp. 8-16. Maspero, *op. cit.* pp. 118-19.

dominated the whole of the social life. We find what is perhaps an echo of it in the separation of the sexes among the aristocracy.<sup>29</sup>

Granet was the first, to my knowledge, to point out the very great probability that the *yin* and the *yang* conceptions were originally merely the classification of objects in general under these two categories (male and female) which were most ready to the hand of the ancient farmer.<sup>30</sup> It must be borne in mind that it is not contended that the developed *yin-yang* cosmology existed among the early agricultural Chinese—rather the contrary—but only that this division on sex lines is probably the source of the later philosophical concepts. Granet believes that *yin* at first referred to the position taken by the female dancers in the spring festival, while *yang* referred to the proper place of the male dancers.

Other aspects of the village life which had an overwhelming importance for the later Chinese religion and philosophy were the social solidarity, already mentioned, and the intense provincialism which characterized it. This is not alone peculiar to agricultural communities located in China. Wherever such a group exists, it tends very quickly to achieve a code of ethics which is not subject to criticism, even the minutest violations of which are considered to be great offences. The origin of reflective, as opposed to hereditary, morality, lies in wide contacts, bringing criticism and comparison. The Chinese village lacked this. China as a whole has lacked and deliberately excluded it, from very ancient times down almost to the present. The result, reflected in the literature beyond all possibility of doubt, was the placing of the highest premium on conformity to custom down to the smallest detail.

The process went a step further. It is nothing unique for a people to believe that its religious rites cause the processes of the universe to follow their accustomed round. Nor is it unusual for people to believe that conformity or non-conformity with a particular ethical code has spectacular cosmic consequences. Most of us have heard some good person say, after a tremendous earthquake or fire, "What a wicked city that must have been!" The tendency to think in such terms increases as we approach conditions of village provincialism like that in ancient China. The Chinese developed this idea, in combination with certain other conceptions,

<sup>29</sup> Granet, *Dances*, p. 569.

<sup>30</sup> Granet, *Religion*, pp. 20-21. The etymology of the characters *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽 is interestingly discussed by Granet.

into a religion, and a social and political and even a natural philosophy. As a result of this, almost every calamity which could happen was referred to the failure of some person or persons to live up to the established code.

The positive conceptions of the ideal state in this regard were *li* 禮 "propriety" and *h'u* 和 "harmony, union, concord, agreement." The former refers to the body of *mores* according to which it was necessary to live in order to win social approval and prosperity, and to avoid disturbing the order of the cosmos (conceived as including men on very intimate terms). The second term is very often used to denote that harmonious state of nature which was the normal and beneficial thing. In the beginning, these ideas were very simple. Men must follow the customs of the group in order to maintain both social and cosmic harmony. If they do not, they will bring upon the group (in a very naturalistically conceived way) such disasters as follow upon the disturbance of the harmonious rotation of the seasons, *i. e.*, drought, floods, crop failures, plagues of insects, etc.

This early Chinese thought-world was (if we do not push the word too far) dynamically conceived. The *hsing*, "elements,"<sup>31</sup> if they existed in the Chinese world at that time, were not so much types of substance, apparently, as *localizations of modes of action*. The Chinese never seem to deal with the epistemological problem; they are naïve realists, with a decidedly pragmatic tinge. In the same way they conceive "good" not as a type of substance but as a state of harmony. That which Westerners have called "supernatural" appears to differ from the "natural" not in substance but only in its way of action. Evil is not a substance nor a class of things, but a kind of behavior which is the opposite of harmonious, that is, *kuo* 過, "excess," "going beyond."

It may seem that the above paragraph attributes to the ancient Chinese a number of sophisticated philosophical ideas which would be, in a setting so naïve, surprising. But careful consideration will show that it rather denies to them certain ideas which the Westerner tends unconsciously to assume that the Chinese must have had, merely because they are implicit in his own occidental background.

We have traced the origin of the most important early ideas in the Chinese philosophical and religious world—on the one hand *yin* and *yang*, on the other the solidarity of the social with the cosmic

<sup>31</sup> The date of their origin will be considered later.

order. But almost nothing has yet been said of *T'ien*, which is, according to some scholars, perhaps the most important ingredient of early Chinese religion. The neglect was not inadvertence. *T'ien* has been mentioned so little because it is believed that its importance, at this period, was very slight and secondary.

The importance of *T'ien* in early Chinese religion has probably been greatly overemphasized, for two reasons. In the first place, by the time the Chinese were writing down their history in any sort of systematic manner, and were re-editing all of the old texts, the political system which depended on the *T'ien* concept (as completely as the Holy Roman Empire depended on *Jahweh*) was in full swing, and it was the officials of this system who wrote and edited the histories. Add to this the Chinese reverence for and imitation of antique custom, and it becomes plain that the officers would beyond all question have written a flourishing *T'ien-cult* into the ancient period, whatever the facts might have been.

In the second place, Western scholars, led in the first place by Christian missionaries, have often been eager to demonstrate the early importance of *T'ien*, usually in order to prove that monotheism was the original religion of China. Christianity then appears, of course, as the preservation of this original and pure cult through the ages. In any case they equate *T'ien* and *Shang Ti*<sup>32</sup> to *Jahweh*, and try to find them to have been as important as possible.

No one, Western scholar or Chinese, pretends to find any sort of popular cult of *T'ien* 天<sup>33</sup> within the historical period. But there was, undeniably, an early and flourishing cult of the *shê*, the five household *shên*, etc. Here was an embarrassing position for the historians. *T'ien* was considered the loftiest power in the universe and was associated with the Emperor himself, and therefore should, of course, have been the object of the most wide-spread and the most ancient veneration. Yet where was the proof of this? As is usual in such cases, a neat explanation was found.

This explanation, upon which some have based the antiquity of the cult of *T'ien*, is founded upon a passage of the *Shu King*, dated about one thousand years after the event, referring to an incident in the reign of Yao, the first Emperor mentioned in the

<sup>32</sup> *Shang Ti*, "Upper Ruler," is probably another form of *T'ien*. This point will be discussed later.

<sup>33</sup> This character seems to have developed from a picture of a man with a line (representing the sky) above his head. It is generally accepted to have originally meant merely the sky.

*Shu King*. The passage, taken from the document *Leu-hing* of the *Shu*,<sup>34</sup> reads:

Then he commissioned Ch'ung and Le to make an end of the communications between earth and heaven, and the descents (*of spirits*, Legge interpolates) ceased. From the princes down to the inferior officers, all helped with clear intelligence *the spread of the regular principles of duty*. . .

Wieger, who of course shares the general Roman Catholic thesis of universal primitive monotheism, tells us that the situation lying behind this text was as follows: The primitive Chinese religion, the pure cult of *T'ien*, had become contaminated through the contact of the people with certain non-Chinese tribes, the Li and the Miao. Shun was charged by the Emperor to punish them, with the result that, the *Shu* tells us, he exterminated them.<sup>35</sup> Further action was necessary, however. The people, not leaving the offering of sacrifices to the official channels, had begun to have personal relations with the superior powers, which threw the entire religious system into confusion. For this reason it was necessary "to make an end of the communications between earth and heaven." This caused the old order to be re-established, Wieger tells us, and it continued until about 770 B. C.

But, upon such close examination, this incident does not at all show that a popular cult of *T'ien* existed at an early date. Wieger says that Shun revived the laws of the ancient cult; had it, therefore, been previously the custom for the people not to sacrifice to *T'ien*, but to leave this to the Emperor? If so, that would agree perfectly with my own hypothesis, that *T'ien* was never properly a deity of the people. On the other hand, it seems difficult to see how the prohibition of popular sacrifices to *T'ien* could have done away with the abuses which were supposed to have occurred. It would seem that the Emperor and his agents would rather have tried to stimulate the *T'ien*-cult, and to make it take the place of the supposedly heretical practices. Furthermore, Legge reports an extended dialogue concerning this passage, dating from the time of Confucius, in which there is not the slightest hint that it has any reference to popular worship of *T'ien* at all.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> *Shu* p. 593.

<sup>35</sup> L. Wieger, S. J., *Histoire des Croyances Religieuses et des Opinions Philosophiques en Chine depuis l'Origine, jusqu'à Nos Jours* (cited hereafter as *Histoire des Croyances*), pp. 14-15.

<sup>36</sup> *Shu*, pp. 593-94, notes.

Another difficulty is worthy of note. How is it that this popular *T'ien*-cult, supposedly so strong up to this time, was extirpated in the full spotlight of history (as its proponents would have us believe) yet has left no echo of its existence in the rest of Chinese literature, not even in the *Shi King*, the *Book of Poetry*, which is our best source for popular sentiment? The point is not one on which to be stubbornly dogmatic, but until further evidence is produced I shall remain persuaded that *T'ien* was always a governmental figure, never a popular one. It is the aristocracy, not the people, who sacrifice to it. The fact is that all of this literature which concerns the early rulers of China is very doubtful. Some of its incidents can only be mythical, much is probably allegory. As collateral evidence it is often very good; as independent proof it is in most cases worthless. In this case the independent evidence nearly all points away from a popular cult of *T'ien*.

But suppose we concede that a *T'ien*-cult might have existed, deeply rooted in the popular imagination, from the earliest times. Could the Emperor have ended it with such ease, or even at all? He could not. Chinese emperors who try to introduce great innovations in religion have always lost their heads and their thrones to some ambitious vassal who has been watching for just such an opportunity to raise a pious rebellion.

But if *T'ien* was not always the great deity of the Chinese, we must account for its origin in some manner.<sup>37</sup> One may not ignore the very frequent association of nomadic peoples with sky-gods. From this fact comes, perhaps, the strongest argument for a pastoral nomadic period in the history of the Chinese.

The earlier Heaven-cult did not include the earth as the counterpart of Heaven, and can not well be said to be a product of the peasant community. The agricultural feature was apparently added to the original ritual as the farming interest had been gradually developed to displace that of pastoral economy.<sup>38</sup>

One may not deny the possibility of a pastoral nomadic period, nor dogmatically assert that this might not be the origin of *T'ien*. It might. But the tendency of nomadic deities to atrophy in an agricultural situation is, as has been pointed out, great, and is

<sup>37</sup> T'ai refers to "the undivided supremacy which *T'ien* had commanded over the people from time immemorial." *Op. cit.*, p. 233.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141a.



irresistible unless the old deities are able to take on new functions which fit into the new habitat and mode of life of their people. In China, *T'ien* did, in the course of time, assume functions of a governmental character, but one can hardly believe that this group of nomads (according to the hypothesis we are pursuing) can have moved into China and immediately set up a thoroughly organized government. Therefore, even if the origin of *T'ien* were nomadic, it seems probable that the concept would in any case have undergone an intermediate period of extreme feebleness.<sup>39</sup>

But if we eliminate the pastoral stage, we may still find an explanation for *T'ien*. The sky is important for the agricultor, as well as for the herdsman. It is from the sky that the rain comes, it is in the sky that the sun, all-important, is located. The sky becomes a symbol of the orderly rotation of the seasons, which is associated with that remarkably strong sense of Harmony and Order, social and cosmic, which, as we have seen, the Chinese developed.

The sky sees everything. Among many peoples it has become linked with justice and with government. It is often the seat of the Great Ruler, who is of course closely associated with the human king or emperor. So it was in China. This development, which can only be mentioned here, will be treated at length when we come to deal with Confucianism and its background.

The sky is active, sending driving rain and hot sunlight. The earth is passive, motionless, putting forth the fruit of the seed it receives. Quite simply, the male *yang* came to have its seat in heaven, while the female *yin* was naturally linked with earth.<sup>40</sup>

\* \* \*

The foregoing picture is not presented as anything like a complete account of early Chinese religion or philosophy, nor even as a thorough canvass of all of the reliable material which is available on the subject. Many elements have been omitted, some because they are peripheral, others because they are included implicitly in what has been described. The chief purpose of this sketch has been to provide a background for, and an introduction to, the ensuing study of later Chinese thought.

<sup>39</sup> The only alternative would be the persistence among the settled people of a governing caste, or the penetration among them of a group of nomads who set up an aristocracy. See Granet's refutation of these possibilities, *Dances*, p. 9-24.

<sup>40</sup> The sun is sometimes called "the great *yang*."