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## Understanding *Di* and *Tian*: Deity and Heaven from Shang to Tang Dynasties

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帝 • 天

UNDERSTANDING *DI* AND *TIAN*:  
DEITY AND HEAVEN FROM SHANG TO TANG DYNASTIES

Ruth H. Chang

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## Introduction

The king said: I am but a small child, yet unstintingly day and night, I act in harmony with the former kings to be worthy of august Tian.... [I] make this sacrificial food vessel, this precious kuei-vessel, to succor those august paradigms, my brilliant ancestors. May it draw down [the spirits of] those exemplary men of old, who now render service at the court of Di and carry forth the magnificent mandate of august Di....<sup>1</sup>

By the time that King Li (r.859-842) cast the above inscription on a bronze vessel, the terms *di* 帝 and *tian* 天 were already included in numerous records, from those of the royal court to the diverse philosophers that were flourishing during the late Western Zhou period.<sup>2</sup> But what do these two words really mean? Sometimes the two terms appear interchangeable, and a significant amount of scholarship mistakenly fails to distinguish their meanings. Other sources show a distinction between the two terms. On certain artifacts, such as the inscription above, they appear to describe a supreme deity whereas in other contexts they seem to refer to Heaven or to other definitions. Due to the amount of documentation that includes both or at least one of the terms, one would think that there should be a clear understanding of these words. However, not only do scholars today have trouble distinguishing specific definitions for these words, but it seems that even the people who used the terms in ancient China also differed in their ideas of the meanings.

Because these two terms are still used today, the study of *di* and *tian* can be traced over thousands of years. In posing the question of their meanings, this paper focuses on earlier China, seeking the origins, earlier meanings, and the development of these ideas from the Shang 商 to the Tang 唐 dynasties. The Xia 夏, Shang, and Zhou 周 dynasties form the traditional "Three Dynasties of Chinese antiquity,"<sup>3</sup> during which the "golden age" of sage emperors ruled.<sup>4</sup> According to legend, the Xia dynasty reigned from 2205-1766 B.C. Later records, such as the *Shujing* 書經 (*Classic of Documents* or *Book of History*), describe the Xia

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<sup>1</sup> Fukui, *Wenwu* [Cultural Artifacts] (Beijing, 1979), 4.89-90, quoted in Robert Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), 24-5.

<sup>2</sup> Note that the majority of the Chinese translations in this paper are written in pinyin. However, some of the names, book titles, and quotes follow their original form of Wade-Giles in order to keep them more familiar and accessible to readers. In such cases, brackets are usually provided to show the pinyin form.

<sup>3</sup> Burton Watson, trans., *The Zuo zhuan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), xxv.

<sup>4</sup> Herrlee G. Creel, *The Origins of Statecraft in China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 28.

period, but there are no writings that can be unquestionably attributed to this period. Some scholars attribute certain archaeological sites to the Xia but such claims lack definitive proof. There are hints that perhaps the Xia dynasty existed, but the evidence is too unconvincing for it to be advantageous to dwell on the study of religion in this period. Clearer evidence lies with the Shang dynasty, which is dated from the mid-1700s until 1123 B.C.<sup>5</sup> The Shang dynasty is the earliest period from which there is enough evidence to study the origins of the terms *di* and *tian* with more certainty. Therefore, this paper begins with the Shang. It centers on the concepts of *di* and *tian* in China from the Shang to the Tang (618-907 A.D) and the significance of their uses in the religious, political, and social realms. Perhaps the answers can shed light upon later definitions and the current understanding of political leadership and religion in pre-modern China.

We begin by examining the Shang state. After establishing the religious and political culture, I explain *di*'s role in the Shang period. Next, I argue in support of the theory that the concept of *tian* does not exist in the Shang dynasty. Progressing chronologically, this paper will then investigate the Zhou dynasty. I illustrate *di*'s position, as well as how and why it was adopted into the Zhou religious system. It was during the Zhou period that *tian* originated as a divinity. Closely bound to the government of the state, *di* and *tian* found their meanings shifting with the times and political motives. I trace the ambiguous meanings of *tian* through the teachings of Zhou philosophers as well. Then I progress to the Han dynasty, relating how the meanings of *di* and *tian* changed and expanded. By the Tang dynasty, although most of the original definitions of the two terms remain, some of the former ideas began to be lost and replaced, especially as foreign cultures influenced Chinese beliefs.

In conclusion, I summarize some of the ideas characterizing *di* and *tian*, such as their function in legitimizing authority and their reflection of society. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that tremendous controversies continue to surround these two terms. Perhaps the ambiguities that remain in these issues will challenge other scholars to clarify them further.

One may question why I choose to retain the Chinese words *di* and *tian* throughout the majority of this paper. Many scholars prefer to translate *di* as "God" or "Lord". They often refer

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

to *di* as *Shangdi* 上帝, which is commonly translated as "Lord on High."<sup>6</sup> However, it is questionable whether simply choosing "God" or "Lord" is adequate to translate *di*. It is just as doubtful to assume that *di* and *Shangdi* are interchangeable. In fact, although the phrase is much more frequently used nowadays than the single word *di*, *Shangdi* is extraordinarily rare in the oracle inscriptions. Shima only cites three examples.<sup>7</sup> *Tian* is usually translated as "Heaven."<sup>8</sup> Although this term is generally appropriate, it would be misleading to adopt this sole translation, especially since *tian* could also connote both a deity and the sky. Despite all efforts to find basic terms and fundamental meanings to explain the concepts of *di* and *tian*, research has led to the discovery that these terms are not as explicit and clearly definable as one may wish. Therefore, using only "God" or "Lord" in place of *di*, or identifying *tian* as simply "Heaven," would subvert the purposes of this paper, which attempts to demonstrate the ambiguity and variety of meanings that are encompassed by *di* and *tian*. There lacks a single, clear and enduring concept of *di*, and especially of *tian*.

Difficulties abound in the study of ancient China. In searching for understanding of *di* and *tian*, controversies arise from various sources. Foremost are the problems that are common to the research of any aspect of early history; scholars can only draw conclusions based solely on the scant information that has survived the ages, such as that available through documents and archaeological artifacts. Specifically for studying *di* and *tian*, as mentioned above, the ambiguity of these terms as judged by their contexts and differing uses even at the time of their origin have resulted in other dilemmas. The controversies grow more complex as one considers the fact that a given character often appeared in different forms. The writing system during these early periods, especially the Shang dynasty, was still in the process of becoming standardized and lacked the stricter uniformity of later writing. Therefore, even when texts and inscriptions are found from this time, their interpretations are subject to more distortion as people try to distinguish the ancient characters. Yet another difficulty of reading history from ancient times arises, depending on the author(s), dates, and motives of the writings. Various authors with different perspectives from different ages, including the modern time, could have, purposely or

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<sup>6</sup> Yao Xinzong, *Confucianism and Christianity: A Comparative Study of Ren and Agape* (United Kingdom: Sussex Academic Press, 1996), 31.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Eno, *Masters of the Dance: The Role of T'ien [Tian] in the Teachings of the Early Juist [Ruist] (Confucian) Community*, vol. 1 and 2 (Michigan: University Microfilms International, 1984), 105, n. 4.

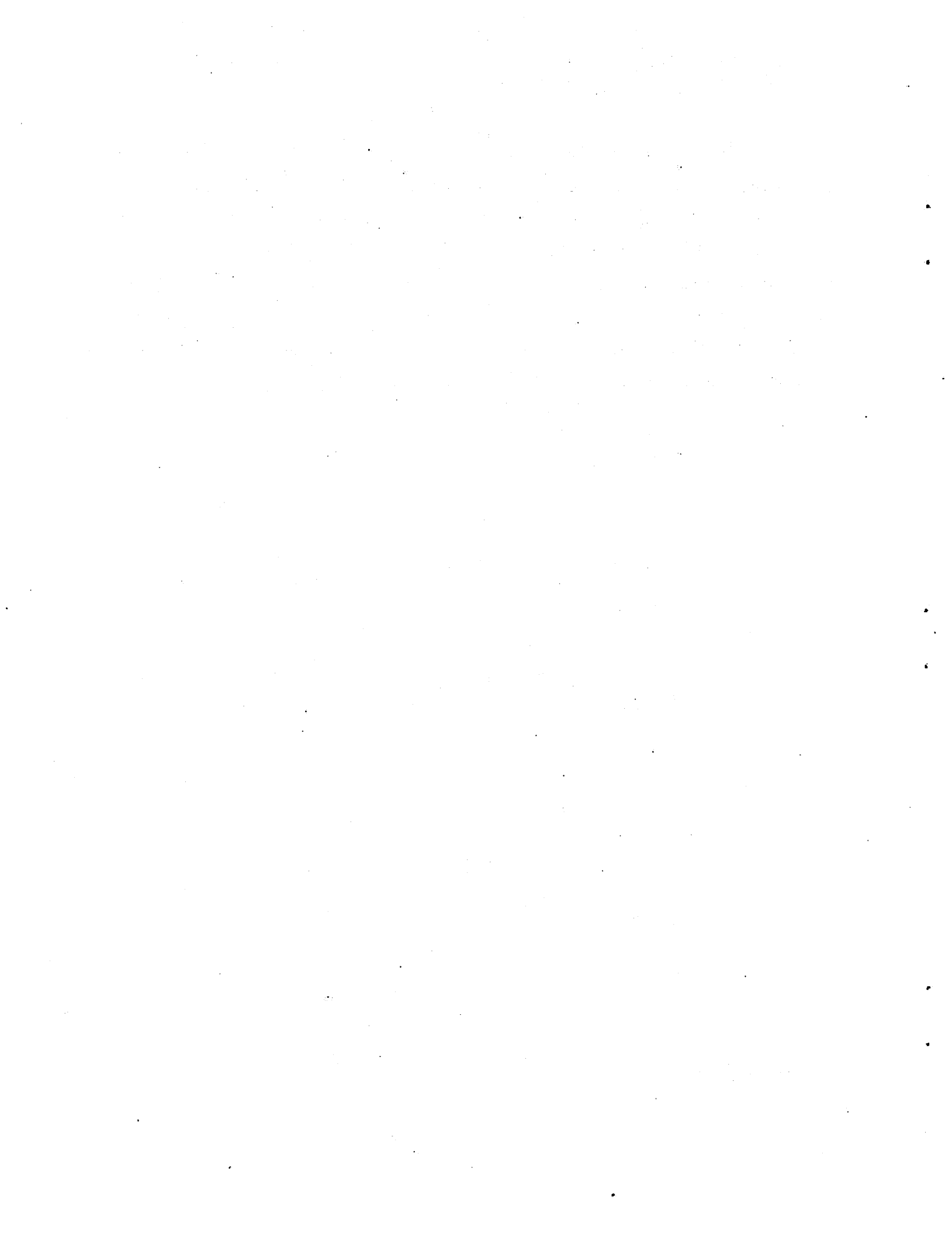


mistakenly, skewed versions of history. Further discussion of this issue is evident later in this paper, especially in the examples of the Zhou propaganda. Along with the dilemmas mentioned above, numerous others hinder the complete understanding of early China.

Because of the complexity of the problems involved in discovering the meanings behind *di* and *tian*, proposals concerning them put forward in this paper will undoubtedly be disputed by some. However, if this paper leads to a greater awareness of Chinese history, ancient religion, or the difficulties and fascinations involved with the study of these topics, or inspires further interest in researching this field, then it has succeeded in its purpose.

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<sup>8</sup> Creel, *Origins of Statecraft*, 82.



## Shang Dynasty (c. 1766-1045 B.C.)

### *Di*

Whether or not the Xia was the first dynasty, as asserted by Chinese tradition, the Shang dynasty begins the more certain Chinese history. Archaeological sites have revealed materials that validate traditional knowledge of the Shang period. Although certain documents were allegedly written from the Shang era, further research has shown these claims to be false assertions, some created as frauds to rewrite history. (Reasons for such revisions of history are explained below.) The majority of the studies on the Shang dynasty are based upon evidence from inscriptions found on oracle bones and artifacts. Fortunately for this study, the content of the oracle texts is dominated by divinations, which reveal information about the Shang religious culture.

The Shang dynasty had a complex religious system. The government was regulated by an elaborate regimen of state sacrifices. Oracle bone texts document various hunting and fishing expeditions that were organized in order to gain offerings for sacrificial rituals.<sup>9</sup> Inscriptions on bones also provide evidence that the kings often divined to decide when to present sacrifices and that they eventually constructed a calendar that designated the appropriate days for offerings. Consulting with spirits to decide when to take action is seen in previous times as well. The first chapter of the *Shangshu* 商書 includes the sage-king Yao's 堯 commission to his astronomers to calculate the motions of the celestial bodies.<sup>10</sup> Records show various rules for the rituals, for example, that sacrificial victims were buried when used as offerings to earth spirits, drowned when presented to river deities, cut into pieces when offered to wind spirits, and burned when offered to higher beings related to the sky. These sacrifices were meant to please the deities and give protection from harm.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Mark Edward Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 21.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>11</sup> Julia Ching, "Son of Heaven: Sacral Kingship in Ancient China," *T'oung Pao* 83 (1997): 28-9.

The offering of sacrifices was a privilege which belonged only to special religious figures and to royalty.<sup>12</sup> The *Guoyu* 國語 includes a passage in "Chuyu" that describes the roles of the spiritual people:

Anciently, men and spirits did not intermingle. At that time there were certain persons who were so perspicacious, single-minded, and reverential that their understanding enabled them to make meaningful collation of what lies above and below, and their insight to illumine what is distant and profound. Therefore the spirits would descend into them. The possessors of such powers were, if men, call [*sic*] *xi* 覡 (shamans), and if women, *wu* 巫 (shamanesses). It is they who supervised the positions of the spirits at the ceremonies, sacrificed to them, and otherwise handled religious matters. As a consequence, the spheres of the divine and the profane were kept distinct. The spirits sent down blessings on the people, and accepted from them their offerings. There were no natural calamities.<sup>13</sup>

Because of their specialized role in interceding between men and spirits, they seem to have had high social statuses. Some oracle bone inscriptions include the character *wu*, and some even specifically mention certain famous shamans.<sup>14</sup>

Even higher in position than the regular shamans were the royalty, the only other group of people who were allowed to make sacrifices. The word *wu* could have been a generic term for leaders who mediated between heaven and earth.<sup>15</sup> Members of the royal house were also considered shamans or at least had shamanic powers. The *Shiji* 史記 records how Minister Fu Yue 傅說 wisely "explained to King Wu Ding 武丁 the meaning of a wild pheasant perching on top of the handle of a bronze tripod" and how Yi Zhi, the son of Yi Yin, explained "to King Tai Wu the meaning of an extraordinary overnight growth of a mulberry tree." Fu Yue, Yi Zhi, and other members of the court were not called *wu* but some of them did possess shamanic capabilities. *Wu* seemed to most often refer to the "full-time or specialist shamans."<sup>16</sup> "The *wu* were advanced to *shi* 史 or archivists, and then they advanced to administrative officials; the

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>13</sup> Derk Bodde, "Myths of ancient China," in *Mythologies of the Ancient World*, ed., Samuel Kramer (New York: Doubleday, 1961), 390, quoted in K.C. Chang, "Shang Shamans," *The Power of Culture: Studies in Chinese Cultural History*, ed. Willard J. Peterson, et al. (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1994), 10-11.

<sup>14</sup> K.C. Chang, "Shang Shamans," *The Power of Culture: Studies in Chinese Cultural History*, ed. Willard J. Peterson, et al. (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1994), 11.

<sup>15</sup> Another view of the word *wu* in which it is translated as \**m'ag*, a "magician" or "mage," is presented in Victor Mair's article "Old Sinitic \**M'ag*, Old Persian *Maguš*, and English 'Magician,'" *Early China* 15 (1990), 27-47.

<sup>16</sup> Chang, "Shang Shamans," 14.

kings were political chiefs, but they remained the leaders of the shamans."<sup>17</sup> A parallel exists between the *wu* (both the specialist shamans and the court officials) and the kings in similar political and religious powers, but with the kings ruling over the *wu*. Tang 湯, the first king of the Shang dynasty, is said to have "observed the taboos, cut his hair, broken his nails, offered himself as a sacrifice, and prayed [for rain] at the *she* 社 altar in the mulberry grove."<sup>18</sup>

As a result of the collaboration between shamans and the royalty, the sacrifices and mediation between the spiritual realm and earth became monopolized by the royalty. Shamanism became a means for the nobility to govern people, since only a select group of the elite could have access to the spirit world.<sup>19</sup> Religious rituals were a method for legitimizing royal authority. The king was seen as the principal mediator between the spirits and deities and human beings.<sup>20</sup>

The importance of the king's role, viewed as that of a religious leader, is more clearly realized in the context of the complexity and pervasiveness of Shang religion. Government of society was dictated through rituals. The oracle bone texts record the numerous sacrifices made by the shamans and rulers, demonstrating the concerns and religious practices of the royalty, as deities were consulted for decisions in order that the rulers could act according to the wishes of the gods. People believed that spirits and ancestors could affect human destinies; therefore, sacrifices could bring good fortune or avert disaster.<sup>21</sup> Offering sacrifices was a major responsibility; indeed, it was one of the fundamental duties of the Shang kings. Sacrifices were made to nature spirits, culture heroes, and royal ancestors. The number of sacrifices grew so that by the eleventh century B.C., the king had to perform a major ceremonial sacrifice every day to mark annual sacrifices to royal deities.<sup>22</sup>

The pervasiveness of the religious ceremonies of the royal house was reflected in the ritualized environment of the Shang society. Many priests and shamans dwelled in the capital.

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<sup>17</sup> Chen Mengjia, "Shangdai di shenhua yu wushu," *Yenjing Journal of Chinese Studies* 20, (1936), 535, quoted in K.C. Chang, "Shang Shamans," *The Power of Culture: Studies in Chinese Cultural History*, ed. Willard J. Peterson, et al., p. 14.

<sup>18</sup> *Di Wang Shiji* 帝王世紀 as quoted in *Taiping Yulan* 太平御覽 from the Taiping 太平 reign period (976-984) of the Song dynasty, vol. 83, quoted in K.C. Chang, "Shang Shamans," *The Power of Culture: Studies in Chinese Cultural History*, ed. Willard J. Peterson, et al., p. 14.

<sup>19</sup> Chang, "Shang Shamans," 18.

<sup>20</sup> Ching, "Son of Heaven," 29.

<sup>21</sup> Herrlee Glessner Creel, *Confucius and the Chinese Way* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 113.

Archaeological excavations have uncovered many ritual artifacts of bronze and jade. The creation of such objects perhaps encouraged the improvement of technology during the dynasty.<sup>23</sup> Evidence of so many elaborate rituals and sacrifices reflects both the belief in the importance of appeasing spirit figures and also the abundance of deities and spirits worshipped by the Shang.

The Shang believed in a polytheistic cosmology, thus they worshipped numerous deities. Most of the spirit figures who were prominently honored were ancestors of the royal Zi clan. Oracle texts reveal that they could be classified into three basic groups: "semi-mythical ancestors, pre-dynastic kings, and dynastic kings and their families."<sup>24</sup> The last category seemed to grow the most throughout the dynasty. Nature spirits were also worshipped. The River, Mountain, Wind, Clouds, and other parts of nature were included in the pantheon. Besides these spirits, other figures that are more difficult to identify are also mentioned in oracle inscriptions. They include culture heroes and other subjects appropriated from popular myths or local cult legends.<sup>25</sup>

*Di* is found within the complex Shang royal pantheon. Within such a polytheistic society, what was it about *di* that made it more notable than the other beings that were worshipped? Most scholars assume that *di* is the "God" of the Shang people, especially because this theory is perpetuated by the use of *Shangdi* in place of *di* throughout later literature. *Shangdi* is often translated as "Lord on High."<sup>26</sup> In oracle bone texts, the term *Shangdi* is actually extremely rare. As mentioned above, only three examples have been cited. (Instead of having the same function as *di*, *Shangdi* could possibly have been a substitute for *xia shang* 下上, meaning "those below and above."<sup>27</sup>) The presupposition that *di* is the ultimate God is fueled by the modern usage of *di* which means "Supreme Being" or *Shangdi* which means "God."<sup>28</sup> However, scholars of ancient China should be wary of interchanging *Shangdi* for *di*.

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<sup>22</sup> Robert Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), 20.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>24</sup> Eno, *Masters*, 53.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>26</sup> Yao, 31.

<sup>27</sup> Eno, *Masters*, 105, n. 4.

<sup>28</sup> *Concise English-Chinese Chinese-English Dictionary* (Beijing: Oxford University Press and The Commercial Press, 1986), s.v. "*di*."

*Di* is in fact most likely the Shang high god or group of gods, but there are also other possibilities. Some arguments are based on the graphical appearance of the character *di* as written on the inscriptions. Most of these theories are more controversial and have less foundation for belief. They tend to be arbitrary as different scholars conceive varying ideas of how the words look. For example, Tōdō Akiyasu interprets the Shang graph for *di* 𠩺 as bound strings and cites the cognate *di* 締, meaning "tightly tied", for support.<sup>29</sup> Yeh Yusen claims the same graph to be a picture of a bundle of sticks to be used in a sacrificial fire, and points to the cognate *di* 𠩺.<sup>30</sup> Other interpretations abound concerning the same word. As Peter Boodberg observes, graphemic analysis is less reliable than investigating the phonetic relations between words in order to determine the root meanings.<sup>31</sup>

Another theory that is not so plausible is Shima Kunio's argument that *di* could refer to a sacrifice name. He assumes that the sacrifice name *di* 𠩺 is equivalent to 𠩺. Then he argues that as a deity, 𠩺 is the same as 𠩺. This type of reasoning, based on such indefinite "loan relationships" is too tenuous to be convincing.<sup>32</sup>

Some scholars hypothesize that *di* was a force of nature. Evidence for this argument is seen in *di*'s ability to control nature. Oracle bone texts describe it holding power over the weather and other elements of nature. *Di* seemed to share similar abilities with nature spirits, such as the River spirit, but *di*'s powers surpassed every other deity's. Some inscriptions show it reigning over other nature deities. Therefore, if *di* was a nature spirit, it was the greatest of all of them. However, such evidence that *di* was Nature or a part of nature does not necessarily prove this theory because royal ancestors also had the ability to influence the weather and harvest.<sup>33</sup>

The most persuasive argument is that *di* was a term that referred to an anthropomorphic god. Much evidence supports this position, but various theories surround this view as well. *Di* seemed more similar to an ancestral figure than a natural spirit. It played a parallel role to the ancestors. Nature deities appeared limited to influencing the natural world, while ancestral

<sup>29</sup> Tōdō Akiyasu, *Kanji gogen jiten* [Dictionary of the Origin of Chinese Characters] (Tokyo: Gakutei, 1965), 470f, quoted in Robert Eno, *Masters*, p. 108, n. 12.

<sup>30</sup> Li Xiaoding, *Jiagu wenzi jishi* [Collected Explanations of Oracle Text Characters] (Nanjing: Academia Sinica, 1965), 1:27-28, quoted in Robert Eno, *Masters*, 108, n. 12.

<sup>31</sup> Peter Boodberg, "Some Proleptical Remarks on the Evolution of Archaic Chinese," *Harvard Journal of Asian Studies* 2 (1937), 329-372, cited in Robert Eno, *Masters*, p. 108, n. 12.

<sup>32</sup> Eno, *Confucian Creation*, 183-4.

<sup>33</sup> Eno, *Masters*, 54.

deities had power over both nature and state proceedings. Like the royal ancestors, *di* was able to affect both natural and human affairs.<sup>34</sup> Infrequently, oracle texts even specifically name ancestors, such as "*wang di*" 王帝<sup>35</sup> or "king *Di(s)*,"<sup>36</sup> which refers collectively to a group of royal ancestors as *di*. Additional support for this concept of *di* is seen by examining the word *di* functioning in certain contexts as an honorific title for a deceased king, such as "*Di jia*" 帝甲 or "*Di ding*" 帝丁.<sup>37</sup> Eno demonstrates that combining this usage with the *di* graphemic family of words offers evidence that the "root meaning of *di* may have been tied to an image of a nuclear family unit, father, principal wife, and eldest son, a meaning which would strongly support a view of *Di* as an ancestral figure."<sup>38</sup> Other examples in texts portray *di* as anthropomorphic: "Xx day, divined, Ke inquired: we perform the *pin* 賓 ritual,/ make *di* descend...." This inscription describes *di* descending a mountain at the shaman's request,<sup>39</sup> suggesting that *di* can move like a human.

Certain scholars take this theory a step further by believing that *di* referred to a specific ancestor. Shirakawa Shizuka argues that *di* was seen as the first ancestor, but was still an abstract conception.<sup>40</sup> Ho Ping-ti [He Bingdi] maintains that *di* was the first Shang ancestor, Ku 嚳,<sup>41</sup> or denoted the high god or gods of the Shang.<sup>42</sup>

On the other hand, other scholars, such as David Keightley, believe that *di* could not have been an ancestor. Some oracle inscriptions show *di* threatening to destroy the Shang people. Chinese ancestors always depended on their descendants to present sacrifices to sustain their spirits. Therefore Keightley deduces that *di* could not have been an ancestor if it wanted to

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>35</sup> Lo Zhenyu, *Yinxu shuqi xubian* [Inscriptions from the Wastes of Yin: Supplementary Volume] (1993; Taipei reprint, n.d.), 4.34.7, quoted in Robert Eno, *Masters*, 56.

<sup>36</sup> Hu Houxuan, *Jigu xucun* [Further Preserved Oracle Texts] (Shanghai, 1955), 1.1594, quoted in Robert Eno, *Masters*, 56.

<sup>37</sup> Eno, *Masters*, 57.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>39</sup> Chang, "Shang Shamans," 19.

<sup>40</sup> Shirakawa Shizuka, *Jiaguwen di shijie* [The World of the Oracle Inscriptions] (translation of *Kokotsubun no sekai*) (Taipei: 1977), 55, quoted in Robert Eno, *Masters*, 55.

<sup>41</sup> Ho Ping-ti [He Bingdi], *The Cradle of the East* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1975), 329, quoted in Robert Eno, *Masters*, 55.

<sup>42</sup> Eno, *Confucian Creation*, 183.



annihilate the Shang state since it would thus be cutting off its source of sustenance.<sup>43</sup> Eno concurs with the possibility of this argument but wryly wonders "whether the king who divined about the destruction of his state was reasoning so well."<sup>44</sup>

Despite the controversy, most evidence leads to the conclusion that *di* was probably an anthropomorphic deity, or a group of gods. In certain contexts, *di* seems to function as a collective noun. For instance, in an example above, *wangdi* refers to a number of royal ancestors composing the body of *di*. Therefore, perhaps *di* denotes a group of kings. This theory remains questionable because *di* sometimes appears to be used in a parallel structure with single deities, whereas other times it is used with plural nouns.<sup>45</sup>

Regardless of whether *di* was a single or plural term, it still appeared to be a deity. What role then did *di* play in the complex Shang pantheon? Keightley believes that *di* was an impersonal bureaucratic deity that ruled supreme over the other gods and spirits. He views the Shang polytheism as being organized in a proto-bureaucracy with *di* as the monotheistic head.<sup>46</sup> This theory seems possible, especially as a parallel to the Chinese government structure. However, it fails to account for the absence of a command structure. Texts do not show orders being issued between the deities. On the other hand, a lack of evidence in the oracle inscriptions could be understandable since diviners would likely be less concerned about the communication between the spirits themselves than with a direct command from the deities to the people. An example of *di*'s interaction with humans is found in the *Shanhaijing* 山海經: "The *di* gave an order to Shu Hai. Shu Hai's right hand held [arithmetic chips]...."<sup>47</sup>

What was the relationship between *di* and the Shang people? Oracle texts show that *di* actively played a role in human affairs.<sup>48</sup> Kings would divine about a wide variety of issues, seeking *di*'s aid. Some inscriptions show that *di* appeared to answer the cries for help, while others reveal that *di* could also ignore these calls.<sup>49</sup> Eno believes that *di* referred to an

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<sup>43</sup> David N. Keightley, "Legitimization in Shang China," Manuscript (1975), 44-45, quoted in Robert Eno, *Masters*, 55.

<sup>44</sup> Eno, *Masters*, 55.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>46</sup> David N. Keightley, "The Religious Commitment: Shang Theology and the Genesis of Chinese Political Culture," *History of Religions* (1978), 219, quoted in Robert Eno, *Masters*, 58.

<sup>47</sup> Chang, "Shang Shamans," 14.

<sup>48</sup> Eno, *Confucian Creation*, 184.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 213, n. 33.

"intelligent force,"<sup>50</sup> but one that was unpredictable with "little or no sense of ethical regularity" to its action.<sup>51</sup> *Di* is portrayed as being a possible opponent to the people, and certain texts even show that *di* has the potential to destroy the Shang capital.<sup>52</sup> Attempting to appease *di*, people rendered service to it by obeying its commands.<sup>53</sup> The fact that their most important god or gods held power over nature reveals the concern of the Shang people for the harvest. They would worship and seek to please *di* in hopes of receiving blessings, such as abundant harvests, and of protecting themselves from harm, for example floods or natural disasters that could destroy their crops.

The blessings of *di* were believed to be gained only through the kings.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, the concept of *di* could have been used as a tool for legitimizing or garnering support for the rulers. The king, by instilling this belief that only he was capable of receiving the most powerful god(s)' blessings, created an invaluable role for himself. This incentive for submitting to the authority of the king would influence everyone's thinking, even that of the lowest peasants, as they sought to reap better harvests or to improve their lives through the blessings of *di*. The power and position of the king would be vindicated further if fortuitous events did occur, because then he could point to these events as evidence that he was fulfilling his obligations as the intermediary between the people and the spirits, which were supposedly the ones granting the good fortune.

In order to gain the favor of the deities, as explained above, the Shang offered numerous sacrifices to the various deities. Although the society was highly ritualized and the calendar of the government was dictated by the sacrifices, there is dispute as to whether or not *di* received sacrifices. It appears more popular to assume that *di*, as the supreme god above the other spirits which seemed to have received sacrifices, was given offerings as well. However, lack of evidence provides the basis for the argument that *di* did not receive any sacrifices. Shima Kunio cites five occurrences in texts where people supposedly offered sacrifices to *di*.<sup>55</sup> Eno disputes Kunio, and sees only one plausible example found in *Kufang* 1738: "Cracks made on *wuxu*:

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<sup>50</sup> Eno, *Masters*, 106, n. 5.

<sup>51</sup> Eno, *Confucian Creation*, 213, n. 32.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 212, n. 25.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 213, n. 33.

<sup>54</sup> Yao, 31.

<sup>55</sup> Shima Kunio, *Yinxu buci yanjiu* [Studies on Oracle Texts from the Wastes of Yin] (translation of *Inkyo bokuji kenkyū*; Taipei: Dingwen, 1975) (1958), 195-97, quoted in Robert Eno, *Masters*, 115.

perhaps a prayer-ritual for harvest to *di*.”<sup>56</sup> Yet, Eno continues to argue that this interpretation is ambiguous because the inscription could continue after the break in the bone fragment. Even if this example did refer to an offering to *di*, more instances are necessary to show that this was not an anomalous occurrence. Eno offers the opinion that perhaps the *di* in this text represents a specific ancestor or that the inscriber did not know to which deity the divination was addressed.<sup>57</sup> Another theory suggests that even if offerings were not made directly to *di*, perhaps sacrifices were symbolically received on the deity’s behalf through a royal ancestor who was worshipped beside *di*.<sup>58</sup> This idea has little evidence to support it. *Di* does not appear to have been the subject of sacrifice in oracle texts, though this issue is disputable.<sup>59</sup>

One reason for the ambiguity of *di* is that the meanings of this term varied with different uses and religious and political trends. Robert Eno argues that *di* “possessed no fixed form, could never have been cast as images in bronze or gold, could never be worshipped as” as an idol.<sup>60</sup> This does not mean that *di* was necessarily an abstract deity but that its meaning changed according to contexts or other factors throughout the estimated six hundred years of the Shang dynasty. It seems likely that research can still draw a number of probable conclusions about *di*, such as the fact that it is an anthropomorphic deity, or group of gods, that held great power and influence. At the very least, in the common thread that runs through the numerous diverse contexts in which *Di* is used, there is always a sense of reverence and honor that is connoted by the term.<sup>61</sup>

Perhaps one reason for the ambiguity of *di* and the complexity of the spirits worshipped by the Shang is that the rulers used a “process of religious co-optation” by which they incorporated deities from the conquered tribes in order to gain influence over the new people.<sup>62</sup> By consolidating and augmenting deities from each tribe, they sought to unite the expanding polity as one people with kindred beliefs.

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<sup>56</sup> Fang Falian (Frank H. Chalfant) and Bo Ruihua (Roswell S. Britton), *Kufang ershi cang jiaguwen buci* [*The Couling-Chalfant Collection of Inscribed Oracle Bones*] (Shanghai: 1935; Taipei reprint, 1966), cited by Shima Kunio. Quoted in Robert Eno, *Masters*, 115-6.

<sup>57</sup> Eno, *Masters*, 116.

<sup>58</sup> Ching, “Son of Heaven,” 31.

<sup>59</sup> Eno, *Confucian Creation*, 184.

<sup>60</sup> Eno, *Masters*, 48.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>62</sup> Eno, *Confucian Creation*, 209, n. 4.

## *Tian*

Another ambiguous term that could have been involved in the "religious cooptation" of the Three Dynasties is *tian*. Scholars argue whether or not *tian* was a part of the Shang pantheon. Many assume that *tian* was a part of Chinese beliefs since the earliest records. Shima Kunio is one such advocate for the position that the Shang used this term *tian*. He makes an interesting case for this idea in his theory concerning the relationship between 𠄎, 乘, and 禾.<sup>63</sup> But, as explained above, his argument lacks convincing evidence and raises many unanswered questions.<sup>64</sup>

Herrlee Creel makes a persuasive case, attacking claims by some scholars that *tian* is found in Shang inscriptions. In contrast to Zhou literature, which contains both *di* and *tian*, Shang texts do not include a single occurrence of *tian*.<sup>65</sup> Sun Haibo published a list of twelve forms that he interpreted as references to *tian* in the Shang inscriptions.<sup>66</sup> Jin Xianghong followed Sun's list with an additional nine citations.<sup>67</sup> Certain scholars agree that these examples indeed refer to *tian* while other scholars, such as Dong Zuobin,<sup>68</sup> Qi Sihe, and Chen Mengjia, side with Creel's conclusion that *tian* never occurs in Shang texts.<sup>69</sup>

Such controversy over whether or not *tian* is found in literature before the Zhou is a result of the difficulties of interpreting handwriting. Because Shang and Zhou texts are inscribed by hand, each character is unique to varying degrees. In the Western Zhou bronze inscriptions, the character *tian* is written in a wide variety of forms, such as 𠄎, 𠄎, 𠄎, and 𠄎. By the end of the Zhou dynasty, the character had evolved into 天.<sup>70</sup> There exist at least twenty-six occurrences of the characters that Sun Haibo and other scholars have distinguished as *tian* in the Shang inscriptions which do in fact share a resemblance with each other and with the *tian* found in Zhou texts.<sup>71</sup> As seen in the examples, variations of the characters could be caused by the

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 183-4.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 183-6.

<sup>65</sup> Creel, *Origins of Statecraft*, 495.

<sup>66</sup> Sun Haibo, *Jiagu Wen Bian* (Beijing: 1934), 1.1ab, cited in Herrlee G. Creel, *Origins of Statecraft*, 495.

<sup>67</sup> Jin Xianghong, *Xu Jiagu Wen Bian* (Taipei: 1959), 1.1ab, cited in Herrlee G. Creel, *Origins of Statecraft*, 495.

<sup>68</sup> Creel, *Origins of Statecraft*, 496.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 496, n. 12.

<sup>70</sup> Guo Moruo, *Liangzhou Jinwen Ci Daxi Lubian* (Tokyo: 1935), 17b, 55a, 56b, 256a, quoted in Herrlee G. Creel, *Origins of Statecraft*, p. 496, n. 13.

<sup>71</sup> Creel, *Origins of Statecraft*, 496-7.

whim of the inscriber who might add or omit a line, for example, because there was no strict convention of forms.

Interpretation of the forms of the characters can be subjective. Therefore, besides only analyzing their appearance, one must also keep in mind the contexts in which the characters are found. By investigating the contexts, one realizes that in most of the cases, the character that resembles *tian* would actually be more logically translated as *da* 大, meaning big or great, rather than *tian*. For example, a Shang city is called *Da Yi Shang* 大邑商, which means "the Great City Shang," and seems more appropriate than interpreting the phrase as *Tian Yi Shang*.<sup>72</sup> In the other contexts, the suspect character can refer to a place name or other meanings. Even if interpreted as *tian*, none of the characters can provide convincing evidence that *tian* was a Shang deity.<sup>73</sup> The Shang did not have the concept of *tian* as a deity until they were conquered by the Zhou people.

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<sup>72</sup> Chen Mengjia, *Yinxu Buci Zongshu* (Beijing: 1956), 255-7, quoted in Herrlee G. Creel, *Origins of Statecraft*, 498.

<sup>73</sup> Creel, *Origins of Statecraft*, 499-501.

## Zhou Dynasty (c.1122-256 B.C.)

### *Di*

With the Zhou conquest came the beginning of a new history. Traditional history describes a decisive battle at Muye in 1122 B.C., but the actual conquest over the Shang probably lasted over a number of years.<sup>74</sup> The Shang dynasty was overthrown by tribesmen from the West, led by the Zhou people who set up the Zhou dynasty.<sup>75</sup> Because the victors conquered a large portion of North China, it was extremely difficult to govern the territory, especially because these warriors were considered "rude tribesmen" who lacked the political experience necessary for administering the land as a centralized state. Meanwhile, hostile people in the east surrounded the Zhou state, so that the vassals had to walk a delicate line in obeying the king, cooperating with other vassals, and appeasing their subjects in order to maintain support and peace from the majority of sources.<sup>76</sup>

The conquest, with the various difficulties of governing that came with it, marked not only a new period of history but also an incorporation of the past. Zhou rulers needed methods to control the people, especially as royal authority came into question with the death of the first Zhou king a few years after the conquest of the Shang. His son succeeded him, but he was too young to rule. As the empire began to show signs of instability, the Duke of Zhou, the uncle of the new king, took control as regent.<sup>77</sup> In order to gain the support of the people, the Duke led a mass propaganda campaign.

One approach of the campaign recalled the Shang method of "religious cooptation" through which they accepted the religious beliefs of subjugated tribes for the purpose of assimilating and winning control over the conquered people.<sup>78</sup> Incorporating deities from new tribes helped to unite the people by providing them with common spiritual beliefs and identities. This process worked in two ways: first, religious cooptation enabled the conquered people to feel that they were a more equal part of the polity, rather than merely vanquished subjects;

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<sup>74</sup> Watson, xxv.

<sup>75</sup> Herrlee G. Creel, *Chinese Thought from Confucius to Mao Tse-tung* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 10.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, *Confucius*, 13.

<sup>77</sup> Creel, *Chinese Thought*, 10.

<sup>78</sup> Eno, *Confucian Creation*, 209, n. 4.

second, adopting the additional deities provided the victorious citizens with new objects of worship, perhaps even giving them incentive to communicate with the Shang either to ask about the new deities or to share the changing religious experiences together. In such ways, the Zhou strategized to ease the incorporation of the Shang people into the Zhou realm and mesh the different groups by adopting the Shang deity, *di*.

A preliminary glance at Zhou literature suggests that *di* was a fundamental term in the Zhou dynasty. The literature refers to *di* without any particular explanation, as if to give the impression that the term had always been native to the Zhou people. (An example of this type of Zhou literature is found in the inscription that is quoted at the beginning of this paper.) However, a comparison of the numbers of references to *di* and to *tian* reveals an interesting contrast. Zhou writings contain dramatically more references to *tian* than to *di*, suggesting that *di* was not originally a Zhou deity. For example, in the *Shijing* 詩經 (*Book of Poetry*), there are 140 occurrences of *tian*, still including 118 references if one disregards the twenty-two in the royal title, "Son of Heaven." In contrast, *di* or *Shangdi* is named only 43 times.<sup>79</sup> The *Shujing* (*Classic of Documents*) also demonstrates this disparity as it includes 116 references to *tian* but only twenty-five mentions of *di* or *Shangdi*. Western Zhou bronze inscriptions, which include 91 occurrences of *tian* in comparison to four examples of *di* or *Shangdi*, as well as various other Zhou writings that discuss *tian*, also show a scarcity of references to *di*. Shang inscriptions, on the other hand, do not include any mentions of *tian*.<sup>80</sup> By combining both *di* and *tian* into the Zhou religious system, the rulers sought to unite the people despite the difference in spiritual beliefs.

In analyzing the examples of Zhou literature that includes both *di* and *tian*, one should note that a significant number of the contexts are speeches in which the Duke of Zhou is speaking to the Shang people. His syntax demonstrates his use of propaganda, indicating his attempts to assimilate the conquered people. For example, he calls both the Shang and the Zhou officials "many officers" to suggest that they are all one group.<sup>81</sup> He uses *tian* and *di* as synonyms, and even combines both terms by naming *Huang Tian Shangdi* 皇天上帝 (August Heaven Shangdi). One hypothesis for his intermixing of the two terms could be that he was

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<sup>79</sup> Creel, *Origins of Statecraft*, 494.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 495.

confusing the words. However, the previously mentioned absence of *di* in the Zhou period, along with the Duke's skill in speech, more strongly supports the theory that he tried to unite the Shang with the Zhou people. He had political motives when using such terms for the deity.<sup>82</sup>

### *Tian*

Another goal of the propaganda campaign, which continues to mislead people even today, was to legitimize the Zhou conquest and the ruler's authority. This aspect of the propaganda campaign required the rewriting of history. Tactics attempted to portray the Zhou as having liberated the Shang people from their "wicked" rulers.<sup>83</sup> The Zhou rulers thus created a new version of history, claiming that both the Xia and Shang dynasties had good rulers in the beginning but that the oppressive kings at the end led to the downfall of the states. According to the revised history, "Heaven" gave its "mandate", a decree to revolt and establish a new dynasty.<sup>84</sup> The *Zuozhuan* 左傳 records the "Hymns of Zhou," a poem that lauds the founders of Zhou for vanquishing the "darkness of Shang": "Glorious is the king's army;/ he reared it up out of darkness."<sup>85</sup>

Shang records reveal a different history. Research shows that the accusations of wickedness of the last kings of the former dynasties are false. In fact, the last Shang king was not a profligate and was actually quite particular in performing religious rituals.<sup>86</sup> Apparently the Zhou altered the truth of history to an extent for their political purposes.

The concept of the "Mandate of Heaven" (*Tianming*) 天命 was essential to Chinese governance. According to this belief, the ruler of China maintained a sacred relationship with the highest deity which granted him the right to his authority. The ruler had to act for the benefit of the people's welfare. But if he failed to preserve his virtue then Heaven would appoint another person to overthrow and replace him. The Zhou used this idea of the Mandate of Heaven as the basis for justifying their conquest. The Duke of Zhou repeatedly reminded the Shang

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 500.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 493.

<sup>83</sup> Creel, *Confucius*, 13.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>85</sup> Watson, 88.

<sup>86</sup> Creel, *Chinese Thought*, 16.



people that *tian* had bestowed its Mandate on the founders of each dynasty.<sup>87</sup> Although most likely it was the Zhou who firmly established this concept,<sup>88</sup> it is probable that the Shang already believed in ruling by divine right.<sup>89</sup> Evidence for the latter theory is suggested as the reason why the Duke of Zhou promulgated the idea of the Mandate of Heaven—because the Shang would be more likely to obey if they already believed in the concept.

As explained above, the position of the king as the grand mediator between the spiritual realm and the earth was established as early as the Shang dynasty. Beginning in the Zhou period, the supremacy of the king was further sanctioned by the title "Son of Heaven" (*Tianzi*) 天子.<sup>90</sup> The Zhou promoted this more intimate relationship between king and deity in order to legitimize the king's rule.

Although widely used during the Zhou dynasty as a single word or in phrases, the term *tian* was ambiguous—as demonstrated by its diversity of functions. The term evolved over time and changed in meaning. *Tian* began, with the start of the Zhou period, as a metaphysical and religious idea. *Tian* originally only referred to an anthropomorphic religious being, almost like a great "man in the sky" as the character seemed to depict. It became a definite deity that chose the recipient of the Mandate. This concept of *tian* is the same one that is referred to in the phrase "Son of Heaven" (*Tianzi*).<sup>91</sup> (Note that there is no such close relationship between the Shang king and *di*, no "son of *Di*", indicating a difference between *tian* and *di*.) Towards the middle of the Zhou dynasty, *tian* was being viewed more philosophically, and by the time of the Eastern Zhou, when the Hundred Schools were flourishing, there was a diversity of uses and meanings of *tian*, some of which were being debated among the philosophers.

Depending on the context, *tian* had different meanings. Besides most commonly meaning a supreme deity, *tian* could also refer to a type of fate or providence since it dictated the destiny of "all under heaven." *Tian* was sometimes defined as the heavens or a "group of ancestral kings." At least one characteristic of it that tended to endure was that it was an "object of great religious reverence and the focus of Zhou dynasty aristocratic religious practice."<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Creel, *Origins of Statecraft*, 493.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>89</sup> Creel, *Chinese Thought*, 15.

<sup>90</sup> Ching, "Son of Heaven," 15.

<sup>91</sup> Creel, *Origins of Statecraft*, 501.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 493.

The complex view of *tian* was too difficult to be systematized in a set doctrine, especially since the term continued to change in meaning. However, some philosophers have tried to explain the concept of *tian*.

Confucius was one of the most influential thinkers during the Zhou dynasty who taught doctrine on *tian*. It is interesting to note that he never mentions *di*,<sup>93</sup> but includes *tian* in many of his discourses. "At fifty I knew the Mandate of Heaven (*Tianming*)."<sup>94</sup> Confucius believed that he understood the "Mandate of Heaven," meaning the "decree of God, which determines the course of one's life, or the rise and fall of the moral order", or moral destiny.<sup>95</sup> He held confidence in Heaven's protection and power in his life: "Heaven produced virtue that is in me; what can Huan Tui do to me?"<sup>96</sup> "But if it is the will of Heaven that this culture should not perish, what can the people of Kuang do to me?"<sup>97</sup> When accused of doing wrong, he swore for Heaven to bear witness to his innocence: "If I have said or done anything wrong, may Heaven forsake me!"<sup>98</sup> While some of his quotes seem to indicate a possible belief in an anthropomorphic god, others of his sayings may support the idea that Heaven is more of an impersonal force that is identified with rules or Nature: "Does Heaven (*Tian*, Nature) say anything? The four seasons run their course and all things are produced."<sup>99</sup>

Such seeming confusion in Confucius' teachings reflects the ambiguity that had always been associated with the term *tian*. Confucians took advantage of these ambiguities to employ the term as they desired. Eno argues that the flexibility of *tian*, because of the transitory character of its meanings, paralleled the versatility that Confucianists tried to teach. Their goal was to "endow the individual with the skills needed to function in an ethical universe." Realizing that a diversity of things in the world can teach knowledge, they wanted to "synthesize the skills that could bring the world into natural order."<sup>100</sup> The ambiguities associated with *tian* are important in demonstrating that *tian* was a diverse range of things, for example, the sky,

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<sup>93</sup> Creel, *Confucius*, 116.

<sup>94</sup> "The Analects," Wing-tsit Chan, trans., *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 22, 2:4.

<sup>95</sup> Wing-tsit Chan, trans., *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 23.

<sup>96</sup> "The Analects," 32, 7:22.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 35, 9:5.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 31, 6:26.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 47, 17:19.

spirits, and holy altar.<sup>101</sup> By teaching people through an educational system that allowed its students to learn new ideas themselves, Confucianism sought to teach a broad variety of skills.<sup>102</sup> Therefore, *tian's* ambiguity reflects the Confucian search in life for skill mastery and Sagehood.<sup>103</sup>

Xunzi is another philosopher who developed his own ideas about *tian*. "When a star falls or a tree calls out, the people of the state are all terrified. They say, 'What is this?' I say: This is nothing. This is an [innocuous] change of Heaven and Earth, the transformation of *yin* and *yang*, or the presence of a material anomaly..."<sup>104</sup> Xunzi, reacting against the popular philosophy which tended to value Heaven and fear omens, believed that anomalies such as occurrences in nature are actually normal. People's behavior does not affect Heaven's patterns.<sup>105</sup> He taught that Heaven remains immutable, unmoved by human actions. "Heaven does not stop winter because people dislike cold; Earth does not stop its expansiveness because people dislike great distances.... Heaven has a constant Way."<sup>106</sup> Despite *tian's* lack of influence in people's lives, it was Heaven that established the Earth and gave people the abilities to understand nature and live properly:

Love, hate, delight, anger, sorrow, and joy are stored within. These are called the Heavenly emotions. The ear, eye, nose, mouth, and body can each sense [objects] but their abilities are not interchangeable. These are called the Heavenly faculties. The heart... is called the Heavenly lord.<sup>107</sup>

Xunzi still felt that *tian* is relevant to people's lives. His interest in rituals demonstrates such a belief because the Sage Kings who created a code of rituals for people to follow based their rules on their understanding of the "Way of Heaven."<sup>108</sup>

Besides Confucius and Xunzi, many other philosophers during the Eastern Zhou period, such as Mencius, Zhuangzi, and Mozi, also sought the meaning of *tian*. A parallel can be suggested between the philosophers' quest and the goal of the Zhou kings. The Zhou kings used

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<sup>100</sup> Eno, *Confucian Creation*, 8.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 172-3.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>104</sup> Paul Rakita Goldin, *Rituals of the Way: The Philosophy of Xunzi* (Chicago and La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1999), 47.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 50-1.

their intimate relationships to *tian* to justify their rule, protecting themselves from possible allegations that they overthrew previous rulers unfairly. By studying *tian*, perhaps the philosophers were trying to validate their own authority. During the Hundred Schools period, with so many philosophers contending for the attention of rulers and disciples, one possible method they used to support their teachings was through demonstrating their closeness to the understanding of *tian*.<sup>109</sup> Perhaps this is why Confucius "was called the sovereign without a kingdom."<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>109</sup> For more information on views of *tian* as held by various philosophers, see Fung Yulan's *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* and *The Spirit of Chinese Philosophy*. Other research can be found in studies by David L. Hall, Roger T. Ames, and Julia Ching.

<sup>110</sup> Paul Gernet, *China and the Christian Impact* (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1985), 199.

## Han Dynasty (c. 206 B.C-220 A.D.)

### *Di*

By the Han dynasty, both *di* and *tian* were often used. The two terms retained most of their earlier meanings, but they also continued to change and expand in their definitions and uses. *Di* continued to be a form of divinity, still viewed as an anthropomorphic god. At this time, *di* should be most often translated as "god." John S. Major and Edward Schafer both sometimes also translate *di* as "thearch," especially when it refers to specific persons such as the Supreme Thearch (*Shangdi* 上帝), the Yellow Thearch (*Huangdi* 皇帝), or to idealized rulers such as emperors. Major believes that "thearch captures well the character of ancient Chinese thought wherein divinities might be (simultaneously and without internal contradiction) high gods, mythical/divine rulers, or deified royal ancestors: beings of enormous import, straddling the numinous and the mundane."<sup>111</sup> Such a translation in certain cases appropriately includes the various nuances encompassing *di*, allowing more meaning than simply "god."

*Di* was still sometimes considered "the great god," but as a single term, there were increasing cases in which it no longer referred to the supreme being that it did in the earlier dynasties. By the Han, it seemed to have been demoted to often meaning "god" or "group of gods," like *zhongdi* 眾帝 ("the many gods").<sup>112</sup> When the author wanted to refer specifically to the high god, *di* usually became a prefix or suffix in a deity's name, such as *Shangdi*. *Di* usually applied to male divinities, whereas the great goddesses were either designated by the stopgap names of *Nü* 女, *Huang* 皇, or *E* 娥, or else by name alone.<sup>113</sup>

Both the earlier concepts of *di*, along with the newer ideas, are demonstrated in the early Western Han book, *Huainanzi* 淮南子. For example chapter three, entitled *Tianwenxun* 天文訓 ("The Treatise on the Patterns of Heaven"), describes various thearchs. "Anciently Gong Gong and Zhuan Xu fought [with each other], each seeking to become the Thearch."<sup>114</sup> This seems to show that *di* could be a single divinity whose position could be contested. Such a position that

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<sup>111</sup> John S. Major, *Heaven and Earth in Early Han Thought: Chapters Three, Four, and Five of the "Huainanzi"* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 18.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

could be disputed departed from the grander image of *di* from the earlier dynasties. The supreme *di* was previously held in such high esteem that it did not seem attainable by anyone, whether the possible contenders were mythical or human, to the extent that there is no mention of anyone trying to gain the position. *Di* existed independently and incorporated into itself any worthy ancestor that it desired.

In another section, the *Huainanzi* discusses how "the Celestial Thearch (*di* 帝) stretches out over the four weft-cords of Heaven...."<sup>115</sup> Here, *di* refers to the God of the Pivot, specifically the star Kochab (beta Ursa Minoris). It was the brightest star near the north pole.<sup>116</sup> Thus, *di* can be seen as referring to one specific god with a limited yet distinguished charge, such as over a star.

The *Huainanzi* includes another new meaning of *di*, found in the reference to *Huangdi*. "The Center is Earth. Its god is the Yellow Thearch (*Huangdi*)."<sup>117</sup> In this case, *di* is used as a suffix in *Huangdi*. Although powerful, *Huangdi* seemed to be just another divinity, like one of the gods of the five planets along with *Tai Hao*, the god of the east,<sup>118</sup> and *Shao Hao*, the god of the west. *Di* is used many times as part of deities' names. For example, "The South is Fire. Its god is *Yan Di* 嚴帝."<sup>119</sup> *Di* therefore, in these cases, is just the suffix in names of planetary gods, indicating that these figures are deities.

The scarcity of references to a supreme being is demonstrated in the *Shanhaijing* 山海經 ("The Classic of Mountains and Seas"). This Han text describes numerous gods, goddesses, and other forms of divinities with various appellations, functions, and characteristics. There are lesser divinities such as *shen* 神, *ling* 靈, *shenren* 神人 ("god-human") who appear to be divine humans, *gui* 鬼 who are ghostly divinities, and *shi* 屍 that denote corpse deities.<sup>120</sup> However, no single high god is depicted at length, while several deities known as the great god share equal status. Some passages refer to a *di* deity, which could likely be a supreme god, but they do not

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<sup>113</sup> Anne Birrell, trans., *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* (New York: Penguin, 1999), xxv.

<sup>114</sup> Major, 62.

<sup>115</sup> Major, 106.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>120</sup> Birrell, 225.

further identify it. The next closest to a paramount being is the great god *Jun* 君 ("Foremost"),<sup>121</sup> but he is not "God Almighty."<sup>122</sup> He is mentioned most often in Book Fourteen,<sup>123</sup> but does not play a significant role in other classical texts.<sup>124</sup>

Also within the *Shanhaijing* readers can find another function of *di*—as an indicator of a divine or religious relation, although not necessarily to the supreme god. *Di* is used within holy place names, such as *Di zhi mi du* 帝之秘都 ("God's Secret City")<sup>125</sup> and *Di zhi xia du* 帝之下都 ("Great God's City on Earth Below"),<sup>126</sup> that are identified with deities or shamans.

### *Tian*

Like the term *di*, *tian* can also be found in some of the same documents preserving certain of its original meanings while adding on new concepts. During the Han dynasty, *tian* still often referred to the earlier definitions of "Heaven," an overarching sky, or a non-anthropomorphic divinity. The *Huainanzi* demonstrates both various older and newer meanings of *tian*. Even the title of chapter three, *Tianwenxun*, reflects the ambiguous and multiple definitions of *tian*, as it includes discussions ranging on astronomy, astrology, cosmogony, and cosmology.

In this chapter, especially as it explains the creation of the universe, there are examples of *tian* as a physical sky:

When Heaven and Earth were yet unformed,  
.....  
Therefore Heaven was completed first, and Earth fixed afterwards.  
The conjoined essences of Heaven and Earth produced yin and yang.  
.....  
To Heaven belong the sun, moon, stars, and planets;  
To Earth belong waters and floods, dust and soil.  
Heaven's pillars broke, the cords of Earth snapped.  
Heaven tilted in the northwest, and thus  
The sun and moon, stars and planets shifted in that direction.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>127</sup> Major, 62.

In the above passage, clearly "Heaven" (*tian*) is something similar to the physical sky or heavens, filled with the sun, moon, and planets. It is something that is created—not something that creates. *Tian* here is at least not a divinity or person. (It should be kept in mind that this description of the cosmogonic process is also influenced by the Huang-Lao philosophy, and thus includes the description of Heaven's pillars.<sup>128</sup> The insertion of Huang-Lao ideas into cosmology is seen in the next section, which discusses Yin 陰 and Yang 陽: "The Dao of Heaven is called the Circular;/... The unbalanced qi of Heaven, becoming perturbed, causes wind....")<sup>129</sup>

Whether or not *tian* is the physical sky, it is geographical and at least appears to be an actual realm that can be measured:

Heaven has nine fields and 9,999 junctures.

It is 150,000 li distant from the earth.

There are five planets, eight winds, and twenty-eight lunar lodges.

There are five offices and six departments.

These are called the Purple Palace, the Great Enclosure, the Chariot Pole, the Pool of Xian, the Four Guardians, and the Heavenly Slope.<sup>130</sup>

*Tian* is a vast domain that includes planets and palaces.<sup>131</sup> "Heaven is round, Earth is square...."<sup>132</sup> It is a physical enough realm to have an actual shape, just like the Earth.

The *Huainanzi* is not unique in its description of *tian*. Some of the passages of the *Huainanzi* are similar to sections of the "*Tianwen*" 天問 chapter of the *Chuci* 楚辭: "Around turn the cords on the pivot of Heaven;/ Eight pillars are the buttresses;/ Spread out are the nine fields of Heaven/ With their numerous edges and angles./ The Heavens mesh with the twelve;/ Sun and moon bond, and the asterisms line up."<sup>133</sup> *Tian* is likewise described as a heavenly place. Various sections of the *Huainanzi* describe "the heavens as a kind of celestial imperial metropolis, with palaces and gardens for the emperor and his empress and concubines, and

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 64-65.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 63.



buildings for the imperial functionaries."<sup>134</sup> Such a depiction of Heaven enforces the growing idea of the divinities having a bureaucratic hierarchy and system like that of humans.

Other places named include the "Heavenly Slope [that] is the gate-tower of the assembled gods."<sup>135</sup> *Tian* is used in this case to mean heavenly, and can be thus employed in other phrases as a modifier indicating a heavenly relation. However, there appears to be more than one "Heaven": "The Southern Limit penetrates upward to the Vermilion Heaven."<sup>136</sup> If there are various heavens, then *tian* could not only refer to all of Heaven, but also to sections within Heaven or to different heavens.

Even within the same chapter of the *Huainanzi*, various other passages use *tian* differently and with more ambiguous meaning. "The natures of the rulers of men penetrate to Heaven on high./... The four seasons are the officers of Heaven./ The sun and moon are the agents of Heaven./ The stars and planets mark the appointed times of Heaven./ Rainbows and comets are the portents of Heaven."<sup>137</sup> Here, the *Huainanzi* moves from depicting a more physical and passive (in the sense that it does not do the "acting" or creating) *tian* to an even more cosmological view of *tian* in which it seems like a high celestial body. In this passage, *tian* could still be a realm, though it is beginning to also sound like a dictating figure that that does not speak yet still communicates with people.

Such a meaning of *tian* as a personage helps explain the royal title, *Tianzi* 天子 ("Son of Heaven"). *Tianzi* usually refers to the human emperor who is so closely associated with divinity that his title links his origins to "Heaven." He was the human paramount ruler. Known as *Tianzi*, he and his subjects were always reminded that his authority was supposedly given by the divine. He was regarded so sacredly that he was viewed as a demigod. Myths even claimed divine origin for the dynastic lines, creating a nearly supernatural power for the emperor. However, it seems unlikely that the scholar class actually believed these creative legends. Yet he was still in a unique position, connecting the populace to divinity. "On the one hand he was the special object of Heaven's beneficence and protective care, and, on the other hand, he alone was worthy to express to Heaven in prayer and sacrifice both the gratitude and the needs of

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<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

mankind."<sup>138</sup> A description of the *tian* divine realm in the *Huainanzi* includes the statement that "the Grand Enclosure (*taiwei* 太圍) is the hall of the Son of Heaven."<sup>139</sup> This passage either raises the human ruler to a higher status of actually having a place of rule or of living in the heavens or else implies there may be another "Son of Heaven" who is actually in Heaven. Either way, this text reinforces the authority of the government, supporting the emperor whether by claiming that he has a right to be in Heaven or else that he, like the rest of the bureaucracy, is mirroring the system of government in Heaven.

Both the government and certain philosophers supported the concept of "a continuity between Heaven and humanity (*tianren heyi* 天人和一)."<sup>140</sup> In government-supported Confucianism, the relationship between *tian* and man was familial, as seen in the title *Tianzi*. *Tian* was viewed as the ancestral progenitor of human beings, the apex of the hierarchical familial relationship and also the model for the human ruler of humanity.

The identification of the high ancestors of humanity with *tian*, an ambiguous term encompassing a deity and the physical sky, blurs categories that usually separate the human world from the natural world. This connection between such different areas is reflected by the notion of *qi* 氣, "vital energy," which is a familiar term in Chinese cosmology. *Qi* constitutes every part of the physical world, linking all persons with the rest of their environment. Thus, according to D. C. Lau and Roger T. Ames, the reason why the Chinese classics do not address the issue of how such ambiguous notions as *tian* are just described and not really explained is that the goal of such texts as the *Lunyu* 論語 (*Analects*) and the *Daodejing* 道德經 is not to provide a comprehensive explanation of the world. It is rather to provide guidance in how people should interact with the phenomena around them.

The philosophers perhaps believed that it was more important to know how to relate with others than to understand the conditions in the world.<sup>141</sup> Such a context provides another interpretation of *tian* in the *Huainanzi*. In *Yuandao* 原道 ("Tracing the 'Dao' to Its Source"), the philosophical opening treatise of the *Huainanzi*, the focus is on distinguishing between *tian* and the human:

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<sup>138</sup> D. Howard Smith, "Divine Kingship in Ancient China," *Numen* 4 (1957): 202.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>140</sup> D. C. Lau and Roger T. Ames, *Yuan Dao: Tracing Dao to Its Source* (New York: Ballantine, 1998), 29.

By "Heaven" is meant  
Pure unadulterated like uncarved wood and undyed silk,  
Original simplicity and sheer whiteness,  
Which has never been admixed with anything else.  
By 'man' is meant  
Studying each other and exercising one's knowledge and presuppositions,  
Being crafty and deceptive to others,  
In order to get on in the world  
And to be able to deal with the vulgar.  
.....  
Those who follow Heaven ramble about with dao,  
Whereas those who accede to man have dealings with the vulgar.<sup>142</sup>

*Tian* here refers to the natural world and the natural conditions in which man exists, while man seems to signify the opposite, being the source of "the unnatural preoccupations which disturb both the person and the environment."<sup>143</sup> *Tian* can be understood sometimes as representing *tiandi* 天地, "heaven and earth," or "the autogenerative and self-sustaining world."<sup>144</sup> This section teaches people how to be in harmony with the rest of the world, depicting different relations between humans and the natural world.

As various texts show how people were supposed to relate to others, they collapse the boundaries between the human and natural worlds. David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames explain how they believe *tian* is contiguous to humanity: "*Tian* is an articulated and patterned sky: *wen* 文. *Tian* is thus defined as the 'day' and the 'skies' under which culture accumulates.... Significantly, there is a continuity between the articulation of nature generally (*tianwen* 天文 or *tianli* 天理), and the inscription of human culture (*wenhua* 文化 or *wenxue* 文學)." This "unwillingness to separate time from matter" results in a lack of division between the active and passive material. For instance, the terms *ziran* 自然 and *tiandi* 天地 do not simply refer to "nature" and the "world," but actually express an active ongoing process of change. Such a concept of an active world leads to the absence of any "final boundary between the sentient and insentient, animate and inanimate, living and lifeless...."<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking from the Han: Self, truth, and transcendence in Chinese and Western culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 241.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

Other boundaries, such as between the real and unreal, were also blurred. Especially during the Han period, it was not unusual for terms to have multiple meanings or for things to be both real and fantastic. One example is found in descriptions of the Kunlun Mountains 崑崙. In chapter four of the *Huainanzi*, called *Dixingxun* 地形訓 ("The Treatise on Topography"), it is written of Kunlun: "Yu also took expanding earth to fill in the great flood, making the great mountains./ He excavated the wastelands of Kunlun to make level ground./... Atop the heights of Kunlun are tree-like cereal plants thirty-five feet tall..."<sup>146</sup> The *Tianwen* also gives an account of Kunlun: "On Mt. Kunlun rests the Hanging Garden...;/ Its terraced walls are many-tiered...;/ There are gates in the four directions..."<sup>147</sup> Based on extensive pre-Han and Han literature describing the Kunlun Mountains, there appear to be two main definitions of Kunlun. "It is the world-mountain or *axis mundi*, the pillar that at once separates and connects heaven and earth. As such it is the highest of mountains, the terrestrial plane's closest approach, and stepping-stone, to the celestial vault." But at the same time, "Kunlun is a paradise, a magical and beautiful land that is the home and kingdom of Xiwangmu, the Queen Mother of the West."<sup>148</sup> Adding even more confusion to the accounts of Kunlun is that the Kunlun Mountains are a real mountain range in northwest China. The *Shanhaijing* at least seems to try to solve this problem by making a distinction between the Kunlun "beyond the Great Wasteland" and the one "within the seas." Yet, the text immediately blurs the distinction again by characterizing the latter as 'the earthly capital of the Supreme Thearch.'<sup>149</sup> Thus during the Han, the Kunlun Mountains were both terrestrial and mythical, causing the two ideas to be fused as one. It was not unusual for mythical qualities to become attached to real but distant places.

Perhaps this tendency was partly driven by the Han quest for immortality and paradise. Therefore, certain far-away places were idealized, since people imagined them to be distant enough to still seem exotic and unknown, yet close enough possibly to be reached. Another reason may be due to a common trait among most ancient cultures in which myths abounded. As people desired to understand the world around them, they took their observations, mixed them with their imagination, and produced their own explanations for occurrences that were not so

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<sup>146</sup> Major, 150.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

easily understood, such as the world's origins. These theories often include what modern society calls mythical stories.

The blurring of lines is a theme seen throughout the Han period in various areas, such as in beliefs about life and death. During this dynasty, the main view towards life and death was that there is a *daxian* 大現 ("great boundary"), referring to death, separating this life and the after-life. People accepted the fact that there was a boundary, yet they also tried to blur this line, pushing it further back or even trying to erase it altogether by searching for immortality.<sup>150</sup>

In this quest for immortality, there was yet another collapsing of boundaries that occurred as people desired to gain help from divinity or to even become part of the divine world. The connection between the divine and the human worlds was not a new concept, as seen, for example, by the use of the expression *Tianzi* at least as early as the Zhou dynasty. However, in some ways, the two realms seemed to grow even closer together during the Han. From more separate bureaucracies during the Shang period, by the Han dynasty, the blurring of the lines between the two worlds showed that they were beginning to merge. The netherworld was considered a "subterranean spirit administration" governed by bureaucratic strictures.<sup>151</sup> Besides the emperor, other human leaders were being incorporated into one large bureaucracy instead of having two parallel systems. Such a merging of systems allowed the earthly government to gain even more power, as now more authority figures could justify their rule through divine right.

Political legitimization was always necessary for the ruling government to assert control over its subjects. From the Qin dynasty through the Han period, political theory and constitutional practice developed an even greater need for the new dynastic house to justify its predecessor's overthrow while simultaneously claiming its right to remain in power. By the end of the Han empire, the next dynasty had an increasingly urgent obligation, especially as more contenders fought for power, to demonstrate that it had received Heaven's mandate to rule. This problem was solved through various methods, such as formulating requirements for sovereignty that the current rulers could claim that they, and not their rivals, possessed. A more effective

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<sup>150</sup> Wu Hung, "Beyond the 'Great Boundary': Funerary Narrative in the Cangshan Tomb," in *Boundaries in China*, ed. John Hay (London: Reaktion Books, 1994), 81-104.

<sup>151</sup> Patricia Buckley Ebrey and Peter N. Gregory, ed., *Religion and Society in Tang and Song China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993), 11.

solution was to incorporate the temporal authority into a transcendent system, thus leading to the merging of the human and divine bureaucracies.<sup>152</sup>

Although integrating the human rulers with their heavenly models gave increased power to more people in government, the emperor was still considered to have the highest authority on earth. No matter how strong statesmen became, even if they were not fully controlled by the emperor, the supremacy of the emperor's title remained such that they could not simply remove a formally installed emperor. And yet, his power was limited both practically and morally, obliging him to receive help from others.<sup>153</sup> The emperor had to rely on the bureaucrats for administration; he needed both their information and their advice. From the Han period onward, Confucian principle taught that a wise ruler should be a perfect moral leader and that he should listen to the advice of wise and virtuous men.<sup>154</sup> He tried to retain his authority while, at the same time, the bureaucracy attempted to restrict his power in order to exert its own influence.

From the beginning of the Han dynasty, there were occasions when, in reality, the emperor lost nearly all his power as other parties sought to influence the government. For instance, when infants or minors were installed as emperors, an empress dowager, an imperial concubine, or her relatives would actually be in control of state decisions. Even among the Han emperors, who were known as capable rulers, evidence shows that their powers were perhaps significantly limited. For example, Wudi 武帝 (141-87) is generally considered one of the greatest emperors of the Former Han (202 BC-8 AD). He did achieve success, but records show that most of his involvement was actually with religious cults, rather than with political or military campaigns.

By the late Han dynasty, the emperor was still acknowledged as the supreme head of state and society; however, his main duties centered on those of a religious and symbolic nature, rather than on political government.<sup>155</sup> Especially during this period, officials, civil servants, and others surrounding the emperor developed more rivalries among themselves as they sought

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<sup>152</sup> Michael Loewe, *Divination, Mythology and Monarchy in Han China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 85.

<sup>153</sup> Pan Yihong, *Son of Heaven and Heavenly Qaghan: Sui-Tang China and its Neighbors* (Washington: Western Washington University, 1997), 69-69.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

greater control over the government of the state.<sup>156</sup> Emperors were probably therefore relying greatly on the divine nature of imperial sovereignty and Heaven's blessings for their continued rule.<sup>157</sup>

While the official religion focused on a supreme Heaven, people outside the ruling court, however, mainly worshipped local cults and deities. They were more concerned with the practical abilities of divinity, and their conception of gods and spirits concentrated on things that affected people's welfare. Making propitiation was of greater importance than understanding where the powers came from, or why the powers even existed at all.

Daybooks (*rishu* 日書) found in Han tombs give evidence that what mattered most usually was external ritual conduct, not the rules of moral behavior.<sup>158</sup> The daybooks, like the *Shanhaijing* and other classical texts, contain numerous gods, spirits, and divine beings that were believed to exist besides the supreme *tian*. These spiritual figures are generally anthropomorphic, concrete, and zoomorphic in nature, different from the more abstract *tian* which was an arbiter of morality.<sup>159</sup> There is little mention of morality or ethics in regard to these beings. Instead, the daybooks depict them as basically only having the power to cause annoyances that affect people; however, ultimately they could be exorcised so they were not really of any threat to people.<sup>160</sup> The books taught people how to deal with such supernatural beings.

Perhaps because there were numerous spiritual figures, some of their descriptions and the methods of counteracting them were so similar that there was a blurring of their definitions.<sup>161</sup> However, there was still distinction between different orders of divine beings, with the highest level including such deities as *shanghuang* 上皇 ("Emperor on High"), *shangshen* 上神 ("God on High"), and *tian* ("Heaven"). Such a hierarchy demonstrates again how the spiritual world

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 261.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>158</sup> Poo Mu-chou, *In Search of Personal Welfare: A View of Ancient Chinese Religion*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 207.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 82-83.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 81.

reflected the human world as the relative positions among the divine beings were comparable to those in the earthly society.<sup>162</sup>

There are various possible reasons for why so many deities were named. The daybooks could have reflected the Han view of the cosmos—that the world was basically predictable and the roles of the spiritual beings were fixed. At the same time, there also existed more capricious spirits and demons that demonstrated a recognition that there were still unpredictable elements in the world. By identifying so many supernatural beings, and placing them within a predetermined structure, fear of the unknown was reduced and people gained the confidence that they could contain and manipulate the things around them.<sup>163</sup> Thus during the Han, like the ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians, people may have believed it was better to keep a grand host of deities, whose functions may have contradicted or overlapped each other, since they were more concerned with having practical solutions to their fears than a comprehensive understanding of the cosmos. Of course this does not mean that no one desired to understand the workings of the universe. There were complex cosmological theories developing, such as the belief in the intertwining of the cyclical Five Phases (*Wuxing* 五行) and the binary *yin-yang* concepts.<sup>164</sup> Instead, this acceptance of numerous spiritual beings reflects the more practical concerns that crossed social lines.

Another Han religious policy that was inherited from the Qin empire was to absorb the local traditions as part of the establishment of a grand empire. This strategy helped local areas feel like a part of the larger nation. It also consolidated and legitimized imperial rule at a local level, since performing rituals at both the local and the central courts symbolized the recognition of these traditions.<sup>165</sup> During the Eastern Han period, there were fewer additions and changes to the cults and rituals.<sup>166</sup> Perhaps this was due to the personal preferences of the emperors and influential authority figures as certain emperors desired to procure more blessings while others refused to accept new cults. Whether or not local cults were fully recognized by the imperial rule, there was a fluid boundary between official and nonofficial religion. This is demonstrated

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<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 87-88.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.



by a text in 134 BC that describes how officials and local people joined in a cooperative effort to pray to the Earth shrine for ceasing excessive rainfall.<sup>167</sup>

The numerous divinities and rituals are discussed in various texts. For example, in *Qianfu lun* 潛夫論 the Eastern Han scholar Wang Fu 王符 writes:

As for secret spells of the *wu*--shamans and shamanesses, feared by the commoners, the seven spirits of the Earth Lord, the Flying Corpse, the Evil Ghost, the Northern Lord, Hsien-chu [Xianzhu] the Way Blocker, the Straight Talisman, as well as the various taboos concerning building activities and some trivial matters, these should not be the concern of the Heavenly King (*tianwang* 天王).<sup>168</sup>

Wang Fu differentiates between certain of the spirits, who are on a lower order, and the *tianwang*. It is uncertain whether or not *tianwang* refers to the supreme god, but the *tian* prefix in its name and the fact that it should not be concerned with trivial affairs of these spirits demonstrates that it is at least a high god.

Further evidence that *tianwang* is a notable deity is provided by the perpetuation of its name. Besides playing a role in the divine hierarchy of the Han dynasty, *tianwang* is actually found in a sixth century tomb. Not only is the period in which it is found significant, but its location makes the discovery even more important. The title *tianwang* was painted in the Tomb of Heavenly Kings and Earthly Spirits in the north Korean kingdom of Koguryō. The transmission of these words reflects the influence of China upon other cultures.

The Han empire expanded Chinese rule from the Pacific to the Pamirs and from southwest Asia to Korea. During this dynasty, colonies from central China migrated to northern Shansi, Manchuria, and Korea. The influence of Chinese culture can be seen especially in such areas as Lelang, near modern Pyoungyang.<sup>169</sup> Korean tombs, for example, share art and architecture styles similar to that of China. Han art, such as designs on lacquer objects, depict "interrelated rhythms and swift, light movement" that is not limited to geometric shapes, except in the abstract borders. Gods, beasts, and clouds are depicted flying through space with a rushing, violent style.<sup>170</sup> In Pyoungyang, several sixth century tomb paintings preserve such a Han style.

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>169</sup> Laurence Sickman and Alexander Soper, *The Art and Architecture of China* (Maryland: Penguin, 1956), 76.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 76.

The Tomb of the Heavenly Kings and Earthly Spirits (Figure 1), for example, imitates many Han tombs in various ways. In the wall paintings, one can see the Chinese style of light, fast movement through space. Also, like some other Korean tombs of this period, it has similar motifs to many Han tombs, such as Buddhist lotuses (Figure 2), figures flowing through space, a heavenly realm, mythical animals (Figure 3), and a journey. It was common in Han tombs to paint images of either the occupants travelling to paradise or to another world in the after-life, and the travel was often done on a mythical animal. Sometimes there is also a figure that guides one to the next life. This tomb likewise depicts a man riding on a red mythical bird (Figure 4). Therefore, this figure probably reflects the tomb occupant's belief in, or his desire for, the journey to paradise after death. Even more significantly, the words *tianwang* are painted above the figure. These words demonstrate that, besides following the Han ideas of an after-life journey, inhabitants of Koguryō tomb also knew Chinese writing and were familiar with the idea of a divine king.

Besides the art, the architecture in this tomb also indicates influence from China, as well as from other countries. The tomb plan is similar to that of other Han tombs, which are characterized by one to three grave chambers in a line and also often include store-chamber wings. The Tomb of the Heavenly Kings and Earthly Spirits has one main chamber with two side chambers (Figure 5). The tomb is also built with a simulated bracketing system and an inverted V (∧) brace that is typical of Han tombs (Figure 6). A third-century Wei poem describes such a bracketing system with "a long slanting arm running out through the wall plane to help brace the weight of the eaves" and "paired shafts," which probably refer to the inverted V brace.<sup>171</sup> The tomb has four arms that curve up to support the center of the capstone. It is cut from the stone but painted in the likeness of a wood-framed design.<sup>172</sup> Soper believes this type of wood-framing tradition actually originated in middle or western Asia, was imitated by China, and then travelled to Korea and Central Asia.<sup>173</sup> Evidently, there was a flowing transmission of ideas between countries. Not only did China influence other countries, but other countries also affected it.

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 384.

<sup>172</sup> Alexander Coburn Soper, "The 'Dome of Heaven' in Asia," *The Art Bulletin* 29.4 (1947): 242.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 386.

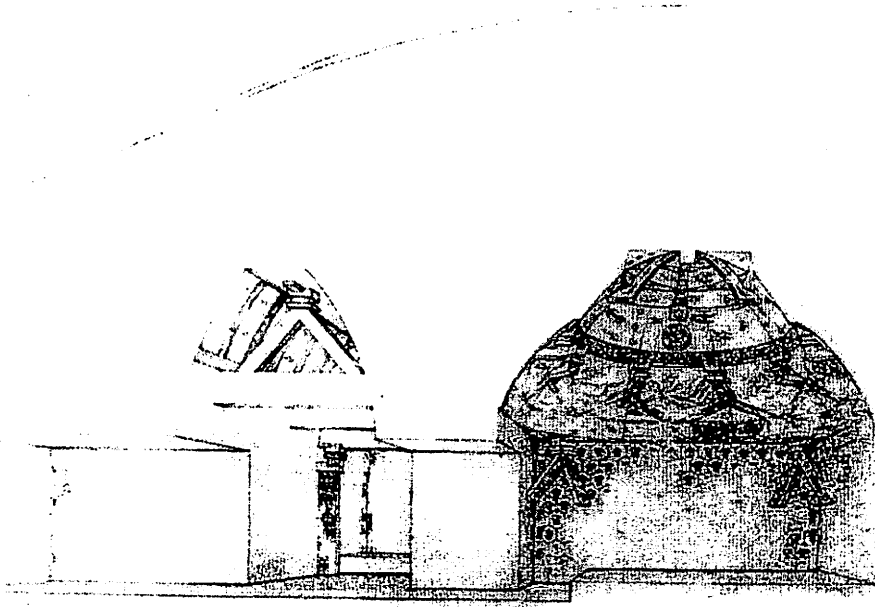


Figure 1: Drawing of the Tomb of the Heavenly Kings and Earthly Spirits (interior)<sup>174</sup>



Figure 2: Lotus flowers on the back chamber wall<sup>175</sup>

<sup>174</sup> T. Sekino and others, *Archaeological Researches on the Ancient Kokuri District* (Government-General of Chosen, 1930), 174.



Figure 3: Mythical animal, possibly a phoenix<sup>176</sup>

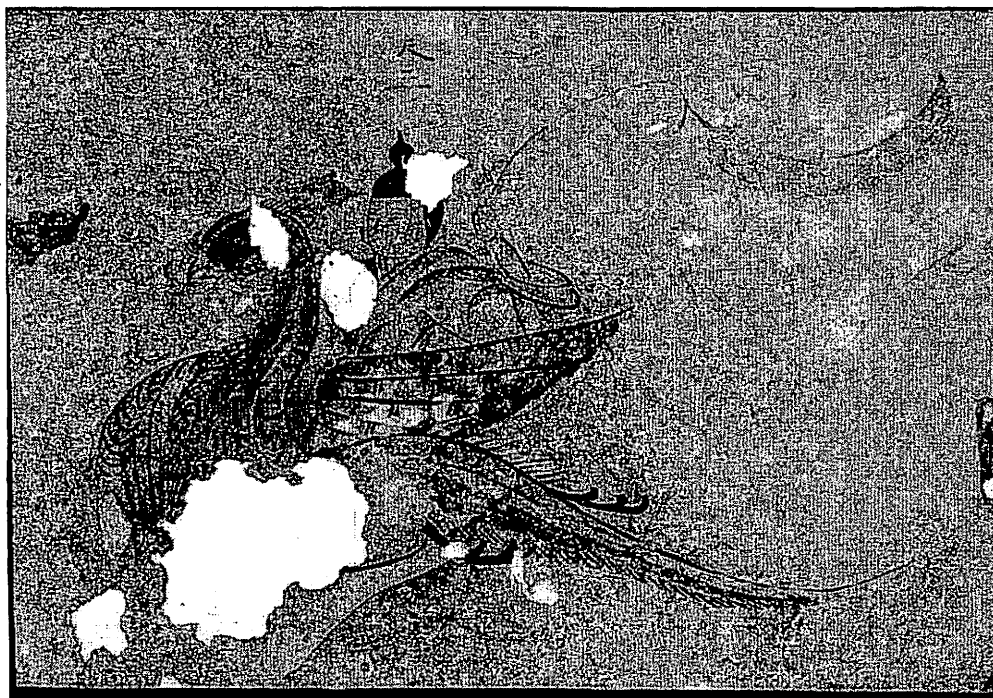


Figure 4: *Tianwang* riding a mythical red bird, on the back chamber north wall<sup>177</sup>

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

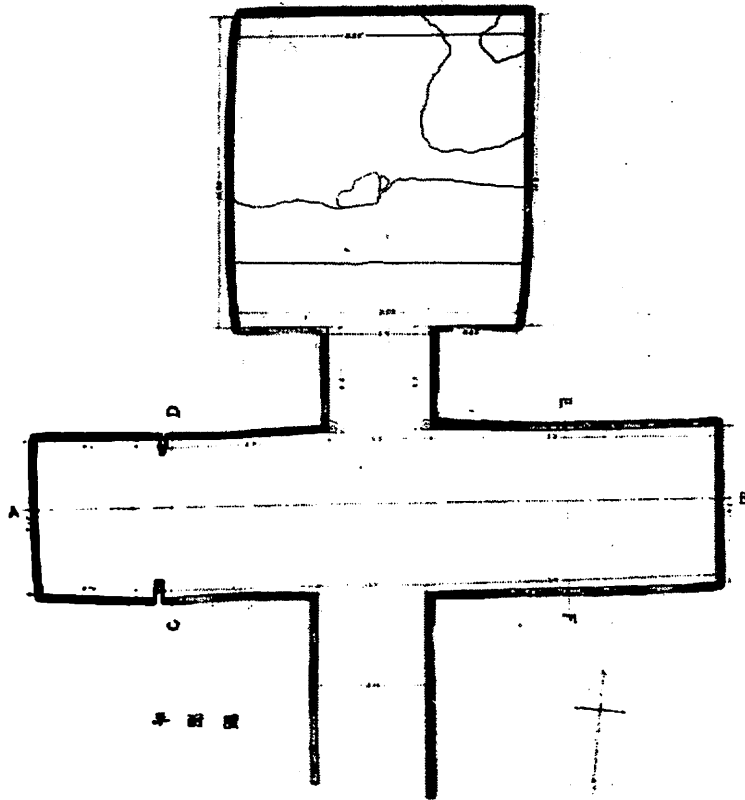


Figure 5: Tomb plan<sup>178</sup>

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

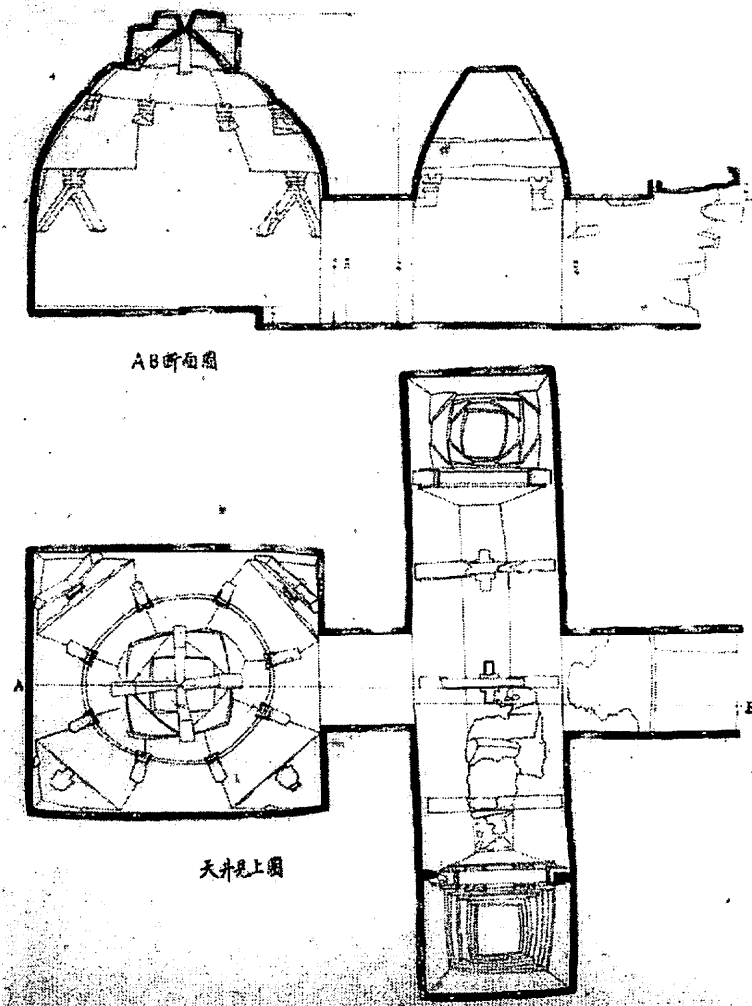


Figure 6: Tomb plan showing cross-section and ceilings<sup>179</sup>

The interaction between cultures was increased due to the network of trade routes known as the silk roads that developed from approximately 200 B.C to 400 A.D. (Figure 7). During this era, the exchange of cultural traditions was so widespread that it affected entire civilizations. Both frontier areas and cosmopolitan cities witnessed the intermingling of cultural ideas, offering cultural alternatives to neighboring groups.<sup>180</sup> As a result of extensive cross-cultural encounters during the late centuries B.C., the influence of Buddhism and Indian culture spread widely. The eastern conquests of Alexander the Great provided new relationships connecting Greeks, Persians, Indians, and others. Buddhist communities were established in the eastern part of the

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>180</sup> Jerry H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-Modern Times*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 33.

Parthian empire by at least the first century B.C. (Figure 8). Merchants, especially Parthian traders, spread Buddhism and other cultural traditions farther into central Asia and China.<sup>181</sup> Parthian traders were especially prominent among the early Buddhists in central Asia and China.

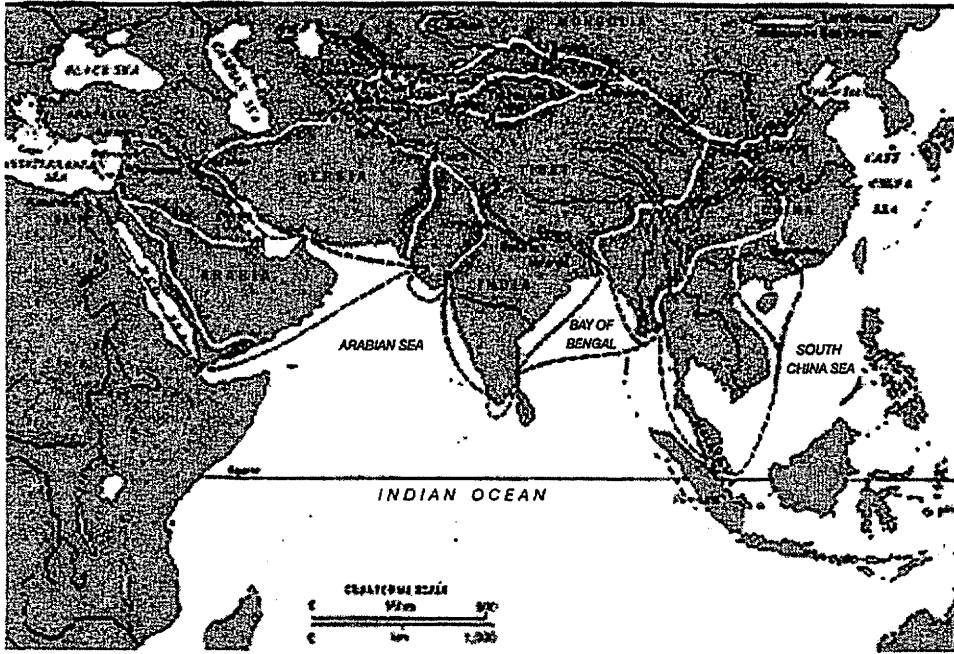
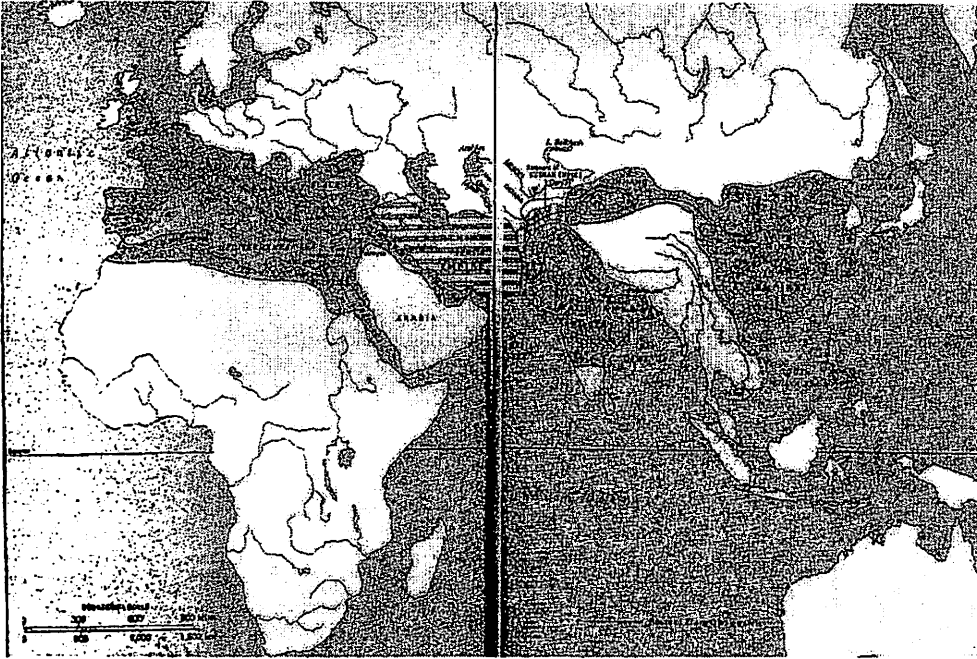


Figure 7: The ancient silk roads<sup>182</sup>

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 34.



**Figure 8: The world of the silk roads**<sup>183</sup>

The influence of other cultures upon China is also seen through another use of *tian*. *Tianzhongtian* 天中天 is an epithet meaning, "god of the gods." In China, the first appearance of this epithet seems to be in Chinese translations of Buddhist literature. Yuezhi translators, such as Lokaksema, Zhi Qian, and Dharmaraksa, often use it to render the Sanskrit *bhagavat* and many other titles of the Buddha.<sup>184</sup> On occasion, it is used to translate *devātideva* ("god of the gods"),<sup>185</sup> however, *devātideva* is rarely found in Indian Buddhist literature. *Tianzhongtian* is commonly used in early translations and is frequently found in Iranian texts. The expression "supreme god of the gods," both in form and in meaning, actually originated from an Iranian source.

Parthians, who invaded northwest India in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C., were the first to use the title *rājātirāja* in India. Saka rulers during the first century B.C. were the next to adopt the title. Kushan rulers, beginning at least with Vima Kadphises, also employed this title, rendering it

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-31.

<sup>184</sup> Daniel Boucher, "Buddhist Translation Procedures in Third-Century China: A Study of Dharmaraksa and His Translation Idiom" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1996), 210.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.



both in Bactrian [ $\rho\alpha\omicron\nu\alpha\nu\omicron \rho\alpha\omicron$ ] and in Prakrit (*rajadiraja*).<sup>186</sup> The Kushans were an ethnically mixed group that was comprised partly of Indo-Europeans, such as the Yuezhi. Ruling over a diverse population that included Indians, Iranians, and Greeks, they adopted ideology from various ethnic groups.<sup>187</sup> Thus, Buddhism was influenced by both Iranian and Greek elements during this period.<sup>188</sup> Iranian influence was seen mostly from the dates 148 to 845, during which time, Buddhism flourished as Iranians helped in the dissemination of Buddhism and other foreign religions.<sup>189</sup> *Devātideva* possibly originated from the Iranian royal title "Supreme king of the kings" when Iranian or Iranian-speaking peoples in Northwest India applied the epithet to the Buddha, who is supposed to be the "holy of holies."<sup>190</sup> In China, only the Yuezhi translators used *tianzhongtian* to render *bhagavat*, demonstrating that these Yuezhi missionaries must have been very familiar with this Iranian concept.<sup>191</sup>

The introduction of the concept *tianzhongtian* could be one of the factors causing the changes in the meanings of *tian* and *di* during the Han dynasty. *Tianzhongtian* implies that *tian* could refer to both one god or to the gods collectively. If a term such as *tianzhongtian* indicated a supreme god above all other gods, then *tian* would necessarily lose its meaning as the highest god. Thus during the Han, *tian* and *di* are seen increasingly as only a part of the names of various gods.

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>187</sup> Richard C. Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road: Overland Trade and Cultural Exchange from Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 44.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>189</sup> Antonino Forte, "Iranians in China: Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and Bureaus of Commerce," *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* 11 (1999-200): 278.

Forte discusses further on the influence of Iranians in China, as well as other uses of *tian* in Iranian religions.

<sup>190</sup> Boucher, 212.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 213.

## Tang Dynasty (c. 618-907 A.D.)

### *Di*

As in the Han dynasty, the term *di* continued to change through the Tang period. It still maintained some of its original meanings, but by the Tang, it rarely stood alone to refer to a high god. Following the pattern that began in the Han, it became more frequently found as part of a deity's name, such as *Shangdi*. *Di* was not commonly used, especially in comparison to *tian*. When it was used by itself, it began to refer more often to the emperor, particularly an idealized ruler. For example, the Tang emperor Taizong 太宗 entitled one of his works as "*Difan*" 帝範 (*The Rules for Emperors*), teaching his son how to behave properly as an emperor.

### *Tian*

Unlike *di*, *tian* became even more frequently used during the Tang, expanding its functions. However, similarly to *di*, it also gained different meanings while losing some of its original definitions to an extent. It still could mean a great non-anthropomorphic divinity but this use was becoming increasingly rare.

One of its most common meanings was "Heaven," of the type that modern day people tend to imagine—a paradise where the divine, spiritual, or the dead reside. However, because of the various religions existing during the Tang, there was not simply one *tian*. Instead, many religions and sects each had their own ideal Heaven.

One Maitreya cult, along with other Buddhist traditions, believed in Tushita Heaven as the abode of Maitreya, the Future Buddha.<sup>192</sup> References to Tushita Heaven are found in various forms. In his poems, Bai Juyi [Po Chü-i] 白居易 repeatedly expresses his desire to meet his friends again in the future rebirths in Tushita Heaven of Maitreya or the Western Paradise of Amitābha.<sup>193</sup> In fact, his writings often allude to Buddhist ideas and are an important source of information about the history of Buddhism during his time. The legend of *Mulian yuanqi* 目連緣起 mentions Tushita Heaven. According to the story, Mulian found his mother after she

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<sup>192</sup> Kenneth K. S. Chen, *The Chinese Transformation of Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 234, n. 107.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

was reborn as a black dog. After reciting sutras together for seven days and nights, demonstrating their merit, she became a woman again. Then he and his mother worshipped the Buddha beneath the sal tree and he asked the Buddha whether or not his mother still had any evil karma left within her. The Buddha answered that she no longer did, and caused her to be reborn as a deva in Tushita Heaven.<sup>194</sup> Other versions of the legend claim that the mother was reborn as a deva in Trāyastimśa Heaven.<sup>195</sup>

The sutra *Fo sheng dao litian wei mu shuofajing* 佛升忉利天為母說法經 (*Sutra on the Buddha ascending to Trāyastimśa Heaven to preach to his mother*), of course, refers to Trāyastimśa Heaven. According to Buddhist legend, Māyā, Buddha's mother, died seven days after giving birth to him. The sutra says that after the Buddha attained enlightenment, he ascended to Trāyastimśa Heaven and stayed there for three months to preach the Buddhist law to his mother, showing his filial piety. Afterwards, he returned to earth to preach among men.<sup>196</sup>

Besides referring more often to a heavenly paradise, *tian* began to be used less by itself and was frequently incorporated as part of names to signify that the subject had a relation to the "heavenly" or divine. Numerous monasteries included the word *tian*. Tianzhu Monastery 天階寺 in Hangzhou 杭州 is described in various records.<sup>197</sup> It existed during the Tang period and was located in Wulin Mountain 武林山, along with the famous Lingyin Monastery 靈隱寺, both of which were favorite visits of Bai Juyi.<sup>198</sup> The Tiantong Linglong Monastery 天童瓊瓏寺 was built on Mount Tiantong 天童山. It was designated as the "monastery of the ten directions" during Emperor Wuzong's 武宗 reign (841-846), then renamed Tianshou Monastery 天壽寺 in 869.<sup>199</sup>

Many religious schools also included *tian* in their names. The Tiantai School 天台 was founded by Zhi Yi 智顛 (538-597). It was known as the first to perfect the "theory of classification of periods," which explained that the differences in doctrines were the result of the

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 28, n. 27.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 29, n. 27.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>199</sup> T. Griffith Foulk, "Myth, Ritual, and Monastic Practice in Sung Chan Buddhism," in *Religion and Society*, ed. Patricia Buckley Ebrey and Peter N. Gregory, p. 165.

Buddha preaching to different audiences during the various periods. The theory rationalized that he had to adjust his teachings according to the intellectual and spiritual maturity of the listeners. According to this theory, the Buddha immediately preached the *Avataṃsakasūtra* after he became enlightened. However, the ideas in this sutra were too advanced for his audience, so he changed his focus to preaching the simpler Hīnayāna sutras during the second period of his ministry. Over the years of preaching, the Buddha began to advance more in his teachings as his followers progressed in their learning, and by the last period he preached the *Lotus Sutra*.<sup>200</sup> Such a theory represented the Chinese attempt to establish a school of Buddhism that could encompass all of the Buddha's diverse teachings.

Among the many monasteries and schools using *tian* in their names, there does not necessarily seem to be one link between all of them. Perhaps some of them wanted to associate themselves with *tian* due to the importance of heaven in their belief systems. Others might have just wanted to express their connection to the spiritual realm. Still others could simply have adopted the names to refer to their location, not really meaning "heaven," although *tian* still signified that these places or schools were religious.

The increasing number of monasteries and schools reflected the trend, which began during the Han and continued throughout the Tang dynasty, towards a more extensive pantheon of deities and spiritual beings. During the Tang, the parallel bureaucratic structures of the divine and human hierarchies merged even more. The Tang Daoist transcendents were modeled after the Han bureaucracy, which was already beginning to show signs of integration between the two systems. This movement progressed through the Tang and, by the Song 宋 dynasty, there existed only one vast bureaucracy that included both earthly and celestial beings.<sup>201</sup> The blurring of lines between the human and divine worlds had already occurred in the Han and continued during the Tang, although the demarcations between various strata of the human Buddhist hierarchy were distinct.<sup>202</sup>

The joining of the two systems expressed another religious belief, namely, that the gods and their devotees remained dependent upon one another. People depended on gods to grant their requests while deities needed followers to make sacrifices for their sustenance.

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<sup>200</sup> Chen, 9-11.

<sup>201</sup> Ebrey, 11.

Demonstrating the intertwined relationship between earth and heaven, Bai Juyi prayed rather admonishingly to the Black Dragon of the North during a severe drought in 823, asking for rain and also reminding it of its dependence on worshippers.<sup>203</sup>

The gods became increasingly anthropomorphized, demonstrated by the fact that their needs, such as for food offerings and human recognition, were expressed in human terms. Because divinities were bound to their devotees through the principle of reciprocity, the pantheon was susceptible to changes in society. For example, the origin and spread of city gods (*cheng huang shen* 城隍神, "gods of walls and moats") might have been related to the growth of a new elite merchant class that emerged with the development of cities as commercial centers during the late Tang.<sup>204</sup>

Changes in the pantheon also resulted from interaction with foreign cultures, especially as the merchants travelled in and out of China. Even more than during the Han, the Tang dynasty was filled with interaction between China and foreign influences. Therefore it is understandable that Indian influence can be seen in the changes in religion.

The concept of local gods who held office reflected the introduction of Buddhism during the early centuries A.D. The rise in this type of deity did not take place until the Tang, along with the many other fluctuations in religion during this period.<sup>205</sup> Valerie Hansen argues that, rather than developing from the new merchant elite, the city gods originated from the Buddhist monastic guardian *Vaiśravaṇa*.<sup>206</sup> During the early Tang, as itinerant monks converted more people and local gods to Buddhism, the Chinese began placing images of the Indian god *Vaiśravaṇa* on walls and any other edifice they wanted him to protect.

Later monastic guardians (*qie lan shen* 伽藍神), and then also gods of walls and moats, appear to have used *Vaiśravaṇa* as their prototype. Buddhists began to appoint their own local deities to keep watch over their monasteries. Following their example, Daoists and Confucian administrators soon developed their own pantheons, expanding the number of deities

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<sup>202</sup> Ebrey, 12.

<sup>203</sup> Arthur Waley, *The Life and Times of Po Chü-i* [Bai Juyi] (New York: MacMillan, 1949), 148.

<sup>204</sup> Ebrey, 29.

<sup>205</sup> Valerie Hansen, "Gods on Walls: A Case of Indian Influence on Chinese Lay Religion?" in *Religion and Society*, ed. Patricia Buckley Ebrey and Peter N. Gregory, p. 75.

<sup>206</sup> Ebrey, 30.

worshipped.<sup>207</sup> Buddhists, Daoists, and Confucianists all disliked the local gods. After trying to tear down temples to "unclean gods," they shifted their strategy to replacing them with or relabeling them as gods that they preferred. As a result, local gods began to assume office and be integrated into larger pantheons throughout China.<sup>208</sup>

Because the Chinese were used to thinking of a god in a variety of ways, as demonstrated by the multiple aspects of *tian* and *di*, it was easier for them to accept another view of a deity than if they had only adhered to a single rigid image of a god.<sup>209</sup> Therefore, as foreign cultures entered the country, the Chinese allowed integration of new religious ideas and gods into their belief system. As these foreign deities became more accepted, Chinese gods and religion were transformed as well. *Tian* and *di* thus gained more meanings and changed in their uses.

The Tang government was another influence on the changes in religion, and vice versa. The expanding pantheon and the integration of even local gods into the bureaucracy reflected the extension of the imperial rule to the local level. As seen beginning in the Han, promotion of gods allowed communities to feel recognized by the central court and caused these areas to submit more willingly to imperial power.

Foreign cultures also affected the Tang government. As mentioned above, the Chinese asserted influence over Koguryō during the Han dynasty. The relationship between the two countries continued through the Tang period. Emperor Gaozu 高祖 (618-626) had relatively peaceful relations with Korea.<sup>210</sup> However, Emperor Taizong (627-649) sent military campaigns against Koguryō from 641-648.<sup>211</sup>

Taizong was motivated both by the Chinese belief in the legitimacy of the Son of Heaven (*Tianzi*) to rule All-under-Heaven (*tianxia* 天下), and by a desire to be honored as a ruler of the non-Chinese as Heavenly Qaghan (*Tian kehan* 天可汗). The title of Heavenly Qaghan symbolized his dream to be both the Chinese Son of Heaven and the qaghan of the steppe. He envisioned a world empire with equal Chinese and non-Chinese subjects.<sup>212</sup> After he conquered

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<sup>207</sup> Hansen, 100.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>209</sup> Terry F. Kleeman, "The Expansion of the Wenchang Cult," in *Religion and Society*, ed. Patricia Buckley Ebrey and Peter N. Gregory, p. 64.

<sup>210</sup> Pan, 207.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

the Eastern Turks in 630, at the request of the non-Chinese rulers of the northwest, he assumed the title of Heavenly Qaghan.<sup>213</sup>

The Heavenly Qaghan system seemed similar to the previous tribute system, already in effect since Han. However, Taizong's new title of Heavenly Qaghan strengthened his legitimacy as a ruler, and appealed to the nomads and other inhabitants of the Western Regions. The new idea of synthesizing Chinese and non-Chinese into one dualistic nation was respected by the nomads, who accepted Taizong as Heavenly Qaghan.<sup>214</sup> He enlisted non-Chinese generals and nomadic military forces to gradually sinicize them.<sup>215</sup> It is clear that Tang China was very cosmopolitan. Foreign influences can be seen in diverse aspects of its culture, from the arts to geographical knowledge to religion.

Taizong was the child of an intermarriage of Chinese and non-Chinese families.<sup>216</sup> Therefore he, unlike previous emperors, tended not to view non-Chinese as inferior barbarians. He believed that "only I view them as equal. That is why they look upon me as their parent."<sup>217</sup> However the idea that China was dominant was so ingrained that, to many people, the non-Chinese would always appear barbaric.<sup>218</sup>

The concept of *tiandi* might encompass the whole world, yet the focus remained on what was specifically under the control of China. Many Chinese still believed that they were the "roots" of All-under-Heaven while the barbarians were merely like "branches and leaves."<sup>219</sup> Even Taizong showed a Chinese bias when he heeded the warnings of certain advisors who feared a sudden integration of the non-Chinese, and decided to gradually assimilate and resettle

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 142.

the surrendered Eastern Turks in 630 after their defeat.<sup>220</sup> After having difficulty resettling the Turks, including a failed attack on Taizong by the younger brother of Tölish Qaghan, Taizong decided to move the Turks north of the Yellow River to be treated as outer subjects.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, 186-187.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, 188-189.



## Conclusion

We can take it as a given that none of the great religious traditions in human history, whether of Semitic, Indian, or Chinese origin, has a single and uniform understanding of the ultimate, supreme, and most real reality—of Heaven, the Tao, the Absolute, the Godhead, God. The difference in names already indicates that the term God is often not simply understood in the same way even within a single tradition.<sup>222</sup>

*Di* and *tian* are two terms referring to divinity or other heavenly relations. As with most other cultures, the Chinese understanding of deity is too complex for one simple word to express. Although these two terms are often translated simply as "God" and "Heaven," clearly they had diverse meanings throughout history.

As demonstrated in the various theories above, the origins and meanings of *di* and *tian* are debatable. There are, however, certain conclusions that can be drawn. Eno concludes that *tian*, like *di*, did not have an enduring meaning and therefore could not be represented as a man-made image or idol. During Shang and Zhou, *tian* and *di* were unique from other spirit figures both because of their supreme positions and their ambiguity. Neither term remained limited to one definition; thus *tian* and *di* could not be depicted as cast idols. Therefore, both could be viewed as greater than other spirits and deities. These were gods that rose above all others in their images, and so were worshipped as such. As Eno explains, these were not "'abstract' gods, the intellectual symbols of proto-philosophers, but because their concrete form was plastic, instantly malleable to fit each occasion," their portraits could be ambiguous.<sup>223</sup> Other spirits and deities, such those of the rivers or mountains, could be concretely seen or represented. Various aspects of *tian*, for example the image of it as the sky or as a force of nature, could also be denoted, but *tian* included more than these forms, depending on who was using the term and for what purposes.

Originally, *di* was a supreme deity or group of gods, and the term began with the Shang dynasty. *Tian* remains an even more ambiguous term than *di*, but studies show that the concept originated in the Zhou period. These terms varied in meaning, according to contexts and times.

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<sup>222</sup> Hans Küng and Julia Ching, *Christianity and Chinese Religions* (New York: Doubleday and Collins, 1989), 99.

<sup>223</sup> Eno, *Masters*, 48.

Perhaps they were purposely unclear or their ambiguity played an important role in their usage, such as when the Confucians accepted the ambiguity of *tian* as a parallel for their teachings.

Despite the controversies, it is also clear that at least in the earliest dynasties, both *di* and *tian* commanded a certain degree of reverence due to the power associated with them. Because of their ultimate authority as the highest deities of the dynasties in which they originated, their uses were closely linked with politics and cultural identities as well. *Tian*, even more so than *di*, was adopted for government propaganda. Both of these concepts were perhaps even used by philosophers to legitimize their own authorities.

In order to understand the different concepts of *di* and *tian*, and to find reasons for their transformations, one must consider the society at large. During both the Han and the Tang, foreign cultures played key roles in the changes within China. Partly due to the silk roads and to military conquests, cross-cultural exchanges became widespread. In the case of *tian*, one can demonstrate both Chinese influence upon foreign cultures and vice versa.

The increasing number of deities and supernatural beings, as a result of either practical concerns of the people or of the desire for political unification, affected Han and Tang religion in various ways. There is little surprise then that *di* and *tian* also changed in meaning and, in many cases, lost their sense of supremacy as they were used as part of the names of other gods. The fluidity of boundaries also contributed to the ambiguity of *tian* and *di*. The various ideas encompassed by each of these two terms are diverse, yet they are also related in different ways. The Han practice of blurring the lines between different categories, and the belief in various characteristics of gods, allowed people to easily accept the different meanings of *tian* and *di*.

Many aspects of pre-modern Chinese society, especially during the Han and Tang periods, are reflected through the ambiguity of the words *di* and *tian*. This paper has only touched on some of the examples, but as demonstrated through art, architecture, poetry, historical writings, and other venues, the views on religion, philosophy, life and death, the authority of the government, and foreign relations are all affected—and also affect—the terms *di* and *tian*.

Debates continue over the ambiguity of *di* and *tian*. Their significance may be clarified by further research and future archaeological findings. Until new discoveries are made,

however, one must make the best of the limited information that is available to further develop the present theories or to create new ideas.

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