

Early Roots of Chinese Astrological Thinking in the Religious Belief of *Di*

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Rané korene čínskeho astrologického myslenia v náboženskej viere v boha Di

Resumé Tento článok skúma možný vplyv náboženských predstáv dynastie Shang na čínske astrologické myslenie. Astrologické tradície populárne počas Obdobia bojujúcich štátov a raného cisárskeho obdobia kládli dôraz na správne načasovanie udalostí či napĺňanie vôle nebies—a boli namierené na entity abstraktné a disantropomorfné. To bolo v kontraste so skoršími predstavami, v ktorých centre stálo spojenie panovníka s nadprirodzeným svetom prostredníctvom jeho zbožnených predkov. Cieľom tohto príspevku je pozmeniť tento názor o veľkom kontraste a naopak poukázať na kontinuitu vývoja. Pretože nedávne výskumy ukázali, že neskoršie predstavy majú svoje korene v shangskej viere v najvyššieho boha *Di*, neosobnú, vzdialenú a abstraktnú entitu, naviazanú na hviezdy a nebo.

Keywords China, Religion, Pre-Imperial Period (before 221 BCE) · Concept of *Di* 帝 · China, Astrology, until 220 CE · Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shiji* 史記 (109–91 BCE)

I Introduction

As least as early as from the formative period of the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) astrological phenomena lie in the center of Chinese politico-religious concepts. Many cultures link celestial omens to ‘politics’ (that is related to the

fate of states and of leaders and royalty), but its central importance is peculiar to Chinese political thinking.² Gods living in Heaven, royal families being descendants of the gods, or the right to rule being derived from the gods are common *topoi* of most ancient civilizations, yet these do not entail the primacy of astrology. Even in China it took centuries of development for the rise in prestige above oracle-bone and yarrow stalk divination.

But astrological portents might have played an important role during early dynastic history,³ and the reconstruction of early politico-religious thought suggests a more complex picture. How deep do the roots of astrological thinking lie in Chinese intellectual history? The aim of this paper is to offer some preliminary insight into the problem by investigating Shang 商 dynasty⁴ beliefs concerning *Di* 帝.

2 Characteristics of Astrological Thinking

By the time of Warring States (5th c.–221 BCE) and Early Imperial era,⁵ astrological thinking permeated cosmological and correlative theories and traditions, from the Yin-Yang 陰陽 school of the Warring States to the cosmologists, the Huang-Lao 黃老 of early Han dynasty and the *fangshi* 方士 ('masters of methods').⁶ Conforming to the changes of Heaven to achieve proper timing is a central tenet of astrological thinking, as seen in the correlation of different governmental actions with seasons, months or Jupiter stations according to the *yueling* 月令 ('monthly ordinances') texts. A good example is chapter 5 of the

- 1 This notion appears even in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*: »When beggars die there are no comets seen; / the heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes.«
- 2 In Mesopotamia eclipses were interpreted in a framework similar to Chinese field-allocation astrology, with correlations for specific territories of the known world, but its prestige never overshadowed other forms of divinations for example extispicy and hepatoscopy, where the internal organs of the sacrificial animals were considered a direct channel between man and god. Cf. *The Babylonian World*, ed. by Gwendolyn Leick (New York: Routledge, 2007), 368.
- 3 See the various works of David Pankenier mostly focused on the Shang-Zhou transition.
- 4 Dated according to the Xia-Shang-Zhou Chronology Project between 1600 and 1046 BCE.
- 5 Different dates have been used to mark its beginning. In 221 BCE the state of Qin conquered the other states and founded the first, although short-lived, imperial dynasty. The imperial period lasted over two millennia, until 1911 CE.
- 6 With the royal support of such traditions, astrological thinking came to influence politico-religious thought as well.

Huainanzi 淮南子 (2nd c. BCE), where every month had its astronomical, ritual, biological and governmental correlations.

孟春之月，招搖指寅，昏參中，旦尾中。〔…〕其祀戶，祭先脾。〔…〕蟄 蟲始振蘇，〔…〕禁伐木，〔…〕毋聚眾。

In the first month of spring, Zhaoyao points to [the early branch] *yin*. [The lunar lodge] Array culminates at dusk; Tail culminates at dawn. [...] Its sacrifices are made to the door god. From the body of the sacrificial victim, the spleen is offered first. [...] Hibernating creatures begin to stir and revive. [...] It is prohibited to cut down trees [...] People must not be assembled [for labor duty] or fortifications erected.⁷

According to the military divination texts even the choice of military engagements should be decided according to the movement of the planets, as seen in the astrological chapter of the *Sbi ji* 史記 (Records of the Grand Historian; 109–91 BCE).

所在國不可伐，可以罰人。

The country where it [the Jupiter] is, cannot be attacked, but it can punish people.⁸

The principle of conforming to the changes of Heaven to achieve proper timing was only slightly changed by the Confucian synthesis of the Han: the goal became to achieve proper moral conduct, and Heaven was portrayed as intentionally cooperating with this project.⁹

以觀天人相與之際，甚可畏也。國家將有失道之敗，而天乃先出災 害以譴告之，不知自省，又出怪異以警懼之，尚不知變，而傷敗乃至。以此見天心之仁愛人君而欲止其亂也。自非大亡道之世者，天盡欲扶持而全安之，事在彊勉而已矣。

[...] it appeared to me that the interaction between Heaven and man is most awesome! When the country, losing the Way, is going to make a mistake, then Heaven first sends out a calamity to reprimand them. Not recognizing [the need for] self inspection, [Heaven] sends further strange phenomena to make them afraid. Still not understanding [the need for] change, only then will the fall arrive.

It is seen from this that the feelings of Heaven are benevolent and loving toward the ruler of men, desiring to stop him from causing chaos. If he is not from a generation that completely lost the Way, Heaven fully desires to support and protect his safety. The affairs are due to the relentless endeavors.¹⁰

7 *Huainanzi* 5.1; tr. by John S. Major from Liu An & al., *The Huainanzi: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Government in Early Han China*, tr. and ed. by John S. Major & al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 182–183.

8 *Sbi ji* 27.1312.

9 As seen in Dong Zhong Shu's 董仲舒 essay about omina, *Han shu* 漢書 56.2496–2497.

10 *Han shu* 56.2496–2497.

According to the sources available to us, such rise of the prestige of astrology (both as the most prestigious divination and as a central element of politico-religious thinking) only came up around the Warring States period. The *Zuo zhuan* 左傳 (tr 4th c. BCE) reports many events where an astrological phenomenon got the attention of a court and its significance was debated by ministers.¹¹ Field allocation astrology is already present here, and some explanations incorporated some but not all of the Five Phases. From these episodes we glimpse a picture of an emerging discipline, not yet institutionalized and sometimes ignored by the decision makers.¹²

The politico-religious thinking of the Bronze Age and the Warring States / Early Imperial era is often strongly contrasted as markedly different: Shang and Western Zhou (1046–771 BCE) rule is based on the ruling clan monopolizing access to the divine through their ancestors,¹³ while later the ruler of the territorial state gains authority by attuning his policies and his country to the processes of nature, a disanthropomorphic and impartial Heaven.¹⁴ While the early rulers monopolized all access to the divine, the centrality of astrology in later thought meant that the portents were accessible to all specialists, who did indeed use them to criticize the government.

The main characteristics of astrological thinking are the focus on celestial phenomena, the need to conform to the patterns of celestial phenomena, and the disanthropomorphic and impartial nature of that entity (Heaven). The main aim of this paper is to show that these attitudes, or at least their roots, were already present in the Shang religious beliefs.

11 *Zuo zhuan*, »Zhao Gong« year 17.

12 It is an open question whether these reports reflect the current beliefs of the reported times (8th–5th c. BCE) or of the writers of the *Zuo zhuan* (probably 5th–4th c. BCE, although much later times have been proposed). On the problems of dating the *Zuo zhuan* see *Early Chinese Texts. A Bibliographical Guide*, ed. by Michael Loewe (Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies, 1993), 70–71.

13 Mark Edward Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 49–51.

14 The degree of disanthropomorphism and impartiality varies from author to author. As seen in the yueling quotation above, the Huainanzi treats the governmental prescriptions just as a part of the natural cycle of the year as the hibernation of animals. Even in Dong Zhong Shu's system of benevolent and supportive Heaven a ruler who has strayed too far from the Way will lose Heaven's support. *Han shu* 56.2496–2497.

3 *The Limitations of Our Sources Concerning the Shang*

We have limited information concerning the practice of astrology during the Shang. Astrological portents themselves are infrequently mentioned in oracle bone inscriptions.¹⁵ Whether this reflects the undeveloped nature of astrological thinking or the fact that astrology lay outside the scope of the oracle bones as a separate form of divination itself cannot be determined. Only a few stars and constellations are mentioned in the inscriptions.¹⁶ Probably the following inscription is the recording of a supernova.

新大星並火

There was a great new star standing together with the Fire Star (Antares)¹⁷ Gaining insight into Bronze Age astronomy and astrology by combining later sources with modern computations on the change of the layout of the stars was so far inconclusive.¹⁸ Such datings presuppose that we have identified the stars correctly, understood their method of choosing those stars and knowing how keen they were on precision: I do not think we possess answers certain enough for those questions.¹⁹

The reconstruction of the Anyang 安陽 era²⁰ Shang beliefs, the first period from where we have written sources at all, whether astrological or otherwise, is

- 15 David N. Keightley, *The Ancestral Landscape: Time, Space, and Community in Late Shang China*, ca. 1200–1045 B. C. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Center for Chinese Studies, 2000), 28.
- 16 David W. Pankenier, »A Brief History of Beiji 北極 (Northern Culmen), With an Excursus on the Origin of the Character 帝«, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 124,2 (2004), 225.
- 17 Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1954ff), 3 (»Mathematics and the Sciences of Heavens and Earth«): 424; and Keightley, *The Ancestral Landscape*, 28.
- 18 Needham dated both the astronomical tradition of the Yaodian and the formation of the system of the 28 lunar mansions to the 3rd millennium BCE. Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, 3: 177 and 249.
- 19 The determinant stars of the lunar mansions have been changed between their first documented appearance during the Warring States and imperial times, and Needham based his dating upon the new set of determinant stars. See Christopher Cullen, *Astronomy and Mathematics in Ancient China: the Zhou bi suan jing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 17–19. Cullen also argues that their distance from the celestial equator was not relevant in choosing these stars, while that was the basis for Needham's calculations.
- 20 The last period of the Shang dynasty, named after its capital at Anyang, approx. 1200–1046 BCE.

riddled with its own challenges. Besides a few bronze inscriptions the only contemporary sources are the oracle bones. Even though they are related to both religion and divination they can only offer us a very limited perspective. All of these divinations were conducted by the royal house—with a few exceptions of divinations done by princes,²¹ all by the king and his diviners – so they represent the practice of a very narrow stratum of society.²² Also it could easily be the case that even the king turned to the oracle bones only with certain types of questions while using other forms of divination either for other types of questions or even for the same ones.²³ After the first documented period the oracle bone inscriptions are dominated by a preoccupation with divinations concerning sacrifices to the royal ancestors, overwhelming all other topics.²⁴

Besides having a limited perspective the oracle bones are limited in content as well. They offer no narrative, no explanations and little context. The earliest narratives we have are Western Zhou receptions and adaptations of Shang mythologies filtered through the belief system of the Zhou. These two kinds of written sources and the archaeological record is all we have to work with.

If we want to investigate the politico-religious beliefs concerning celestial phenomena we find ourselves in the middle of the most hotly debated topics of Shang religion: the problem of the high god *Di*, the question whether the Shang royal house claimed descent from *Di*, the identification of Di Ku 帝嚳, the ancestor of the Shang in the Zhou period myths, with the divine entities that actually do appear on Shang dynasty oracle bone inscriptions, and the totemistic identification with the ten Suns.

21 Robert Eno, »Shang State Religion and the Pantheon of the Oracle Texts«, in *Early Chinese Religion*, ed. by John Lagerwey and Marc Kalinowski (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2009), 77–81.

22 Eno, »Shang State Religion«, 42.

23 We know that during the Eastern Zhou (770–221 BCE) period multiple divinations of different kind were made concerning a single question, as seen in the *Zuo Zhuan* (»Xi« year 4, 12.14a–b), when Duke Xian of Jin 晉獻公 wanted to marry Li Ji 驪姬. Multiple divinations are also recorded among the inscriptions on bronze vessels unearthed at Houma. Cf. Edward L. Shaughnessy, *New Sources of Early Chinese History: An Introduction to the Reading of Inscriptions and Manuscripts* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1997). If this was a well-established practice at that time, it might have been the same for earlier periods.

24 Eno, »Shang State Religion«, 83.

4 *High God Di: Remoteness and the Question of an Ancestral Deity*

Apparently, the most powerful entity in Shang beliefs is *Shang Di* 上帝, most frequently written simply *Di* in the oracle bones. The divinations imply that *Di* has power over various large and small-scale natural and political events.²⁵

翌癸卯帝不令風

On the next *guimao* [day 40], *Di* will not order Wind²⁶

佳帝害我年。二月 / 不佳帝害我年

It is *Di* who is harming our harvest. In the second moon / It is not *Di* who is harming our harvest²⁷

我其作邑帝弗佐若

If we build a settlement, *Di* will not obstruct [but] will approve.²⁸

He is the only power that is said to »order« events to occur.²⁹ Another unique trait is that he does not receive cult. This is usually interpreted as *Di* being too remote from living humans to accept sacrifices and being only reachable by an intermediary power, such as in the *bin* 賓 ritual.

The *bin* ritual mentioned in the oracle bone inscriptions have been interpreted as either going to a deity as a guest (and thus seen as an evidence of shamanic journeys into the realm of spirits) or as entertaining deities as guests. An interesting feature of the *bin* ritual is that it can be multi-leveled (which feature seems to support the second interpretation), that is the Shang king entertains one of his ancestors, who in turn entertains another ancestor or deity. These multi-layered rituals are always arranged in a hierarchy of power, thus living humans contact a more recent, thus less powerful ancestor, who in turn contacts a more powerful ancestor. *Di* and nature powers were also involved with *bin* rituals: the Sun or the River could be contacted directly by humans, while *Di* only through an intermediary ancestor spirit.³⁰ This peculiarity of the *bin* ritual is generally taken as a sign of the remoteness of *Di* from the Shang king.

25 Eno, »Shang State Religion«, 70.

26 Keightley, *The Ancestral Landscape*, 4.

27 *Ibid.*, 14.

28 *Ibid.*, 60.

29 Eno, »Shang State religion«, 71, for possible exceptions to this.

30 Michael J. Puett, *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center for the Harvard-Yenching Institute, 2002), 46-50.

The king will entertain [*bin*] The Sun. It will not rain.³¹

Da Jia (an ancestor) will be a guest [*bin*] to *Di*.³²

Despite these peculiarities scholars traditionally considered *Di* as the ancestor of the Shang. Their views differ on how the development of the roles of *Di* happened: from ancestor to high god by absorbing roles³³ or from high god to ancestor by being monopolized by the royal family.³⁴

On the other hand this remoteness has been cited as an evidence that the Shang did not consider *Di* as an ancestral deity by Michael Puett.³⁵ Puett's aim in his analysis is to prove that the Chinese religion, preceding the innovations of the Warring States era, had much more in common with contemporary Greek beliefs than usually accepted, so his interpretations go counter to accepted theories. In his opinion a crucial point of similarity between Shang and Greek beliefs and difference between Shang and later Chinese ones is the existence of a strict line of division and antagonism between the divine and human realms.³⁶ His arguments are far from conclusive in the case of the Shang ancestor cult, indeed his own interpretation of the *bin* ritual suggests that the supposed breach between gods and man can be bridged by the ancestors-turned-gods.³⁷

31 *Ibid.*, 50.

32 *Ibid.*, 47.

33 Akatsuka Kiyoshi 赤塚忠, *Chūgoku kodai no shūkyō to bunka: In ōchō no saishi* 中國古代の宗教と文化 : 殷王朝の祭祀 [Religion and Culture in Ancient China: The Sacrifices of the Yin Court] (Tōkyō: Kadokawa, 1977); Ikeda Suetoshi 池田末利, *Chūgoku kodai shūkyōshi kenkyū: Seido to shisō* 中國古代宗教史研究 : 制度と思想 [Studies on the History of Ancient Chinese Religion: Systems and Thought] (Tōkyō: Tōkai University Press, 1981).

34 Chen Mengjia 陳夢家, *Yin xu buci zongshu* 殷墟卜辭綜述 [Comprehensive Account of the Divination Inscriptions from Yinxu], (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 1956).

35 Puett, *To Become a God*.

36 He does not deal with the demigods and numerous nymphs and other local deities of Greek beliefs whose existence complicates the picture.

37 Puett interprets the act of turning ancestors into gods as a forceful intrusion of mortals into an antagonistic realm of gods. Again this is far from proven. Sarah Allan links the posthumous naming system using the ten days of the 'week' with the Shang origin myth of their descent from the Ten Suns (or Sun-Birds), so each Shang king was metaphorically born of the Sun which appeared on their birthday. See Sarah Allan, *The Shape of the Turtle. Myth, Art, and Cosmos in Early China* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), 55. Thus the inclusion of deceased ancestors into the realm of divine could be predestined at their birth, not forced by humans at their funerary rites.

Western Zhou myths are a possible source of information concerning the earlier Shang religious world-view when analyzed with the right tools and with the right amount of circumspection. By structural analysis of myths, etymological links and graphic interpretation of oracle bone characters Sarah Allan showed that figures of Di Ku, Di Jun 帝俊 and Shun 舜 of Zhou texts were originally a single character, based upon a Zhou reception of the Shang origin myth. In Zhou texts the Shang descended from a woman who swallowed a black bird's egg. Her husband or the bird is Di Ku (who is identified with Di Jun) and his other wives are easily identified with Xihe 羲和 the mother of the Ten Suns and Chang Xi 常羲 (also known as Chang E 嫦娥, Heng E 姮娥, Chang Yi 常羲), the mother of the Twelve Moons.

簡狄在台譽何宜 / 玄鳥致胎女何喜

When Jian Di was in the tower, how did Ku favor her? When the black bird brought its gift, how did the woman become blessed?³⁸

殷契，母曰簡狄，有娥氏之女，為帝譽次妃。三人行浴，見玄鳥墮其卵，簡狄取吞之，因孕生契。

Xie of Yin's mother was called Jian Di. A woman of the You Rong clan, she was the second concubine of Di Ku. Three persons [including Jian Di] were going to bathe. They saw a black bird drop an egg. Jian Di took it and swallowed it. Thus, she became pregnant and gave birth to Xie.³⁹

有女子名曰羲和，方浴日於甘淵。羲和者，帝俊之妻，生十日。

[...] there is a woman named Xihe who regularly bathes the suns in the Sweet Springs. Xihe is the wife of Di Jun. It is she who gave birth to the ten suns⁴⁰

有女子方浴月。帝俊妻常羲，生月十有二，〔...〕

There is a woman, [who] regularly bathes the moons. [She is] the wife of Di Jun, Chang Xi. It is she who gave birth to the twelve moons.⁴¹

These two are most likely the Eastern Mother and Western Mother appearing in the oracle bone inscriptions. In the various versions the Shang are either descendents of the black sun-bird or of another wife of the father of the Ten Suns and Twelve Moons.⁴²

38 *Chu ci* 楚辭 («Tian wen» 天問 15), tr. by Sarah Allan, in her *The Shape of the Turtle*, 40.

39 *Shi ji* 3.91, tr. by Allan, *ibid.*

40 *Shanhai jing* 山海經 15.27, tr. by Allan, *ibid.*, 33.

41 *Shanhai jing* 16.30.

42 The association of the Shang royalty with the Ten Suns is hard to dismiss, but whether they had monopolized it is a different question. We have an inscription where the king entrusted a certain Qiao 雀 to conduct an offering to the rising and setting sun. Qiao seems to be a social

Building upon the identification of Shun with Di Ku/Di Jun, another proposal of Allan is that the abdication of Yao 堯 to Shun is a Zhou reception of the Shang myth of *Di* giving heavenly charge to their progenitor. Yao is named as Di Yao 帝堯 in the first line of the Yaodian 堯典 text;⁴³ from then on he is only referred to as *Di*. Although the word *di* had several meanings by the time of the Zhou, for example the title of certain rulers of high antiquity and the Shang main royal line, this standalone usage of »Di« is only compatible with the meaning of the high god Shang Di according to Allan.⁴⁴

So far this means that the myth is about the ancestor of the Shang (Shun/Di Ku/Di Jun) received the throne from Di (Yao)—if the decoding from Zhou to Shang mythology is correct. Allan has a third proposal that links Yao (and thus Di) with the Sun(s), a proposal that makes the picture quite complicated. Yao is referred to as Tang Yao 唐堯. In the oracle bones, this character for Tang is the same as the one used for Cheng Tang 成湯, the first king of the Shang (according to the Zhou traditions), and for the valley where the Ten Suns bathe in the East.⁴⁵ This implies a closer link between Di/Yao and the Shang/Shun than just a simple abdication (and possibly marrying his daughters to Shun). Furthermore his son is called Dan Zhu 丹朱 in some sources, and if we take 朱 for 珠 his name is ‘cinnabar/red pearl’, a reference to the sun motif according to Allan.

帝曰：“疇咨若時登庸？”放齊曰：“胤子朱啟明。”帝曰：“吁！嚚訟可乎？”

Di asked: »Who will carefully attend to this? I will raise and use him.« Fangqi said: »[Your] son and heir Dan he is becoming bright.« *Di* said: »Ah, he is quarrelsome, how could he?«⁴⁶

堯曰：“誰可順此事？”放齊曰：“嗣子丹朱開明。”堯曰：“吁！頑凶，不用。”

Yao said: »Who can obediently manage these matters?« Fangqi said: »[Your] son and heir Danzhu, who is becoming bright.« Yao said: »Oh! He is stubborn and wicked; no use.«⁴⁷

Furthermore, in the *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 (late 3rd c. BCE), he is said to have ten sons, the same number as the number of the suns. If Yao, who is probably

and/or political unit according to other inscriptions, so the ritual was delegated to their leader or representative. See Keightley, *The Ancestral Landscape*, 26–27.

43 The first chapter of the *Shangshu* 尚書, also known as *Shujing* 書經, the Book of Documents.

44 Allan, *The Shape of the Turtle*, 59.

45 In the oracle bones tang 湯 was written with a character that was the antecedent of the other tang 唐. (Allan, *The Shape of the Turtle*, 45).

46 *Shangshu* 1.3.

47 *Shiji* 1.20.

linked with the Shang high god *Di*, is the father of the Sun(s) then this structural analysis of myths either leads to a contradiction (because *Di Ku/Di Jun/Shun* is also the father of the Suns) or to the conclusion that *Di* was considered the ancestor of the Shang. Even in the later case we would have to leave out the abdication myth from our reconstructions. This third suggestion from Allan is in some conflict with the first two and it also has the weakest support.

The identification of Yao's son with the sun rests on three premises: that the full name given in the *Sbi ji*, the latest among our sources, is an old name; that the character *zhu* should be read as 'pearl' and not as 'cinnabar'; and that 'red pearl' denotes the sun. As for Yao having ten sons, when the *Lüshi chungiu* mentions this fact it is part of a parable about not being particular to one's own family and Shun is listed with his nine sons as well. Whether Yao having ten sons is a remnant of an older layer of mythology or just a rhetorical device in the text is hard to tell.

天無私覆也，地無私載也，日月無私燭也，四時無私行也，行其德而萬物得遂長焉。黃帝言曰：“聲禁重，色禁重，衣禁重，香禁重，味禁重，室禁重。”堯有子十人，不與其子而授舜；舜有子九人，不與其子而授禹；至公也。

Heaven covers without private [interests], Earth carries without private [interests], the Sun and the Moon illuminates without private [interests], the four seasons follow each other [in cycle] without private [interests]. They carry out their virtues letting the ten thousand things obtain the benefits from it.

Huangdi said: »Sounds [should be] confined [to what is] solemn, colours [should be] confined [to what is] solemn, clothing [should be] confined [to what is] solemn, smells [should be] confined [to what is] solemn, tastes [should be] confined [to what is] solemn, bedrooms [should be] confined [to what is] solemn.«

Yao had ten sons, but did not approve his sons so he conferred [the throne] upon Shun. Shun had nine sons, but did not approve his sons so he conferred [the throne] upon Yu. Unbiased to the utmost! ⁴⁸

The question whether the Shang considered *Di* as their ancestor is a complex one, as there are strong arguments for both contradictory answers. Even if they did, the remoteness of *Di* from his living descendants is apparent. The close association of the Shang ancestors with the Ten Suns is well supported by both the oracle bone texts⁴⁹ and by the later mythologies. On the other hand, the connection between *Di* (or Yao) and the Sun(s) is uncertain.

48 *Lüshi chungiu* 5.1-3.

49 Keightley *The Ancestral Landscape*, 27.

5 *Di as the Celestial Pole*

Besides the links with the Shang ancestors and thus the Ten Suns, there is also a possibility of linking, or maybe even identifying *Di* with the celestial pole. It is well documented that by the time of the Warring States the supreme deity Taiyi 太一 has been equated with the celestial pole,⁵⁰ which might reflect a much older tradition—that the Shang identified *Di* with the pole as well.⁵¹ Already in the *Lunyu* 論語 (Analects) we can find the famous passage comparing the virtue of government to the celestial pole—both standing still while the world / stars revolve around it.

子曰：“為政以德，譬如北辰，居其所而眾星共之。”

The master said »governing by virtue is taking the Pole Star as example – remaining at its place and all the myriad stars rotate around it.«⁵²

Shang *Di*'s link with the sky is evident in the oracle bone inscriptions where he commands and sends down meteorological phenomena as well as in him over-ranking the Ten Suns—and the only celestial body that could be imagined as above the suns is the pole star,⁵³ unless *Di* is the sky or the night sky itself. The ease with which the Zhou paired (or equated) him with Tian 天 (Heaven), also indicates his celestial nature.⁵⁴

Pankenier even proposed a more fanciful theory, claiming that the graph *di* represents a star diagram used to find the celestial pole, because there was no pole star close enough.⁵⁵ Due to the precession of the stars during the 3rd millennium BCE the star Thuban (α Draconis) was very close to the celestial pole (with a declination of $89^{\circ} 53'$ in 2775 BCE, closer than our Polaris, α UMi, currently is), but it moved away and during most of the antiquity no bright star was closer than 6° to the pole, with Thuban moving away and Kochab (β UMi) getting closer.

Pankenier suggested that this lack of an apparent pole star combined with the polar-equatorial focus of Chinese astrology could have fueled the Chinese

50 See Li Ling 李零, »An Archaeological Study of Taiyi Worship«, tr. by Donald Harper, *Early Medieval China* 2 (1995–96), 1–39.

51 Pankenier, »A Brief History of Beiji«, 213; Sarah Allan, »On the Identity of Shang Di 上帝 and the Origin of the Concept of a Celestial Mandate (*tian ming* 天命)«, *Early China* 31 (2007), 2–3.

52 *Lunyu* 2.1.

53 Allan, »On the identity of Shang Di«, 7.

54 Shaughnessy, *New Sources of Early Chinese History*, 314–317.

55 Pankenier, »A Brief History of Beiji«. I will summarize his arguments at some length below.

preoccupation during the 1st millennium BCE with the power of emptiness—a very intriguing idea.⁵⁶

Now, the Shang tombs and palaces were misaligned by 6–12° East from true North, while the earlier Erlitou 二里頭 sites⁵⁷ were misaligned to the West.⁵⁸ Around 1600 BCE, when the Shang came to power, both Tochab and Thuban were around 7° off the pole. The difference in alignment could be explained by the two cultures using different pole stars or by using the same star but taking the measurement during different time of the night. A third explanation could be that the Shang had a more complex method for measuring the pole, a method that was precise around 2000 BCE and already generated an error by 1600 BCE.

This method was to find the pole by using the stars around it. That is, taking three stars of Ursa Minor and linking them with three stars from Ursa Major, forming an hourglass shape with the celestial pole being where the lines cross. Linking Thuban, which is on the side of this hourglass, with κ Draconis also intersecting the center of this diagram where the pole is—or rather, where the pole was in 2000 BCE, because by the time of the Shang dynasty this method also produced an error of several degrees.

This diagram is very similar in shape to the character *di* in the oracle bone inscriptions and this might be the origin of that character. This theory can be supported by linguistic evidence by relating the etymology of *Di* to the root ‘to match, mate, fit, conform with’.

It should be made clear that Pankenier’s explanation is not supported by archaeological evidence, because the misalignment of the buildings can just as well be explained with the use of Thuban and Kochab for finding the northpole, just as he admitted.⁵⁹ Also the change in alignment around 1600 BCE seems much better explained by the replacement of Thuban by Kochab, because it was around that time when Kochab got closer to the pole compared to Thuban, than by supposing the invention of a more complex method back in 2000 BCE that left no mark in the archaeological record for several centuries and only appeared when it was already quite misaligned. Also the hypothesis requires that this ‘pre-dynastic Shang’ culture was so keen on precision that they discarded the trade-

56 Pankenier, »A Brief History of Beiji«, 220.

57 The hot debates about the identification of the Erlitou culture (or its earlier layers) with the Xia 夏 dynasty, the dynasty predating the Shang according to the Chinese historical tradition, are getting settled on a positive answer.

58 Pankenier, »A Brief History of Beiji«, 228.

59 Another problem is that even tombs that are not aligned to the North, but to other cardinal directions, show the same deviation by *circa* 10 degrees. Keightley, *The Ancestral Landscape*, 83.

tional pole star not for another star, but for a rather complex method, because the pole star generated an error of 4.5° , yet they were so traditional that they kept using that complex method when it was already misaligned by 7° .

The variants of the graph *di* also pose a problem: Since Pankenier explains the misalignment of the Shang tombs with the use of such a device for finding the celestial pole, it entails that the device was still in use, and if the graph for *di* is a depiction of this device it is hard to explain why the graph *di* is sometimes written with an extra, unconnected line on top.⁶⁰

Considering these difficulties, it is best to discard the proposal that the graph of *di* depicts an astronomical instrument or star chart that is also responsible for the misalignment of the tombs. Nevertheless, a strong argument can still be salvaged from Pankenier's proposal: The alignment of tombs is best explained by the position of the pole stars rather than such a device and if that is true it proves that the Shang wanted to align them to the pole.

On the other hand, the small shrine atop the tomb of queen Fu Hao 婦好 is aligned precisely to the cardinal directions, while the tomb underground is not. Apparently, more than one method was employed by the Shang to align their buildings, most likely a solar method for the erection of the shrine where ritual sacrifices were offered, and a polar method when constructing the tomb itself.⁶¹

This can be reconciled with our theories: The cyclical offerings to ancestors were linked with the Ten Suns, thus the solar alignment of the shrine, while the tombs themselves were aligned to the polestar. The cross shape of the tombs are probably representations of the cosmos,⁶² and in the royal tombs the North-South axis is more prominent; in lesser tombs there are only northern and southern ramps and in the smallest ones only a southern ramp.

This preferred treatment of the direction of South implies that the tombs themselves were not constructed to express the identification of the Shang with the Sun and with the East.⁶³ On the other hand, it matches perfectly with the idea of the Emperor in Heaven residing in the polestar facing south, a concept well documented in later ages.

60 An overview of the variants of the graph *di* can be found in Allan, »On the Identity of Shang Di«, 44-46. The variants mentioned are listed by Allan in table 3.

61 Pankenier, »A Brief History of Beiji«, 229n45.

62 Sarah Allan offered a solid argument that the Shang believed in a cross shaped world. (Allan, *The Shape of the Turtle*, 74-111).

63 Although it allows an identification with the Sun, since the sun is to the south if we take the midday Sun, rather than the Sun rising from the Tang Valley 湯谷 and Mulberry Tree in the East.

中宮天極星，其一明者，太一常居也

In the Central Palace [circumpolar stars] Heavenly Pole Star. This is a single bright [star], it is the regular residence of Taiyi.⁶⁴

The ritual position of the ruler facing southward is already apparent from the Zhou bronze inscriptions where royal audiences (with grants from the king) are a frequent topic.⁶⁵ At least by the time of Confucius the analogy with the pole star is made explicit. The character for 'north', *bei* 北, is represented by its homophone 背 meaning 'back'.⁶⁶ The prominence of the southern ramp in the tombs fits well into this picture and suggests that the concept of the high god, *Di*, residing in the polestar, facing south was already embraced by the Shang.

The different alignment of the buildings also shows that the Shang did not necessarily have a single, monolithic religious belief/cosmology and most of the theories presented above do not necessarily contradict each other. Rather than searching for a monolithic explanation of all facets of Shang beliefs, being open to the possibility of a more complex picture may greatly help our understanding.

6 The Abstractness of Di

Another characteristic of Di beside his remoteness is his abstractness, impersonal and impartial nature. This abstractness and the undefined nature of Shang Di has already been noted by K. C. Chang,⁶⁷ and further elaborated by Keightley, who observed that older ancestors were not only considered more powerful, but their powers were exercised in increasingly impersonal ways, losing their personalities, with only their rank being important (he found the root of Chinese bureaucratic thinking in this attitude) and Di was the most impersonal and 'bureaucratic' of all.⁶⁸

64 *Shiji* 27.1289

65 Edward L. Shaughnessy, »Western Zhou History«, in *The Cambridge History of Ancient China*, ed. by Michael Loewe (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 320.

66 Léon Wieger, *Chinese Characters* (New York: Paragon Book. Dover Publications, 1965), 80.

67 Zhang Guangzhi 張光直, »Shang-Zhou shenhua yu meishu zhong suojian ren yu dongwu guanxi zhi yanbian« 商周神話與美術中所見人與動物關係之演變 [Changing Relationship of Man and Animal in Shang and Chou Myths and Art], *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan Minzuxue yanjiusuo jikan* 中央研究院民族學研究所集刊 no 16 (Taipei, Autumn 1963), 142.

68 David N. Keightley, »The Religious Commitment: Shang Theology and the Genesis of Chinese Political Culture«, *History of Religions* 17,3/4 (1978), 219. Keightley remained uncommitted in the question whether Di was considered an ancestor of the royal line or not.

An even more radical interpretation has been proposed by Robert Eno: that there was no high god *Di* at all, and that *Di* is a generic term for any power, or for a specific group of powers, most likely those that are related to the core Shang lineage.⁶⁹ He proposed that etymologically the word *Di* originally meant ‘father who leads a lineage’.⁷⁰ There are some problems with this hypothesis. First, it is in conflict with the role of *Di* in the *bin* rituals.⁷¹ Second, if *Di* is only a collective name of powers also appearing individually, why then the expression of a power ‘ordering’ a phenomenon is never used with those individual powers? If Eno’s hypothesis is true and *Di* is the collective name for the royal core line ancestors, its implications are not very different from the theories that consider *Di* as the ancestor of the royal line. He is the abstraction of ancestors.

Leaving Eno’s suggestion aside, the abstract and impersonal nature of *Di* is an important aspect of Shang religious beliefs. He is an impartial power who can take side with the enemies of the Shang.

方戎征佳帝令作我禍。

That the [...] Fang are harming and attacking [us] means that *Di* is ordering them to make disasters on us⁷²

The frequent divinations about »will there be disaster tonight?« showed a strong fear of the nighttime, when the Ten Suns and the deified ancestors were powerless.⁷³ If *Di* is indeed linked with the pole star or the sky itself, than night is as much his domain as day. That the Shang feared the night shows that *Di* was not biased toward the them.⁷⁴

The abstractness, impersonality and impartiality of *Di* is strongly supported by evidence but we should keep in mind that his apparent lack of personality might be the result of the distortion of our sources: We do not know if any myths, now lost, were told about *Di* during the Shang. On the other hand, among the culture heroes, Yao and Shun had the least amount of detail,⁷⁵ so if

69 Eno, »Shang State«, 76.

70 Robert Eno, »Was There a High God Ti in Shang Religion?«, *Early China* 15 (1990), 18.

71 Eno is aware of this problem, but he dismisses it based on the rare occurrence of these inscriptions. Eno »Shang State Religion«, 76-77 and 96.

72 Keightley, *The Ancestral Landscape*, 59.

73 *Ibid.*, 31.

74 If Shang *Di* was not in an intimate relationship with the Shang—at least by the time of the last kings—this could explain why the Zhou conquerors could so easily spread the theory that they gained the support of the highest divinity.

75 Henri Maspéro, *La Chine antique* [Ancient China] (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1965), 44.

the identification of Yao of the Zhou myths as *Di* of the Shang is correct, the statement that Shang *Di* lacked personality is corroborated by the received mythological corpus.

7 *Roots of Astrological Thinking*

The main conclusion from the investigation of the aspects of *Di* of the Shang is that many characteristics of astrological thinking also applies to the Shang beliefs concerning *Di*, characteristics which were usually considered as new developments of the Spring and Autumn and the Warring States era. The presence of these characteristics in Shang religious beliefs implies that the strong distinction between systems of thought of the two eras should be toned down, with more emphasis on continuity.

It is still true that many developments took place during the millennium between the Shang and the Han, but many aspects had already visible roots during the Shang, even if their influence did not reach the critical mass to drastically change the paradigm. These aspects include the focus on timing; the distant and unbiased nature of the highest power; its abstract, disanthropomorphic nature; and the strategy of conforming to its unchangeable will.

The focus on proper timing dominated Shang divination.⁷⁶

專食日 𠄎 王受又

[In praying for harvest] it should be at mealtime that [we] perform the *you*-cutting ritual; the king will receive assistance.⁷⁷

翌庚寅于大庚

On the next *gengyin* [day 27] [we will make offering] to Da Geng⁷⁸

76 The most frequent topic for divination in the oracle bones was about the establishment of the ritual calendar of ancestral sacrifices. The politico-ritual importance of calendar-making for the Shang is debated: Pankenier claims (without offering any support) that already by the Xia it was the ruler's duty to harmonize his rule with the cycles of seasons and of the sky. (David Pankenier, »The Mandate of Heaven«, *Archaeology* 51,2 [1998], 29). Allan supposed that the sky is the physical source of timing, as it offered the basic experiences for it. (Allan, »On the Identity of Shang Di«, 3-4). On the other hand, Lewis considers the importance of calendar-making in the Yaodian as an evidence of its late origin. (Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China*, 103-104).

77 Keightley *The Ancestral Landscape*, 23.

78 *Ibid.*, 32.

今辛亥王○出若

On the present *xinbai* [day 48] if the king goes out, there will be approval.⁷⁹

This focus on timing returned to prominence with the *Yueling* literature of the late Warring States, and preoccupation with proper timing characterized many specialists from strategists to astrologers.⁸⁰

當天時，與之皆斷。當斷不斷，反受其亂。

Taking advantage of natural timeliness [天時], everything is decided in light of it.

When one ought to decide but does not, disorder will rebound upon him.⁸¹

The apparent distance and ambivalent stance of Shang Di toward the Shang is strongly supported by the evidence. He is not reachable directly by the Shang, just as Heaven or the Dao 道 is considered unknowable, and uninfluenceable (*ziran* 自然 and *wuwei* 無為) a millennium later.

Beliefs concerning the attitude of the supreme deity changed back and forth during the millennium. The indifference of the Shang dynasty *Di* is mirrored in the later occultist and Huang-Lao traditions and astrological texts of the late Warring States and Early Imperial era. But by the end of the Shang there was a tendency to interpret calamities as resulting from the ritual errors of humans rather than the capricious nature of deities.⁸² The Zhou Mandate of Heaven follows this direction: The Zhou felt an urgency to rule well and thus maintain the Mandate.

By the time of the Warring States the notion of morally indifferent powers return. This trend is reversed again by the synthesis Confucian ethics with correlative categories and the creation of a moralizing omenology during the Western Han—developments attributed to Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179–104 BCE).

If our perception of the abstractness of *Di* is correct, then a third common point between Shang religion and the Early Imperial natural philosophy/occultism is the disanthropomorphism of the highest power.

Another peculiarity is the concept that *Di* could not be influenced by sacrifices, and the only thing the Shang could do was trying hard to determine his

79 *Ibid.*, 75.

80 Many astrological portents, like the movement of planets, are interpreted as advantageous or disadvantageous times for different military activities in the astrological chapter of the *Sbi ji*, namely 27.

81 *Huanglao boshu* 71.117b. tr. by Randall Peerenboom, in *Law and Morality in Ancient China. The Silk Manuscripts of Huang-Lao* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 67.

82 David N. Keightley, »Shang Divination and Metaphysics«, *Philosophy East and West* 38,4 (1988), 388.

intentions and conform to it had a lasting influence. Most probably this idea served as the basis for the notion of conforming to a changing pattern. It paved the way for the importance of astrology and the regular need to update the calendar, thus shaping astrological thinking.

One might be inclined to carry this trail of thought further and connect it with peculiarities of Chinese political thinking and philosophy: obedience to changing edicts over obedience to laws set in stone might have contributed to the tenacity of Chinese civilization, while such an attitude could also have led to the preoccupation of Chinese philosophy with the pursuit of the correct Way instead of the ultimate truth.⁸³

8 Conclusion

Our insight into Shang religious and political thinking is extremely limited. By structuring the fragmented evidence in different ways, placing emphasis on different aspects, employing different readings of inscriptions and choosing different problems to be set aside, several competing interpretations have been offered by researchers on these topics. Any conclusions drawn from a reconstruction of Shang politico-religious thought will be highly hypothetical. Knowing this it can still be worthwhile because formulating hypotheses, even if later proven wrong, can facilitate investigations, offer new insight into the problems and guide research to new questions.

A common point of the different interpretations is that the nature of *Di*, who is strongly linked or even identified with the sky, appears either distant or abstract, possibly both. This aspect of early Chinese religion possibly had a great influence on astrological development, foreshadowing many characteristics of the late Warring States–Early Imperial era theories. These characteristics are the importance of proper timing, of conforming to the will of the Heaven, a distant and unbiased highest power with abstract and disanthropomorphic tendencies.

If our understanding of Shang religious beliefs is correct, then these later developments already had their roots at the beginnings of Chinese civilization, rather than being innovations of the later periods.

Concerning the importance of timing, or the unbiased, disinterested stance of the highest divinity, a three-phase development seems likely. The Western

83 For this characterization of the Chinese philosophical tradition, see A. C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1989), 3.

Zhou beliefs moved away from the Shang, but this trend was reversed during the Warring States period. The development of other aspects is different. The change to a non-personal connection between the rulers and the divine occurred during the Eastern Zhou period, when the royal dynasties with personal connections to their deified ancestors lost political power. So for example in this aspect it is the two earlier periods (Shang and Western Zhou) are similar.

Therefore, we cannot fit a single scheme that explains all aspects of politico-religious thinking. The ancient Chinese faced a handful of questions, and although these were interrelated, still many different combinations of answers were open to them. Paradigms of interlocking theories probably existed, and they are a useful tool for us to categorize intellectual history, but each question, each aspect of their politico-religious beliefs has its own history.

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