

# **Religions of Ancient China**

**by**

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## Chapter 1. The Ancient Faith

Philosophical Theory of the Universe.--The problem of the universe has never offered the slightest difficulty to Chinese philosophers. Before the beginning of all things, there was Nothing. In the lapse of ages Nothing coalesced into Unity, the Great Monad. After more ages, the Great Monad separated into Duality, the Male and Female Principles in nature; and then, by a process of biogenesis, the visible universe was produced.

Popular Cosmogony.--An addition, however, to this simple system had to be made, in deference to, and on a plane with, the intelligence of the masses. According to this, the Male and Female Principles were each subdivided into Greater and Lesser, and then from the interaction of these four agencies a being, named P'an Ku, came into existence. He seems to have come into life endowed with perfect knowledge, and his function was to set the economy of the universe in order. He is often depicted as wielding a huge adze, and engaged in constructing the world. With his death the details of creation began. His breath became the wind; his voice, the thunder; his left eye, the sun; his right eye, the moon; his blood flowed in rivers; his hair grew into trees and plants; his flesh became the soil; his sweat descended as rain; while the parasites which infested his body were the origin of the human race.

Recognition and Worship of Spirits.--Early Chinese writers tell us that Fu Hsi, B.C. 2953-2838, was the first Emperor to organize sacrifices to, and worship of, spirits. In this he was followed by the Yellow Emperor, B.C. 2698-2598, who built a temple for the worship of God, in which incense was used, and first sacrificed to the Mountains and Rivers. He is also said to have established the worship of the sun, moon, and five planets, and to have elaborated the ceremonial of ancestral worship.

God the Father, Earth the Mother.--The Yellow Emperor was followed by the Emperor Shao Hao, B.C. 2598-2514, "who instituted the music of the Great Abyss in order to bring spirits and men into harmony." Then came the Emperor Chuan Hsu, B.C. 2514-2436, of whom it is said that he appointed an officer "to preside over the worship of God and Earth, in order to form a link between the spirits and man," and also "caused music to be played for the enjoyment of God." Music, by the way, is said to have been introduced into worship in imitation of thunder, and was therefore supposed to be pleasing to the Almighty. After him followed the Emperor Ti K'u, B.C. 2436-2366, who dabbled in astronomy, and "came to a knowledge of spiritual beings, which he respectfully worshipped." The Emperor Yao, B.C. 2357-2255, built a temple for the worship of God, and also caused dances to be performed for the enjoyment of God on occasions of special sacrifice and communication with the spiritual world. After him, we reach the Emperor Shun, B.C. 2255-2205, in whose favour Yao abdicated.

Additional Deities.--Before, however, Shun ventured to mount the throne, he consulted the stars, in order to find out if the unseen Powers were favourable to his elevation; and on receiving a satisfactory reply, "he proceeded to sacrifice to God, to the Six Honoured Ones (unknown), to the Mountains and Rivers, and to Spirits in general. . . . In the second month of the year, he made a tour of inspection eastwards, as far as Mount T'ai (in modern Shantung), where he presented a burnt offering to God, and sacrificed to the Mountains and Rivers."

God punishes the wicked and rewards the good.--The Great Yu, who drained the empire, and came to the throne in B.C. 2205 as first Emperor of the Hsia dynasty, followed in the lines of his pious predecessors. But the Emperor K'ung Chia, B.C. 1879-1848, who at first had treated the Spirits with all due reverence, fell into evil ways, and was abandoned by God. This was the beginning of the end. In B.C. 1766 T'ang the Completer, founder of the Shang dynasty, set to work to overthrow Chieh Kuei, the last ruler of the Hsia dynasty. He began by sacrificing to Almighty God, and asked for a blessing on his undertaking. And in his subsequent proclamation to the empire, he spoke of that God as follows: "God has given to every man a conscience; and if all men acted in accordance with its dictates, they would not stray from the right path. . . . The way of God is to bless the good and punish the bad. He has sent down calamities on the House of Hsia, to make manifest its crimes."

God manifests displeasure.--In B.C. 1637 the Emperor T'ai Mou succeeded. His reign was marked by the supernatural appearance in the palace of two mulberry-trees, which in a single night grew to such a size that they could hardly be spanned by two hands. The Emperor was terrified; whereupon a Minister said, "No prodigy is a match for virtue. Your Majesty's government is no doubt at fault, and some reform of conduct is necessary." Accordingly, the Emperor began to act more circumspectly; after which the mulberry-trees soon withered and died.

Revelation in a dream.--The Emperor Wu Ting, B.C. 1324-1264, began his reign by not speaking for three years, leaving all State affairs to be decided by his Prime Minister, while he himself gained experience. Later on, the features of a sage were revealed to him in a dream; and on waking, he caused a portrait of the apparition to be prepared and circulated throughout the empire. The sage was found, and for a long time aided the Emperor in the right administration of government. On the occasion of a sacrifice, a pheasant perched upon the handle of the great sacrificial tripod, and crowed, at which the Emperor was much alarmed. "Be not afraid," cried a Minister; "but begin by reforming your government. God looks down upon mortals, and in accordance with their deserts grants them many years or few. God does not shorten men's lives; they do that themselves. Some are wanting in virtue, and will not acknowledge their transgressions; only when God chastens them do they cry, What are we to do?"

Anthropomorphism and Fetishism.--One of the last Emperors of the Shang dynasty, Wu I, who reigned B.C. 1198-1194, even went so far as "to make an

image in human form, which he called God. With this image he used to play at dice, causing some one to throw for the image; and if 'God' lost, he would overwhelm the image with insult. He also made a bag of leather, which he filled with blood and hung up. Then he would shoot at it, saying that he was shooting God. By and by, when he was out hunting, he was struck down by a violent thunderclap, and killed."

God indignant.--Finally, when the Shang dynasty sank into the lowest depths of moral abasement, King Wu, who charged himself with its overthrow, and who subsequently became the first sovereign of the Chou dynasty, offered sacrifices to Almighty God, and also to Mother Earth. "The King of Shang," he said in his address to the high officers who collected around him, "does not reverence God above, and inflicts calamities on the people below. Almighty God is moved with indignation." On the day of the final battle he declared that he was acting in the matter of punishment merely as the instrument of God; and after his great victory and the establishment of his own line, it was to God that he rendered thanks.

No Devil, No Hell.--In this primitive monotheism, of which only scanty, but no doubt genuine, records remain, no place was found for any being such as the Buddhist Mara or the Devil of the Old and New Testaments. God inflicted His own punishments by visiting calamities on mankind, just as He bestowed His own rewards by sending bounteous harvests in due season. Evil spirits were a later invention, and their operations were even then confined chiefly to tearing people's hearts out, and so forth, for their own particular pleasure; we certainly meet no cases of evil spirits wishing to undermine man's allegiance to God, or desiring to make people wicked in order to secure their everlasting punishment. The vision of Purgatory, with all its horrid tortures, was introduced into China by Buddhism, and was subsequently annexed by the Taoists, some time between the third and sixth centuries A.D.

Chinese Terms for God.--Before passing to the firmer ground, historically speaking, of the Chou dynasty, it may be as well to state here that there are two terms in ancient Chinese literature which seem to be used indiscriminately for God. One is /T'ien/, which has come to include the material heavens, the sky; and the other is /Shang Ti/, which has come to include the spirits of deceased Emperors. These two terms appear simultaneously, so to speak, in the earliest documents which have come down to us, dating back to something like the twentieth century before Christ. Priority, however, belongs beyond all doubt to /T'ien/, which it would have been more natural to find meaning, first the visible heavens, and secondly the Deity, whose existence beyond the sky would be inferred from such phenomena as lightning, thunder, wind, and rain. But the process appears to have been the other way, so far at any rate as the written language is concerned. The Chinese script, when it first came into existence, was purely pictorial, and confined to visible objects which were comparatively easy to depict. There does not seem to have been any attempt to draw a picture of the sky. On the other hand, the character /T'ien/ was just such a

representation of a human being as would be expected from the hand of a prehistoric artist; and under this unmistakable shape the character appears on bells and tripods, as seen in collections of inscriptions, so late as the sixth and seventh centuries B.C., after which the head is flattered to a line, and the arms are raised until they form another line parallel to that of the head.

Distinction between T'ien and Shang Ti.--The term /Shang Ti/ means literally Supreme Ruler. It is not quite so vague as /T'ien/, which seems to be more of an abstraction, while /Shang Ti/ is a genuinely personal God. Reference to /T'ien/ is usually associated with fate or destiny, calamities, blessings, prayers for help, etc. The commandments of /T'ien/ are hard to obey; He is compassionate, to be feared, unjust, and cruel. /Shang Ti/ lives in heaven, walks, leaves tracks on the ground, enjoys the sweet savour of sacrifice, approves or disapproves of conduct, deals with rewards and punishments in a more particular way, and comes more actually into touch with the human race.

Thus /Shang Ti/ would be the God who walked in the garden in the cool of the day, the God who smelled the sweet savour of Noah's sacrifice, and the God who allowed Moses to see His back. /T'ien/ would be the God of Gods of the Psalms, whose mercy endureth for ever; the everlasting God of Isaiah, who fainteth not, neither is weary.

Roman Catholic Dissensions.--These two, in fact, were the very terms favoured by the early Jesuit missionaries to China, though not with the limitations above suggested, as fit the proper renderings for God; and of the two terms the great Manchu Emperor K'ang Hsi chose /T'ien/. It has been thought that the conversion of China to Christianity under the guiding influence of the Jesuits would soon have become an accomplished fact, but for the ignorant opposition to the use of these terms by the Franciscans and Dominicans, who referred this question, among others, to the Pope. In 1704 Clement XI published a bull declaring that the Chinese equivalent for God was /T'ien Chu/=Lord of Heaven; and such it has continued to be ever since, so far as the Roman Catholic church is concerned, in spite of the fact that /T'ien Chu/ was a name given at the close of the third century B.C. to one of the Eight Spirits.

The two Terms are One.--That the two terms refer in Chinese thought to one and the same Being, though possibly with differing attributes, even down to modern times, may be seen from the account of a dream by the Emperor Yung Lo, A.D. 1403-1425, in which His Majesty relates that an angel appeared to him, with a message from /Shang Ti/; upon which the Emperor remarked, "Is not this a command from /T'ien/?" A comparison might perhaps be instituted with the use of "God" and "Jehovah" in the Bible. At the same time it must be noted that this view was not suggested by the Emperor K'ang Hsi, who fixed upon /T'ien/ as the appropriate term. It is probable that, vigorous Confucianist as he was, he was anxious to appear on the side rather of an abstract than of a personal Deity, and that he was repelled by the overwrought anthropomorphism of the Christian God.

His conversion was said to have been very near at times; we read, however, that, when hard pressed by the missionaries to accept baptism, "he always excused himself by saying that he worshipped the same God as the Christians."

God in the "Odes."--The Chou dynasty lasted from B.C. 1122 to B.C. 255. It was China's feudal age, when the empire, then included between latitude 34-40 and longitude 109-118, was split up into a number of vassal States, which owned allegiance to a suzerain State. And it is to the earlier centuries of the Chou dynasty that must be attributed the composition of a large number of ballads of various kinds, ultimately collected and edited by Confucius, and now known as the /Odes/. From these /Odes/ it is abundantly clear that the Chinese people continued to hold, more clearly and more firmly than ever, a deep-seated belief in the existence of an anthropomorphic and personal God, whose one care was the welfare of the human race:--

There is Almighty God;  
Does He hate any one?

He reigns in glory.--The soul of King Wen, father of the King Wu below, and posthumously raised by his son to royal rank, is represented as enjoying happiness in a state beyond the grave:--

King Wen is on high,  
In glory in heaven.  
His comings and his goings  
Are to and from the presence of God.

He is a Spirit.--Sometimes in the /Odes/ there is a hint that God, in spite of His anthropomorphic semblance, is a spirit:--

The doings of God  
Have neither sound nor smell.

Spiritual Beings.--Spirits were certainly supposed to move freely among mortals:--

Do not say, This place is not public;  
No one can see me here.  
The approaches of spiritual Beings  
Cannot be calculated beforehand;  
But on no account should they be ignored.

The God of Battle.--In the hour of battle the God of ancient China was as much a participator in the fight as the God of Israel in the Old Testament:--

God is on your side!

was the cry which stimulated King Wu to break down the opposing ranks of Shang. To King Wu's father, and others, direct communications had previously been made from heaven, with a view to the regeneration of the empire:--

The dynasties of Hsia and Shang  
Had not satisfied God with their government;  
So throughout the various States  
He sought and considered  
For a State on which He might confer the rule.

God said to King Wen,  
I am pleased with your conspicuous virtue,  
Without noise and without display,  
Without heat and without change,  
Without consciousness of effort,  
Following the pattern of God.

God said to King Wen,  
Take measures against hostile States,  
Along with your brethren,  
Get ready your grappling-irons,  
And your engines of assault,  
To attack the walls of Ts'ung.

God sends Famine.--The /Ode/ from which the following extract is taken carries us back to the ninth century B.C., at the time of a prolonged and disastrous drought:--

Glorious was the Milky Way,  
Revolving brightly in the sky,  
When the king said, Alas!  
What crime have my people committed now,  
That God sends down death and disorder,  
And famine comes upon us again?  
There is no spirit to whom I have not sacrificed;  
There is no victim that I have grudged;  
Our sacrificial symbols are all used up;--  
How is it that I am not heard?

The Confucian Criterion.--The keystone of the Confucian philosophy, that man is born good, will be found in the following lines:--

How mighty is God!  
How clothed in majesty is God,  
And how unsearchable are His judgments!  
God gives birth to the people,



But their natures are not constant;  
All have the same beginning,  
But few have the same end.

God, however, is not held responsible for the sufferings of mankind. King Wen, in an address to the last tyrant of the House of Shang, says plainly,

It is not God who has caused this evil time,  
But it is you who have strayed from the old paths.

The Associate of God.--Worshipped on certain occasions as the Associate of God, and often summoned to aid in hours of distress or danger, was a personage known as Hou Chi, said to have been the original ancestor of the House of Chou. His story, sufficiently told in the /Odes/, is curious for several reasons, and especially for an instance in Chinese literature, which, in the absence of any known husband, comes near suggesting the much-vexed question of parthenogenesis:--

She who first gave birth to our people  
Was the lady Chiang Yuan.  
How did she give birth to them?  
She offered up a sacrifice  
That she might not be childless;  
Then she trod in a footprint of God's, and conceived,  
The great and blessed one,  
Pregnant with a new birth to be,  
And brought forth and nourished  
Him who was Hou Chi.

When she had fulfilled her months,  
Her firstborn came forth like a lamb.  
There was no bursting, no rending,  
No injury, no hurt,  
In order to emphasise his divinity.  
Did not God give her comfort?  
Had He not accepted her sacrifice,  
So that thus easily she brought forth her son?

He was exposed in a narrow lane,  
But sheep and oxen protected and suckled him;  
He was exposed in a wide forest,  
But woodcutters found him;  
He was exposed on cold ice,  
But birds covered him with their wings.

Apotheosis of Hou Chi.--And so he grew to man's estate, and taught the people husbandry, with a success that has never been rivalled. Consequently, he was deified, and during several centuries of the Chou dynasty was united in worship with God:--

O wise Hou Chi,  
Fit Associate of our God,  
Founder of our race,  
There is none greater than thou!  
Thou gavest us wheat and barley,  
Which God appointed for our nourishment,  
And without distinction of territory,  
Didst inculcate the virtues over our vast dominions.

Other Deities.--During the long period covered by the Chou dynasty, various other deities, of more or less importance, were called into existence.

The patriarchal Emperor Shen Nung, B.C. 2838-2698, who had taught his people to till the ground and eat of the fruits of their labour, was deified as the tutelary genius of agriculture:--

That my fields are in such good condition  
Is matter of joy to my husbandmen.  
With lutes, and with drums beating,  
We will invoke the Father of Husbandry,  
And pray for sweet rain,  
To increase the produce of our millet fields,  
And to bless my men and their wives.

There were also sacrifices to the Father of War, whoever he may have been; to the Spirits of Wind, Rain, and Fire; and even to a deity who watched over the welfare of silkworms. Since those days, the number of spiritual beings who receive worship from the Chinese, some in one part of the empire, some in another, has increased enormously. A single work, published in 1640, gives notices of no fewer than eight hundred divinities.

Superstitions.--During the period under consideration, all kinds of superstition prevailed; among others, that of referring to the rainbow. The rainbow was believed by the vulgar to be an emanation from an enormous oyster away in the great ocean which surrounded the world, i.e. China. Philosophers held it to be the result of undue proportions in the mixture of the two cosmogonical principles which when properly blended produce the harmony of nature. By both parties it was considered to be an inauspicious manifestation, and merely to point at it would produce a sore on the hand.

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