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MysteryHistory

Mystery of Chinese Ancient History

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Chinese ancient history, i.e., 3000 to 300BC, is difficult to figure out, as information sources are scarce, and what sources that are available are unreliable: not only do they contain legends and folktales passed down as facts, but they could have been deliberately forged or extensively revised by later authors with particular agendas. Note that such revision/forgery is not necessarily for a sinister purpose, but more for round off stories. In particular, as tribes merged and states unified, separate ancestral legends get merged into a common "family history", especially if they previously had alliances and marriages so that, once you start counting descent on both male and female sides, almost everyone is related to everyone else.

Legend has it that around 5000 years ago China was ruled by the Yellow Emperor, from whom the good rulers Yao, Shun and the chiefs of the Xia, Shang and Chou tribes all descended. Vague stories exist about the chiefs Gao Yang, who "separated heaven from earth", i.e., claimed exclusive right to communicate with the gods, thus justifying his right to command over the rest of the tribe members, and Gao Xin about whom little is known other than his many wives gave birth to important tribe founding chiefs after swallowing bird eggs or stepping on giant footprints (probably reflecting primitive fertility rites). Various legends about the wives and the seasons, sun and moon also indicate that his tribe devised some system of calendar to time agricultural activities, an achievement that may have justified the tribe's leadership position in its region. Gao Yang means High Sun, and Gao Xin High Firewood, indicating the tribes engaged in some form of sun/fire worship.

The main documentary evidence from the Shang era, approximately 1500 to 1000BC, is piles of turtle shells and cattle shoulder blades recording the results of oracle divination: Shangs and later people believed that heating up a shell/bone till it cracks reveals divine answers on whether a proposed action is blessed by the gods or not. The priest/oracle, based on his observation of the shape and structure of the cracks, would then carve out a commentary on the shell/bone, thus leaving behind a brief description of some major event requiring divine instruction at the time. Together with pottery and jade/metal artifacts discovered by archaeologists, and later written documents, it has been possible to deduce an outline of Shang history. In particular, the later documents describe a number of tribal migrations to different capitals. Looking at its primitive writing tools and the

prominence of cattle in both documentary information and legends, the Shangs appear to have been in transition from a semi-nomadic to agricultural subsistence, and it is not easy to separate Shang-related legends into those they originate themselves and those they appropriated from the agricultural tribes they merged with

The Zhou era, approximately 1000 to 300BC, left behind bronze utensils that commemorate major events with much longer text on them, using a more advanced ideographic system allowing detailed description of events as well as the people involved. This also allows the written material by contemporary and later authors to be authenticated by comparing with the information on the utensils. The Zhou court, however, had to move east at around 700BC because of various problems in the west, burying much of its bronze for modern rediscovery. Losing most of its territory, wealth and power, it virtually stopped further bronze utensil making, though various vassal states continue to make small numbers of their own. While some records, written on pieces of wood or bamboo and used as burial goods in tombs of nobility, survived for future rediscovery, and their contents were transcribed into books that survived to modern times, the main source of information had to be later writings that supposedly cover these same events.

In comparison, the Xia era described in the legends as preceding Shang, left behind no solid evidence of its existence at all: Archaeologists have so far found no identifiable Xia objects or sites. Its most important figure, the Great Yu, was supposed to have managed a nationwide flood relief campaign that transformed China geographically, divided the now flood free country into regions for better governance, and organized various barbarian tribes too. The two long stories describing these (one a discussion between Yu, the reigning monarch Shun, and Chief Justice Gao Tao, and one the territorial account) are almost certainly later inventions, since the Xia era would not have the means to record such lengthy accounts, considering how primitive the writings of the later Shang era were. The territory described also appears too extensive for what was a small and primitive tribe to govern, and reflected later conditions. In fact, the account of the rivers in the article sounds like a plan for water transport, not flood relief, and probably someone looking for writings on Yu simply took a later article because it seemed to be related and added some Yu stuff to it.

Reports of two military campaigns of the era are similarly suspect, one involving two astrological officials who failed to produce good calendars predicting astronomical events accurately. While dealing with floods arising from the silting of Yellow River, and fixing a calendar to guide serfs to plant crops at the right time, were important matters for monarchs and tribe chiefs, they could hardly be at the level of sophistication described in the stories. (In fact, the names of the two officials, Xi and He, came from the legend that Queen Xihe gave birth to ten suns, which appears to represent the invention of the 10-day counting period, i.e. week; another queen Changyi was supposed to have given birth to 12 moons, i.e., the idea of the 12-month year. The ten-sun legend then led to the story of Chang-Er the Moon Maiden, which appears to involve a marriage alliance between the sun-bird worshipping tribe headed by Gao Xin, or the arrow shooter Hou Yi depending on the version of the story, and the moon worshipping tribe from the west, with some trouble involving an earlier alliance with a river-dwelling tribe. Probably Hou Yi defeated Chang-Er's former husband and took her as war trophy, and she later took revenge by arranging his murder. A suspiciously similar story of the Manchu tribe involves the wind god stealing the thunder god's wife, which appears also to parallel a story widespread among southern tribes about a tribal war, in which the thunder god caused a flood to destroy a sibling tribe - to be discussed later in sections 4-7. Note that the bird tribes are related to the wind, while thunder/rain/river is related to the dragon. There is some kind of longstanding tribal conflict reflected in various different legends.)

However, given the consistency with which the Xia era and Yu appear in the numerous accounts, including poems by Qu Yuan who could not have a motive to forge history, there was at least a standard legend concerning the Xias that had some factual basis, with people who genuinely believed in the story passing it down many generations. Further, several Zhou states had historical writings that used the Xia calendar, which differed from the Zhou calendar by two months and the Shang

calendar by one, and Confucius several times referred to old Xia rituals being retained in some of the states whose ruling families were descended from the Xias. In other words, the Xia dynasty's existence left too many traces to be mere legend. The issue will be further discussed in Section 4.

The information available indicates a very primitive state of life up to late Xia times. The legends mentioned by Qu Yuan, for example included one about a Xia usurper killing an earlier usurper (none other than Hou Yi, who shot down nine out of ten suns with arrows) in league with Hou Yi's wife, and then together eating his flesh; another story from Qu Yuan poems was about the great great grandfather of King Cheng Tang of Shang herding cattle in the territory of the Youyi tribe, seducing the daughter of the chief, and getting murdered as result. Cheng Tang himself had a chief minister who was originally a slave cook given to him as part of his wife's dowry, indicating that early Shang times was pretty primitive too, so that some of his sophisticated words are also later inventions, and reflect more the political ideas of the Zhous (see section 7).

Two stories about Xia figures indicate that human sacrifice was practised. Yu's son Qi was supposed to have received from heaven the divine music Nine Verses for his gift of beautiful maidens, and the longevity elixir that Chang-Er swallowed, causing her to rise up to the moon and live there for eternity, was given to her husband by the western queen mother in return for his watering her magical plant with human blood. The Shang dynasty turtle shells record widespread practice of human sacrifice, and there is no reason to believe the Xias were very different, though the scale might have been smaller as its military machine would have been less efficient and population density then was probably lower. Yu himself was said to have executed a tribal chief for late arrival to a gathering, contradicting the benevolent image usually presented. The embellishments the Yu stories received probably started naturally though modestly with stories being told and retold, and might have received a big push from Moist writers, who modeled their social philosophy ideas on the example of Yu serving the people selflessly, and had a motive to exaggerate his achievements and the sophistication of his government.

In summary, Shang and earlier history is mixed up with mythology, in much the same way as Homer and Hesiod, but the curious issue is why the Zhous, who had an extremely sophisticated system of government, did not leave behind a more ordered set of historic material. In fact, this deficiency even led some to doubt the information about Zhou feudal system as later forgery too, by Confucians describing much later ideas as historical. It is this mystery that we wish to discuss first.

1. [The great destruction](#)

A great deal of blame has been placed on Qin Shi Huang for ordering the burning of books and the execution of the scholars who kept the books. The actual situation was much more complex. The Qin decree ordered the destruction of (a) history archives of the six conquered Warring States because of their hostility to Qin (b) histories, classics and philosophy writings outside the possession of court scholars and state schools, to suppress deviant learning and unauthorized discussions of policies and history. The executions of scholars occurred later, when some ran away after being sent to search for longevity elixirs wanted by the emperor, while others were reported for slandering him (perhaps criticizing his sending the elixir search teams).

The book burning was devastating to documents of the Warring States period: while Qin state documents remained available to Han historians, they were of low usability, being sketchy and mostly undated. Without the rival states' records, the Qin documents were also hard to verify and supplement to get a more complete and accurate picture. Virtually all our information about the Warring States came from the book *Warring States Plotting*, compiled by Liu Xiang from scattered documents left by the Vertical-Horizontal diplomats and their followers (Vertical means States should form a North-South united front against Qin in the West, while Horizontal means they should submit to Qin westward.) On the other hand, the Confucian classics, both historical writings and literary/philosophical material that contain

historical anecdotes for illustration, survived largely intact: not only were the official libraries' holdings kept, their widespread use ensured that enough forbidden copies were hidden by their owners all over the country, to re-emerge in Han times. It was probably the Han scholars that chose to dismiss some of the manuscripts as less important or less orthodox, causing these to be lost later because of the scarcity of copies. To be fair to them though, many of the manuscripts found by court collectors were indeed suspect, with new content pretending to be old.

In terms of widespread destruction of documents, the western Han Redbrow Rebellion, the eastern Han Yellow Turban Rebellion, the Jin era Eight Princes Turmoil followed by the Turmoil of the Five Barbarian Tribes, had far greater impact. Court archives and scholars' holdings simply ceased to exist, with wholesale razing of buildings and dispersal/killing of bookish people. The Eastern Jin officials made some attempt to re-create the book collections but was hampered by the simple unavailability of material, and a number of books were in essence re-written by imagining what the content might have been. Books in wide usage normally had surviving copies available; others could be reconstructed more or less accurately because they were widely quoted in other books or many people were familiar with them; yet others were considered important enough to get reconstructions that reflected their spirit though not exact words. Books that did not fall into these categories were simply lost.

The question is why this affected different eras differently: while official rival Warring States records were destroyed by Qin, why no private writings were hidden for later re-discovery.* Why there appeared to be a drought of historical material for the early Zhou and late Spring-Autumn periods, while the period in between had a rich supply. This has to do with what amounts to intellectual trends of ancient China.

*note: there was a Bamboo Book of Annals supposedly discovered in an ancient grave during the Jin era, but its authenticity is highly suspect; like parts of the Ancient Book (one of the five confucian classics) and Confucius's Sayings at Home, the book was likely to have been a compilation of information from other books and orally transmitted information.

2. [Who wants history?](#)

The usual reason given to justify the study of history is that it provides guidance for future actions. This is such a logically obvious statement that one does not always recognize its potential subversiveness to autocrats: if the current ruling methods already embody the lessons and are the best possible, then going back to history is unnecessary. Feudal China officials frequently had to argue for precedents not because they recall some past ideal golden age that overshadow the present, but that they come from the emperor's ancestors to whom descendants need to show respect, thus avoiding the issue of the present ruler's perfection.

Confucian scholars frequently invoke the ideal of Great Unity, the age when the throne was not considered a personal property to be passed down from father to son, but a public trust granted to the best person, chosen by some form of popular will expressing the mandate of heaven. This ancient democratic vision had its basis in the tribal origin of the early Chinese state: since every male member of the tribe was a relative of the chief, everyone had some right to inherit, and since every male was a tribal fighter, choosing a commander that everyone was willing to obey unquestioningly, was something of a practical necessity. It should also be remembered that the early tribes were matriarchal, and male leaders were like hired managers chosen by the matriarchs to lead the male members in jobs containing "heavy lifting" parts. We can recall similarly democratic tribal

organizations in Greek, Roman and Germanic history.

(The founders of the Zhou and Shang families were said to be both brothers of King Yao. Both Shun and Yu were descended from Yao's cousin Gao Yang, from whom Qu Yuan also claimed descent. All are supposed to descend from the Yellow Emperor. While these might not be factual family lineage, they show how power relations were perceived in ancient times.)

During the Han era, some stubborn scholars insisted on propagating this and other unacceptable ideas in the court of Emperors Wu and Zao, and were executed because of it. History, in short, was a risky business. A similar brush with danger occurred in an earlier realm, when two scholars debated whether rebelling against tyranny was compatible with loyalty, thus implying that the overthrow of Qin and its subsequent replacement by Han was in some way wrong. The emperor Jing, caught between condemning his own rebel grandfather on one and endorsing future rebellion on the other, had to close down the discussion without a conclusion.

In view of this risk, history was often treated as a form of literature, an activity that does honour to the expressive skills of the writer and provides pleasure to the reader. When the ideas of logic and rhetoric came to be developed in the late Spring-Autumn and early Warring States period, history was also used as argumentive fodder to help in philosophical discourses and diplomatic debates. For such purposes, historical accuracy was of low importance, relative to entertainment value and rhetorical persuasiveness. Witty or exciting stories are better than accurate ones.

The very first general history of China, Sima Qian's Historical Records, had numerous examples of such sensationalized stories. Most of these were probably not invented by Sima himself, but it appears that he tended to select the more exciting versions from alternative stories found in the court manuscript collections. An example was the story of the replaced baby, which appears twice in his book, one relating to Zhou's King Li who was driven out by rebellious knights for his tyrannical rule; when the soldiers searched for the crown prince to kill, the king's loyal minister handed over his own son instead, and later installed the prince as the new king. The second occurrence was 500 years later, when the duke of Jin ordered the extermination of the Zhao family, but a loyal servant hid the heir, handing over his own son. The story has various adventurous details of the heir's survival and return. However, the true version is known: earlier history text shows that the heir was in fact raised in the ducal palace by the widowed princess, wife of the previous Lord Zhao, probably born of a low status mother so normally not entitled to inherit, but was made the new Lord Zhao with all other claimants having been eliminated. He was never at risk of being included in the family extermination. The remaining parts of the story were sordid rather than exciting, involving adultery, family infighting and inter family backstabbing, rather than loyalty and heroism.

Another example was the story of the alarm flame: King Yiu was supposed have entertained his favored concubine by lighting the alarm flame used to muster troops in the event of an attack, so that when a barbarian invasion actually occurred, the armies' commanders ignored it thinking it was just another joke, resulting in King Yiu dying in the subsequent rout. The only problem with the story is: the location where he was supposed to have been killed was several days' march from the capital, and it appears he was actually on the way to invade the rebellious state of his father in law, supporting his elder son in a succession dispute, and was killed in battle along with the younger chosen heir. Their marching army may have been ambushed by barbarian troops allied to the rebels. The nomads then proceeded to attack the capital, but left after being paid. That the Zhous retained control of the capital was shown by the fact that another younger son reigned there for 20 years, while the elder brother reigned in the east, till the lords of Jin and Qin, situated to the north and the west of the western capital, invaded in the name of the elder brother, killing the younger usurper, and divided the territory between themselves, leaving the king with the rump territory around the eastern

capital. In fact the Qins coveted the Jin portion north of the Wei river and it changed hands several times between the two sides during the Spring Autumn and Warring States periods till the final Qin conquest. The actual story was therefore very much realpolitic, not picturesque like the more amusing version commonly propagated.

Once we appreciate these alternative traditions of history as political education, and history as literature, ancient Chinese history could then be studied in a clearer perspective. We now look more closely at some details.

3. [The five classics](#)

Much of our information about ancient China comes from the four early Zhou classics, used in state schools to train sons of nobility as future officials: Classic Poems, Ancient Book, Book of Change, and Zhou Conventions. While Ancient Book comes closest to being a history text, its content actually concentrates on ideological foundations: material for each of the three periods it covers, the ascension of Yu to the throne for his flood relief achievement in the reign of King Shun, after an unsuccessful effort by his father kun under King Yao; the conquest of the misgoverned realm of Xia by the better ruler Cheng Tang of Shang followed by Pan Geng's migration to a new capital to make a fresh start, and a similar change of dynasty from the decadent King Jiu of Shang to the orderly Zhou, ending with a series of proclamations and battle oaths of early Zhou times setting out its ideas of statehood, show it to be a textbook for indoctrination. Unlike a history text which needs regular updating, Ancient Book remained more or less unchanged once the Zhou ideology content was completed. The two later items, dated several hundred years afterwards, were isolated additions, presumably because later editors thought their content fitted in particularly well.

Having completed Ancient Book, the court authors moved on to collecting poems instead: the three groups of material, folk songs, ceremonial chants and genteel expressions, all had purposes related to politics rather than recreation: for the nobility trainee officials to keep in touch with the feelings of the people they would later govern, do their part in state rituals seeking divine blessings and audiences/banquets cementing feudal relations, and comment on events and personalities. The Book of Change recorded divination procedures together with related events, while Zhou Conventions describes the government structure, though its authenticity is suspect as much of its content seems to reflect later practices - it appears to have been extensively re-written by later authors.

It was Confucius who added a fifth classic, Spring-Autumn, an itemized chronicle listing major events in his own state Lu and its neighbours, based on Lu state's own archive as well as material he collected from elsewhere, in particular the Zhou central collection (where Laozi was archivist). By careful selection of particular words, he subtly inserted his own commentary on each event and its perpetrator as positive or negative - an experienced politician, he knew that historical discussion might be considered subversive, and made no direct comments.

Subsequently his followers, who spread to other states, expanded the effort by augmenting the brief chronicle with more detailed accounts of the events. The raw material for these accounts were mainly records of court activities and discussions from the various states, and Zuo Qiu Ming, who appears to have been a junior colleague of Confucius though little is known about his life, is credited with starting this effort and passing down his writings to successive generations of students, who probably augmented and polished the material well into the Warring States period. Because of the wide spread of Confucian training schools, many copies existed and survived, so that the period covered by Spring-Autumn is better known to posterity than the two periods before it and after it. Zuo Qiu Ming is also credited (but less firmly) with a second collection Stately Discourses, though the most probable situation was that there was originally just a single collection, which he started and his students augmented, and parts of the collection that chronologically fitted the Confucian

chronicle were taken out and separately maintained and edited, resulting in two texts that roughly cover the same period and overlap in many details.

In short, until Confucius, with followers and possibly also predecessors whom we do not know about, started Spring-Autumn, historical information was available though dispersed as parts of documents for other purposes - court chronicles, poems, worship books, indoctrination books, etc. Turtle shells might be kept because they contain sacred messages, and poems might be written about the good government of a lord or a battle victory, but there was no conscious effort to write history. The Zhous still took the worship of ancestral gods very seriously, and history was basically ancestral memory, but since men kept regular contact with their ancestors through daily worship and frequent divination, there was no need for men to have long memories; the gods would remember and give men instructions accordingly.

For the same reason, the ancient Chinese had no elaborate legends of the origin of the world like the Greeks and Hebrews, nor the Greeks' complex system of gods embodying natural phenomena and human ideas (e.g., Athena for knowledge, Eros for love), nor the Hebrews' system of God-man relationship. They believed that when humans die, they simply stayed around with their descendants, forever into the future. (The idea of reincarnation came later from India in Buddhism.) The Shang and Zhous, while vaguely believing that there were other divine entities in heaven and on earth, did not directly worship them, but assumed that their ancestor gods would "speak to heaven on our behalf", probably the consequence of Gao Yang's "separation of heaven from earth". The worship of other objects was considered to be heretical witchcraft. When a mysterious seabird flew into Lu State Temple and the Duke ordered sacrifices be made to it (presumably asking it to leave in peace), one of his ministers criticized his order, rather like Hebrew prophets condemning imagery.

Instead of recording legends about the origin of the world, philosophers like Laozi postulated that thing is the same as nothing (i.e., opposites meet, such as rich government makes poor people), thus dismissing the question as unnecessary: there is nothing out there, so there is no need to ask where it came from; in other words, you have to take the world as is. A different but related school, mixing up ideas of calendar, astronomy, mathematics and divination with history, tried to interpret dynastic changes in terms of the dynamic transitions between the five elements metal, wood, water, fire and soil, with one element producing another (e.g., water grows wood, wood produces fire) and overcoming another (like fire melts metal, and metal cuts wood), in an endless cycle; in other words, history was just the reflection on earth of astrology.

Further, if the reason for men to remember history is for its value in political education, then history can be changed in order to fulfil the purpose better. In short, completeness, currency or authenticity was not paramount, but a paradigm shift started in the middle Western Zhou era, when scholars felt a strong need to select records of events and conversations from available sources, copy and share these with colleagues, and pass them down to new generations of students, so that by the time of Confucius and followers, the material could be systematically organized into recognizably historical history. The meticulous way in which he assembled his collection and expressed his views of the events, revealed a budding historical methodology.

Why did the change occur? It seems no coincidence that the material preserved in *Stately Discourses* is biased towards the critical: there was a feeling that things were not perfect with the Kingdom of Zhou and there was need to gather information to figure out what was wrong. The scholars stopped writing poems or collecting folk songs, leading Mencius to remark 400 years later "When poetry ended history began". The same trend was then picked up by the individual states, with time lapses that explain why their stories in *Stately Discourses* tended to be later in age. With the passing of more time, chroniclers within the households of important officials also got into the act, and some of the later content of Zuo's Spring-

Autumn and Stately Discourses appear to have been taken from the family histories of Yanzi, the chief minister of Qi around the time of Confucius, Shuxiang, something of a chief guru of Jin around the time, and Zichan, the chief minister of Zhen, whose time slightly preceded Confucius.

But the fashionable trend of history writing seemed to have ended soon after Confucius. While Zuo Qiu Ming's collection was said to have been handed down to Zhen Shen, son of Confucius's student Zhen Chan, then to Wu Qi, a well known military commander and court official of the early Warring States period, and later to Yu Qin, another well known court official, neither Zi Si the grandson of Confucius, nor Mencius, considered to be the greatest Confucian after Confucius himself, worked on history. Indeed, some major historical details contained in Mencius such as which King of Qi tried to conquer the neighbouring Yan state against Mencius's advice, appeared to be wrong, revealing a low concern for historic accuracy. Similarly, Qu Yuan made no distinction between legends and historical events in his poems - both are stories and the idea of different methodologies had not occurred to him.

The many well known Warring States figures were busy with a wide variety of pursuits, collectively called the Hundred Schools, but few took the trouble to write historical accounts paralleling the official state records, such that, when these records were burnt in the Qin era, there were virtually no alternative information sources to provide us with replacement material. So the question is again why.

The main reason was that the Zhou feudal system, with its career paths for educated people, had by then disintegrated altogether. Previously the prospective brain workers (in contrast to feudal commanders trained to fight and bark out orders) went to the training schools and worked as record keepers in noble households or ritual prompters in temples or audience halls, but these were no longer needed in the warring states. Power was being concentrated into the hands of a small number of princes, who ran their states through a new system of appointed officials based on individual favour, rather than families of nobility, and paid little heed to the old fashioned procedures and conventions. Ambitious men tried to come to the attention of monarchs by writing amusing or impressive treatises and putting up persuasive arguments in personal audiences or debates. Instead of staying with the service of a feudal lord for life as a family retainer, they roamed from court to court seeking opportunities. Whereas the Zhou system of government aimed to preserve a dignified and carefully balanced hierarchy in stable equilibrium, the Warring States wanted simple and direct methods to expand agriculture and military establishments, and engaged in incessant conflicts and treacherous diplomacy. Who needs historical insight and old records in such an environment?

As before, historical information continued to be used, but as part of material written for other purposes. As part of diplomatic, legalist or philosophical discussions, historical facts were recast as the circumstances required, more literature than history. Another thousand years had to pass before a rigorous methodology for writing history was systematically implemented, in the consolidated history of Sima Guang.

4. [In search of the Xia tribe](#)

It is common for Chinese people to call themselves "Han people", "Tang people" or "Hua people". While the first two are well understood, the less well known name Hua refers to the Hua Hills of southern Sh'anxi, around which a number of archaeological sites have been found dating from over 5500 years ago, characterized by pottery bearing the rose or chrysanthemum pattern. The ideogram for Hua, meaning "bright proliferation", is probably related to that for "flower", also pronounced hua but with a different tone.

Since in Zhou manuscripts the historical figures frequently refer to their own people as "huaxia" when discussing Zhou versus barbarians, it might seem obvious to conclude that the Xias originated

there. However, further east are more recent sites (3000BC, close to the supposed time of the Xias) where the flower pottery is augmented with the three-legged pot, used to hold food offerings in ritual worship and therefore important, and adopted by the Xias as well as the later Shangs and Zhou, with Yu forging nine bronze pots representing the nine regions of Chinese territory. This type of pots has turned up in older sites in eastern China, meaning that people in the east invented it and brought it with them to central China. It is also far more likely that Yu's flood relief work occurred in the east where the ground is flatter and rivers flow slowly so that silting occurs, and generally the eastern sites show greater progress in both art and agricultural techniques towards 3000BC and are more likely to have sent the dominant tribe. Further support for an eastern origin comes from Yu legends' frequent mention of eastern locations.

But an opposite set of evidence lies in Tibetan ancient manuscripts which describe the Xias as people of the east, except that for Tibetans "east" cannot be all the way to eastern China, but could only be Sichuan, Gansu and maybe Shaanxi. So the books are saying the Xias migrated from the west of central China eastwards. Some other records show a White Horse Qiang tribe migrated east and provided chiefs Kun and Yu to the eastern tribes, but details are obscure.

Adding to the profusion of tribe origins, there is the issue of the source of the Chinese imperial dragon emblem - a totem symbol derived from the snake by adding features of various other animals like deer horns, eagle talons, and fish tail and scales. It appears to be related to early legends about mythological Xia tribal founding chiefs: Fu Xi who was supposed to have invented ruler and compass, and Nu Wa who supposedly mended the sky after its supporting column collapsed, were the brother-sister couple from whom the Xia tribe descended, and were often shown as inter-twined human-headed snakes. The Xia-dragon connection is further discussed in another section, and its similarity to biblical legends after that.

Unfortunately, neither the Hua Hills sites, nor the eastern sites, nor the 3000BC sites near Luoyang, show signs of the dragon, with just an occasional snake pattern turning up on pottery. From time to time elongated fish with human faces were seen, possibly connected. A couple of ancient graves had shell/stone assemblies of elongated 4-legged animal figures, usually with bird claws, showing a merging of the snake with bird and mammal, but the format and small number indicate these were not so much tribal totems as shaman objects for specialized worship, along with other animals like tiger and deer.

But the dragon showed up repeatedly in sites in southern Manchuria, from 3000BC and earlier. Some 4000BC pottery fragments display what appear to be dragon scales (more probably, crocodile scales). Deer, bird, pig or bear heads with snake bodies were found as jade objects or pottery drawings, and a dragon relief, constructed by piling granite stones on ground, turned up among ancient graves. The dragon's prominent appearance and large size gives it a lone eminence which it did not seem to enjoy elsewhere till much later.

There is some mystery about where the southern Manchurian tribes came from, but the presence of grand tombs in which the corpse had jade turtles in both hands shows their connection to tribes in eastern China with the shared reverence for the turtle and the probable use of turtle shells for divination. The tribe disappeared after 3000BC from Manchuria, leaving no signs of what happened and where they went.

Now legends have it that the Yellow Emperor, the early predecessor of the Xia dynasty and closely associated with the dragon - even sometimes described as half man half snake like Fuxi/Nuwa - defeated Emperor Yan of the Shen Nong (Divine Cultivator) tribe at a location in northern China not far from Manchuria, and the barbarian Chi Yiu tribe at a battlefield near by, though normally all these tribes

were thought to be nearer the Yellow River. Perhaps the dragon worshipping tribe moved down from Manchuria, met and defeated the tribes coming up from the south, and made themselves masters of all China? However, this neat theory could not be correct

First, far too little weaponry was found in the old sites, and the tribes living there could not have been involved in large scale wars. Fortifications, weapons and headless bodies increased after 2500BC. Second, largescale horse breeding did not arrive in China till around 1500BC so that it was not possible for the tribes to meet in battle halfway across the country. Finally, the scarcity of ancient sites in the Hebei area indicates that it was probably too flood prone for inhabitation, and, to ensure adequate food supplies on the way, armies would have to march from central/eastern China to the north by going west to Shanxi and then northeast, a very unlikely choice if the objective is to prevent manchurian hordes from conquering their land, and even getting prompt news of a northern invasion would be difficult.

If we must take the war stories literally, a reasonable interpretation is that the Divine Cultivator tribes in Central China came under pressure from the Chi Yiu tribes coming from the east, and retreated northwards, but were defeated and absorbed by the Yellow Emperor tribes with which they had some alliance relationship. The combined group then returned southwards and defeated Chi Yiu, achieving dominance over the whole of traditional Han Chinese territory. These movements may have taken decades, even centuries, contrary to the impressions caused by the brief mentions in written history. They were tribal migrations from older sites where the land had exhausted its fertility to new sites, perhaps fighting some current occupiers, rather than military campaigns.

The mixed up nature of the Yellow Emperor legend is illustrated by his queen's supposed role in introducing the silkworm, which is only possible in southern parts of China among agricultural communities, thus contradicting other information suggesting a northern nomadic tribe - the name of Yellow Emperor's tribe was "have bear", putting them in cold forest areas of north china, maybe siberia, and "chariot riders", and he was supposed to have invented the compass, which, significantly, is called "south pointing needle", instead of northward to the polar star, understandable if the tribal starting point is north of the domain it conquered, moving south towards its goal. "Chariot riders" were supposed to use stone weapons, while Yellow Emperor used "jade" weapons, which appears to indicate a tribe progressing from palaeolithic to neolithic times with finer stone craft being developed for tools and weapons.

It seems that as the tribe moved south, it took over legends about the conquered tribes as its own, especially if it came from the south originally so that everything looked "vaguely familiar". They could not have taken the silkworm story with them to Manchuria and brought it back, if they had no chance to see silkworms and mulberry trees for centuries. In contrast, the dragon emblem, separate from daily life experience, can be carried around everywhere.

Similarly, tribes on the Tibetan border migrating eastwards were also "coming home" after their ancestors went west from central China, where flooding and soil exhaustion made continued stay unprofitable. In the west the tribes took up goat herding and horse breeding, which they brought back with them. They soon formed alliances with the sedentary tribes and merged their oral histories and legends with the allies'.

In any case the southern tribes seemed to have re-asserted their own importance soon: the two successors of the Yellow Emperor, Gao Yang (also known as Zhuaxu - Gao Yang was probably the tribe's rather than the chief's name) and Gao Xin (or Emperor Hao, though Hao could also be tribal name, especially in view of the absence of non-mythical details about him as a person) both supposedly descended from his sons who were exiled to the south, suggesting that the new chiefs rising from southern tribes very conveniently discovered that they were part of the family all along. Not just that the prestige of the Yellow Emperor was so high that the chiefs ruling after him all wanted to claim descent from him, but also there is the need to

have everyone share in common ancestor worship. Given the polygamous practice of important men, one could always invent an extra son or two hidden in the woodpile, especially as in matriarchal societies sons were brought up in their mothers' tribes, which their fathers joined for long or short periods of marriage, perhaps for purpose of tribe alliance. A tribe, like the Austrian Empire that made marriages while others made wars, can spread its members around successfully, and gain influence and even control over other tribes.

A common practice was that boys reaching puberty had to leave their own tribes because of the incest taboo, and had to pass tough maturity rituals to be accepted into an allied tribe and allowed to marry its

girls. Yao chose Shun as successor and allowed Shun to marry his two daughters; presumably he himself entered the tribe in the same way previously - his wife's name and one daughter's name are both E Huang, meaning "female sovereign", with their power held by their husbands. The same name was also used for one of Gao Xin's wives, indicating that he too married into the ruling tribe. Further, the character huang was derived from the feathered headdress of the bird tribe chief, which fits the background of Shun and

Gao Xin. In contrast, the character for emperor di, used in connection with Yellow Emperor, Emperor Yan, Gao Yang, etc, was derived from the bundled reed figure used to represent divine ruler to absorb

the sacrificial wine poured onto it in rituals. Two distinct traditions are indicated, with intertwining family histories as the sons of one clan married into the other and succeeded their fathers-in-law as tribe chiefs. Note that the bundle straw idol may well be derived from the corn spirit practice widespread in Europe, with the last sheath of harvest being used to represent the spirit of abundance worshiped during the post harvest festivities. Various other similarities between Chinese and Western legends will be discussed in a later section.

The coastal tribes saw birds migrating with seasonal changes, and attached divine significance to them. They also linked this to music - somehow the tone changes of string instruments because of seasonal

humidity variation, got mixed with bird calls. The family of Shun, for example, had some tribal responsibility to tell season and wind with harp. With legends indicating that Gao Yang (on his maternal side), Shun and Gao Xin were with tribes with bird totems, we see an extended alliance between the birds and the bears, with the reptiles/snake tribes as perhaps their common enemy.

Legends show that the Yellow Emperor sent his son Qinyang (or Shaohao, again there is confusion of tribe with person) to head the bird tribes, where his grandson Gaoyang spent his youth before moving to head

a tribe somewhere in the north, believed to be near the modern city of Puyang. Qinyang later sent his son Zhong, also known as Jumang (who, curiously, also appears as an ancestor of Shun) to be Fu Xi's assistant,

presumably to take over the tribe later, and there is even a hint that Gaoyang's grandson Li (also known as Zhuyong) was sent to be assistant in Emperor Yan's tribe located somewhere in the south. This apparent attempt to pack the teams may have caused the conflict that ended with the collapsing sky story as well as about Zhuyong executing Yu's father for unauthorized hydraulic work, which hint at initial military success followed by disastrous failure. A number of books mention Zhuanxu's three sons turning into demons at various exile locations: apparently, they were sent to head various tribes but did not go down well with the people there. With stories giving almost every chief (Nu Wa, Gaoyang, Gaoxin, Yao, Shun and Yu) credit for killing/exiling the mysterious water demon Gonggong who in some way caused flood/heaven collapse, the war seems to have gone on for decades or longer.

Western Zhou maps reconstructed by historians actually show two states called Gong and Yong (Gonggong is believed to be also known as Yonghui) near Puyang, upstream on the northern bank of Yellow River. Quite probably Gonggong's tribe caused flooding downstream by building dykes, maybe a deliberately hostile act, or inadvertently when trying to improve farm irrigation. It could

even be that the flood started from natural causes but got blamed on Gongong's tribe simply because they were upstream, though they could have worsened things downstream by trying to divert water from their own land. In the legends of the widely dispersed minority Miao tribes, a wide variety of versions of the sibling conflict/flood story exist, all pointing to a fight between two allied tribes over the violation of a chicken taboo: the thunder god tribe was somehow tricked into eating chicken meat and avenged the offence by launching a flood. The story that follows talked about brother-sister marriage and tribal regeneration, but it is not clear whether they matched actual events, or were two separate legends involving different tribes at different times, that got linked together subsequently.

For all the obscurity, the legends show some agreement that Yu and Shun were genealogically closer to each other, from the Gao Yang side, and their activities were usually in the south and east, while the Gao Xin descendants, which include both the Zhou and Shang founding chiefs, associate with the north and the west. In a number of ways Yao seems to be the odd man out, without stories that explain his background other than the name of Tao-Tang for his clan associating with southern Shangxi, or what he actually did (though the name Tao hints his tribe invented either pottery making techniques, taoqi, or dwellings constructed out of cellars dug into soil). His mother's surname Yi indicates a connection to the Youxin tribe, since the slave-cook-counsellor of Cheng Tang had the same surname. Yao is credited with virtually no concrete achievements, other than showing concern for the people and always looking for good successors.

Despite Yao's constant search for good officials, it was Shun who supposedly appointed sixteen competent helpers and exiled four bad characters after succeeding Yao. Yao, to put it bluntly, comes across as a wishy-washy character, and seems to have been added in as an extra on the Gao Xin side to strengthen the claim of the supposed descendants about their side's contributions, using his choice of Shun as son-in-law and successor as tenuous evidence of his great virtue. On the other hand, the Ancient book section on Shun shows that once in power, he promoted his supporters and destroyed his opponents, as a realpolitic ruler would.

Yet another sign of confused legacy: the southern Manchurian sites contained a giant scale temple devoted to some goddess, most probably a fertility shrine as pottery figures of pregnant females were found at various other sites in southern Manchuria. However, no similar ancient temples have been found in other parts of China. It would seem that somewhere along the move south in the next 500 years, the tribe gave up their goddess, kept the dragon, picked up weapons and fighting skills, adopted the Hua name in west-central

China, started using the three-legged pot for worship after arriving in central China, and learned to cope with floods as well. Though not impossible, the development process seems rather fast for ancient times. 500 years amount to just 25 generations of people and the change from generation to generation would seem rather large, but more understandable if the tribe picked alliances and exchanged sons in marriage, and eventually all the legends and practices got mixed up. Further, various forms of fertility worship did exist and are frequently mentioned. Perhaps the goddess temples in the heavily populated areas got rebuilt and transformed into later worship fashions, but the near total absence of the original version remains puzzling.

When sorting through the confusing mass of semi-historical information, a noticeable difference arises between the eastern and western threads. The western thread cumulated in the Zhous, while the eastern thread ended with the less literary Shangs and the artistic and sentimental Chus, which largely explains why one can be followed with a much higher level of clarity than the other. The eastern legends were oriented towards the sun, birds (either golden because they are suns, or burnt black like crows or swallows because they carry the sun around), and phoenix, while the western legends related to the moon, and the full moon's darker patch was variously believed to be a toad, rabbit or turtle, with the reverence extending to snakes merging into other animals to become the dragon. Note that in many parts of asia and europe, the moon is associated with fertility because of the menstration cycle being synchronized with the moon.

In the western thread, the northern nomadic, dragon worshipping tribe of Yellow emperor, turned south and successively merged with the farming and fishing tribes in the mid sections of the Yellow River and defeated their enemies in the east. The alliance later acquired new leaders like Yao and Shun who married the daughters of previous chiefs, and it sent sons to the eastern tribes in a similar fashion, with mixed levels of success exemplified by the vagues stories relating to Shaohao, Kun and others. The tribal mixing cumulated in the successful elevation of Yu as the leader of the eastern alliance through his achievements in flood relief, and his clan's return to central China to found the Xia dynasty, a branch of which later became the Zhous with an enemy Shang interlude. This is the story of the good reptiles, and their descendents the Zhous selected from the mix of oral histories and legends a suitably edifying thread to pass down to posterity.

In contrast, the eastern thread was dominated by figures like Fuxi, Nuwa, Zhuyong, Zhuangxu (Gaoyang) and Emperor Hao (Gaoxin), more divinities than humans. Their stories are those of the birds and "bad reptiles", the losers in a struggle extending over many centuries. While they were not exactly villified or ignored (since they too were ancestors of the Chinese), less efforts were devoted to straightening their stories out and fitting them into logical places in history.

Take the name Gaoyang: clearly it is the name of a tribe rather than an individual; its usual identification with Zhuanxu, the tribal chief who decreed the separation of heaven from earth setting off a long civil war, must have been responsible for a great deal of confusion, since "descended from Gaoyang" can be interpreted variously, making it useless for fixing time or lineage. It has been convincingly argued that the Gaoyang tribe was actually the fire-sun worshipping tribe of Emperor Yan, whose very name means "hot", and it is entirely reasonable that as his tribe adoped farming, it would start to worship the sun. It then follows that Zhuyong the fire priest, "descended from Gaoyang", was probably a different person from Zhongli the grandson of Zhuanxu. Similarly, it was suggested that Tang the founder of Shang Dynasty, was not a real person, because it just means Hot Spring, from which the sun rises in the Tang Valley. The sun worshipping tribe had Tang as an object of worship, then a deity, and finally a person.

Then take the name Gaoxin or Emperor Hao: the vague stories about his queen Xihe, 10 suns and 12 moons, indicate that he belonged to a much older era, compared with the hierarchical worship practices revealed by the "separation of heaven and earth" of Zhuanxu, though in genealogical charts he was supposed to be Zhuanxu's nephew. Most probably it reflects the continued side-by-side existence of the two tribes Gaoyang and Gaoxin long afterwards, with many later achievements being attached to the name of the early founder. Yu's father Kun, the Shang founder Cheng Tang and the father of King Wen of Zhou were all supposed to have taken a wife from the Youxing tribe, an alliance that in some obscure way cemented their dominant positions, thus hinting that Youxing was none other than the historical Gaoxing tribe whose support was needed by the up-and-coming tribe chiefs. (This shadowy presence of a "heavenly tribe" would be further discussed in section 8.)

Similarly, were Yu and Shun actual chiefs ruling around 2000BC, or just mythical ancestors who founded tribes much earlier in the periphery, and when their descendents came to dominate central China, got their stories inserted into the western thread? One can find much relevant evidence in legends, with place names and even shrines built centuries ago and in active use since then, to support the idea that they once lived here or there, but no archaeological proof such as cave paintings or pottery drawings depicting their stories. If their tribes had written languages, they left behind no records other than the odd markings on pottery that resemble later Chinese writing but cannot be decyphered in meaning.

In any case, sites around Fen River in Southern Shanxi province have been found, from about 2500BC, with artifacts linked to all the older sites: dragon and turtle; three legged pots, with solid

legs or empty legs which probably came from the merging of clay jars; .. and stone weapons - but no fertility shrines with female statues, and too far from flood prone areas to fit the Yu stories, though the location name of the main burial site, Taoshi, links to Yao. Further south the geography fits better, and a great bronze age palace as well as surrounding sites have been found, showing all the signs that one would expect from a 2000BC ruling tribe, but it remains a matter of conjecture that Yu the hydraulic planner and his descendents actually lived there. In fact, by place names appearing in stories, he met his ten thousand lords at a location five hundred kilometres to the east, and died at a place another thousand kilometres to the south, not far from Hangzhou, after performing rituals honouring heaven there. There are also convincing accounts linking his son Qi, also known as Kai (both meaning "to open") with the city Kaifeng in the eastern sector of central China.

One hesitates to dismiss the story of ten thousand tribe chiefs presenting "jade and silk" to Yu, because that was an actual custom during Zhou times: a vassal presenting himself to a lord for the first time would submit

a dagger-shaped piece of jade, which the lord retains as sign of acceptance of the vassal's submission; in subsequent visits, a piece of jade is again presented, but is returned upon departure to indicate satisfaction. The ritual appears to have been based on visitors leaving their weapons upon arrival and retrieving them at departure, and seemed an ancient practice, not a Zhou invention. Its mention in relation to Yu makes the story sound more creditable, especially if we assume that each chief probably ran a village or small town, since large cities surrounded by tall walls still seemed an unfamiliar and threatening idea judging by the problem his father had, (a legend says tribes were suspicious and rebellious when he built towns with walls)and ten thousand tribes would only add up to a modest total population. Presumably only the main chief of each tribe group went to submit jade and silk to Yu, on behalf of all his affiliated tribes, not all 10000 chiefs. Many such pieces of jade have been discovered in graves dating from 2000BC. Both Shang and Zhou histories mention their immediately taking the jade treasure from the palaces after battle victories - it is unlikely they were merely after jewelry, but wanted to take over the tokens of tribal submission as the new conquering tribe.

But all this is conjecture and guesswork, taking each piece of obscure evidence in an ideal way. Despite the long search for the Xia tribe, it has remained elusive and mysterious. Yu the great hydraulic engineer lives on as a figure of myth and legend

--sections 5, 6 & 7 overlap sinazen.com/chinadragon & sinazen.com/chinamyths and have been omitted---

[8.From Shang to Zhou](#)

While we cannot conclusively find the Xias, archaeological evidence indisputably show the existence of the Shangs, and all signs indicate that the Xias lived not very differently from the Shangs, in the tribal way. So learning about the Shangs allow us to speculate about the Xias including their connection with the later Zhous.

We can trace Shang's origin to Hebei, over which flood prone plains they used to drive their cattle, but their conquest of the Youyi tribe appears to have brought them a taste for settled agricultural life, on the higher, less flooded ground near the middle Yellow River. They claimed descent from Gao Xin via his wife Jian Di, whose name indicates she originated from a northern nomadic tribe, as does her tribe name You Rong, though rong was later specific for western nomads. (The meaning of Rong was originally "war like" rather than "barbarian"; therefore "descended from/belonging to Rong tribe" does not equal "west".) Gao Xin is named Shangxin in some stories, including one about two sons whose quarrels forced their father to separate them by sending them to distant areas, "never meeting like the stars Shang and Chan". This might be the same sibling conflict reflected in the flood/heaven collapse stories or a

separate one. We do know the Warring States Qin and Zhao in the west both claimed the same "birth from swallowed egg" story as the origin of their tribes, and indeed the Qin founder was the horse breeder and Zhao founder the carriage driver of a Zhou king, showing the same animal handling skills which the Shangs were known for.

The Shangs had a swallow totem; the specific bird emblems of the Qins and Zhaos were lost in the historical mist. The pronunciation of Shang may be related to sang or mulberry: their ancestor bird tribe under

Shaohao/Qinyang originated in a place called Kongsang or Qionsang, meaning "land without mulberries", presumably because of cold climate, and it was flood prone, which sounds like northern Hebei, and they settled in a place called Sangqiu or Mulberry Hill. Later the name Shangqiu was used for various places the Shang tribe stayed at, including Puyang where Gaoyang resided, and Song which became the state of the Shang prince who submitted to the Zhous and was permitted to continue the line of descent.

The word "qiong" is rather intriguing: its ideogram has "bow" next to "body" under "cave", meaning "cave dwelling of the longbow men", which fits the name Youqiong, the tribe of Hou Yi the sun shooter; it is less clear how it acquired its common modern meaning of "poor" "deficient", though the less common meaning "reaching the end" does provide a transitional explanation. Qionsang therefore meant "end of mulberry trees", like Kongsang, and perhaps the arrow/bow-using bird tribe's territory started where mulberry ended. There is also a third mention of qiong in one Han book on mythical history: Yellow Emperor was said to rise in Qiong Mountains. Taking the three together, we see a series of warlike tribes: first the "chariot riders" (probably push carts or oxcarts, since horse taming probably had not yet succeeded at the time), then the arrowshooters, then the cattle-horse skilled Shangs, coming down via the uninhabited, flood prone Northern Hebei area, to rule over the sedentary tribes on the mulberry covered land further south.

Mulberries were part of the sacred Shang shrines, where King Tang offered to sacrifice himself to the gods during a prayer for rain to relieve a 7-year drought, which (as the legend goes) immediately produced the desired result. Since sacrificing an older chief to make way for a younger one appears to have been actually practised, the offer was more than mere PR. The mulberry forest was also the place for fertility orgies that were still regularly held in Zhou times, though the Zhous did not follow the custom themselves, among states where native populations dominated. Curious about such events, a duke of Lu went to visit the neighbouring Qi state during the carnival to see the activities first hand, causing criticisms from his ministers. Stories about the decadence of King Jiu, that he ordered for ponds of wine and meat hung from trees so that courtiers could frolic naked in the woods, probably arose from these ritual orgies.

One reason for having annual fertility rites is that the babies would be born at around the same time so that nursing duties can be shared: maternal mortality rates were high in those days and orphaned babies need to have alternative sources of milk. Having the rites in spring also ensures that births occur after the harvests when food would be available for the nursing mothers.

This brings us to the story of the drowned daughter of Emperor Yan mentioned in Section 5. The swallowed bird egg story has three different versions. In the simplest, Jian Di was bathing in a pond, found an egg, swallowed it and thereafter became pregnant. In a less directly comprehensible version, the granddaughter of Zhuan Xu was weaving, and somehow found an egg to swallow, later to give birth to the Qin-Zhao founding chief. In the most elaborate version, Jian Di and her sister, being royal princesses, lived on a high altar, and was visited by a lovely bird which the girls caught; it then escaped leaving behind an egg.

Now how did we link all these to the drowning story? The glue is a later story about Zhi Nu the weaving fairy: when she went to bathe in a pond, the farming boy Niu Lang hid her clothes preventing her from returning to heaven and making her promise to go to live with him. The Queen

of Heaven soon discovered it and brought the maiden back up, but relented somewhat agreeing to let them meet once a year on 7th of July. This story had its first written version around 400AD, but its outline appeared in poetry during Zhou and Han times and was likely an oral legend much earlier. It shares something with each of the three earlier stories: bathing in one, weaving in another, and girl from heaven in the third, and one cannot help suspecting that the four stories share one origin: bathing and egg swallowing were part of the ruling tribe's fertility rites, probably with mulberry trees, silk worms, yarn and weaving in the story because it was about girls of the tribe who have to weave all year round and were let out once a year for the fertility ritual. Note that, since silk comes from mulberry leaves, the weaving fairy was also the mulberry goddess. The story may also be related to the White Maiden (Su-Nu), who figures in a story about harp playing (and later, sexual techniques) for the Emperor, with the ideogram for su containing the ideogram for silk though its modern meaning is quite different ("plain" "vegetarian" in fact). Its pronunciation su seems to be related to silk si too.

During the rituals with girls coming down the hill to dip in sacred ponds, men from other tribes had the chance to engage in sexual intercourse with "maidens from heaven", including even the daughters of the chief, and the weaving fairy and drowning girl stories hint that instead of going home, the daughter decided to run away with the boy, and was only made to return with great reluctance or did not return altogether. Presumably the fertility rites were held each spring, making the girls available to the men only once a year, though the date 7 July seems rather late for a spring day and seems more related to post-harvest celebrations as the year used to start with the spring equinox so that 7 July would actually be in late September. Note that 1 January, 3 March, 5 May, 7 July and 9 September (11, 33, 55, 77, 99) are all festivals of the Chinese lunar calendar, and it is easy to transplant one date on another. The choice of 7 may have something to do with the girl in the story being the youngest of 7 daughters.

It is also useful to point out that Niu Lang went to the bathing pond at the advice of his bull, and both the boy and the bull were exiles from heaven, i.e., former members of the ruling tribe who knew about its ritual

practice and, together with friends in the subordinate tribes, knew when and where to sneak up on the bathing girls; presumably tribal boys were expelled upon reaching puberty, a common practice. For another connection: the name of the bathing pond happens to be the name of one daughter of Emperor Yan: Yao Pond, whose exact meaning is unclear but the Yao star (Tama Star) is a frequently used name in Japan denoting a romantic idea, with very occasional use in Chinese too. Whether there is any relation to the minority southern tribe Yao, with a slightly different ideogram, is also unknown. This Yao girl was supposed to have died early and turned into some kind of love goddess, again in some vague way fitting the other stories: there was a daughter lost in a way relating to water and romance, and she was possibly regained (came back to life); how the story of Jinwei bird got mixed up with it is not clear, but may be related to the Phoenesian story of the phoenix being reborn on the tree of life, which happens to be tamar in hebrew. Probably a branch tribe got its home washed away by a tsunami and regenerated itself as a bird tribe. The story of throwing stones into the sea to try to fill it up might be a tribal ritual to remember the dead or pacify the water god. The disaster-revival story may well be just another version of the brother-sister marriage story, and the daughter's name also happens to be nuwa, though with a different wa ideogram.

A weaving fairy appears in yet another story, and her name was again E Huang (my female sovereign) who weaved all night in the spinning palace, but was let out to go about Kongsang and met the son of the white emperor; after they toured around in a boat with a jade bird on the bow, she gave birth to Shaohao the bird tribe chief (while in some other story he was the son of yellow emperor sent to head the bird tribe); why the boy-girl romance always has weaving and water (pond, marrying water god or touring in a boat, even drowning) is not clear.

There was also a Shang story that the son sent to the east was the fire priest for the House of Tao-Tang (i.e., King Yao) - it must be significant that the son/grandson of one chief became the fire priest

of a later chief, probably because the ruling tribe keeps a sacred fire on behalf of the tribal alliance, and each ruler succession is marked by the transfer of the sacred fire from the old to the new ruling tribe, carried over by a son of the old ruling tribe, with some connection to the Prometheus story. Even during Han times there was an annual ritual called Cold Food Day on which fire was not used, and in the evening a royal flame was sent around to the houses of the officials for them to relight their home stoves. After Yao this succession ritual must have ceased; we hear instead of the descent of the phoenix ceremony of Shun, and the presentation of jade and silk of Yu. We also see that Shun's son was named Shangjun, hinting that Shang has some connection to him, probably through marriage. The Shangs themselves worship an Emperor Jun as the original ancestor, and Jun has several similarities to Gao Xin and to Shun, leading to speculation that they were actually a single mythical figure producing three sets of legends, some of which attached to real but later people too. Emperor Jun's connection to Shangjun is also unclear (the two juns have different ideograms), as we know virtually no details about Shangjun at all with no stories about him having passed down.

The difference brought by the discovery of bronze, which benefited tribes with access to copper mines plus the skills to forge and use weapons, and horses which the Shangs learned to breed, being experienced with cattle, was a clear pecking order among the conquering and conquered tribes - the Shang tribe, besides its claim to be able to seek divine blessings on behalf of others, had the ability to impose its rule and could demand to receive abeyance from the other tribes in fear of its military prowess. In effect, superior military capability WAS the mandate of heaven. Ancient Book records that Shang ministers were thrown into panic when the Zhou tribe began to show greater achievements in conquering neighbouring tribes, but their lamentation fell on deaf ears while King Jiu continued to indulge himself with wine, women and new types of cruel execution methods, confident that heaven was on his side.

Shang royal court demanded frequent and heavy tributes in material, animals and slaves (including pretty women), but subject tribes were largely left to run themselves as they used to. There was basically no Shang national government. The idea of codified laws was probably not yet understood, and tribe chiefs dispensed justice by personal acumen. They were supposed to be in communication with the ancestral gods through daily sacrifices and other rituals, and any doubts would be settled by divination with bones and turtle shells. This type of local self-government with minimal central intervention is sometimes credited to Yellow Emperor, as if it was by design while in reality it was simply due to the lack of means, but Laozi, who is usually given shared credit, is more deserving, with a deliberate belief in winning via passivity, though the ancient tribal times he longed for was far from idyllic.

There was a great deal of savagery. Slaves were killed in large numbers for various types of ritualistic sacrifice. Putting up any large building, for example, required tens of slaves to be killed and placed under the foundations to placate the earth gods, and when a king or a nobleman died, his servants and concubines were buried with him so that they could continue to serve him in the netherworld. Slaves and prisoners of war were slaughtered at the royal shrines to celebrate military victory or other important festivities. Given the low regard for human life, nonslaves were probably not well treated either. Stories about King Jiu's executions are well known from history books, but the earlier kings could not have been much more gentle, merely less well reported as long as their descendants continued to reign. Human sacrifices appear to have peaked in the reign of Wu Ding, noted for military successes, and were relatively fewer in the time of Jiu as indicated by the number of human skeletons dug up in royal tombs.

No evidence of slave rebellions have been found, and tribal uprisings were rare too. It appears that people remained primitive in thinking and accepted their fate as given. King Jiu was known to have suppressed one great uprising, of the Yi tribe in the east, and this played a major role in the dynastic change by seriously

weakening the Shangs and decimating their own tribal army, which, when it faced the Zhous invading from the west, consisted mostly of captured prisoners of war, who promptly surrendered or even turned on their own commanders.

The Zhous also claimed descent from Gao Xin, somewhat less backed by available evidence. The Zhou tribe totem was the bear which does relate to the Yellow Emperor, and in fact the tribal surname Ji's idiogram is

"female" next to a bear footprint. Their founder Hou Ji was supposedly born by another Gao Xin wife, Jiang Yuan, whose name indicates descent from the Jiang tribe that itself claimed to be descendents of Emperor Yan. The Jiang tribe was later closely allied with the Zhous, and its chief Jiang Tai Gong was the Zhou army supreme commander, who was then granted the dukedom of Qi, hence the Qi pedigree from Emperor Yan, both ally and competitor to Yellow Emperor. Another vague story hints that when the Zhou founder was born, he had to undergo some tests of legitimacy: when he was placed on the path of the cattle herds, he was not trampled on by the animals, and when placed on an icy riverbank, birds gathered around him protectively - more probably, sea gulls gathered to feast on the baby, but was deterred by the spirited crying and struggle the baby put up, allowing him to pass the test and even to be branded a blessed child with future potential, eventually to found his own tribe. He was supposed to have been Yao's farming chief and helped Yu in resettling land reclaimed from floods. His mother's supposed marriage to Gao Xin was probably just an expression of his divine conception and noble descent.

Who exactly was Gaoxin/Emperor Hao anyway? As explained earlier, his link to the Shang tribe seems clear, and the obscurity surrounding him is about right, being just a mythical ancestor of one group of people among many in ancient China and other tribes knew little about him other than same story told differently. What accounts for his omnipresence seems a case of nature expanding to fill a vacuum: following the disastrous events that occurred in Zhuanxu's reign, the tribal alliance inherited from Emperor Yan/Yellow Emperor was in a state of disintegration and all of eastern China went into total chaos, with various tribes escaping trouble by migrating south and west. When the alliance was re-established under Yao and some predecessors we do not know about, the centre of gravity had shifted westwards. In some way, Yao had the allegiance of the descendents of Gonggong (the Xiyue/Siyue), Gaoxin (hence his supposed parenthood, though it is more probable, give various stories about his mother conceiving him with a dragon, that he was descended from the reptile tribe but married into the bird tribe, since his wife's name is Nu Huang, female sovereign, Huang being the word for the tribal feather crown as mentioned before) and the Shun clan which appears to have come from a junior bird tribe under Jumang (who was, as we might recall, sent by his father Qinyang to be assistant/successor of the Fuxi tribe, but Shun is said to have migrated a number of times, each time with people going with him because of his great virtue as ruler but more likely because that was what tribes were used to).

Judging by some other stories about Gao Xin, e.g., his dog Panku, born from the ear of an old woman living in the palace as a worm initially, killed Gaoxin's enemy and then married his daughter, with a parallel story in which a chief was saved by his horse, which too wanted to marry his daughter and was killed, whose skin then wrapped itself around the girl to turn into a silkworm, with a further connection to the dog story in that two silkworm goddesses were worshiped during Zhou-Han times, the older one called Wanku and younger one Princess Yu, all hinting at an event during which some barbarian slave tribe performed an important service and was rewarded with a marriage alliance, from which resulted some new tribe that raised silk worms; it all shows that Gao Xin's legend started during very primitive times, long before the more sophisticated period of Yao, Shun and Yu. The story, again with a lost daughter of the chief running away with a boy from outside the group with silkworm playing a part somehow, could once again be another version developed from a single original story. In any case, while the Shang tribe legends could not be used to provide any definitive timing of Gaoxin's reign, he conveniently slotted into the time before Yao, as the Shang tribe began to be prominent then. Any important chief arising around the time with claim of divine descent was then automatically assumed to be son of Gaoxin, in the

absence of any meaningful records and memory given the prevailing chaos.

This shadowy presence of some heavenly emperor went beyond the Shang and Zhou ancestors. Yellow Emperor's army was supposedly called in to rescue the Miao people (which might mean one tribe, or all the agricultural tribes who raise plants - "miao" means "plant shoots") from the cruel tortures and executions of Chi You after the smell of excessive blood reached heaven moving the emperor to take action, Hou Yi was supposedly given the bow and arrow by the heavenly emperor to come down to earth and exterminate various monsters and make life better below, and a Black Maiden descended from heaven to help in directing the battle between Yellow Emperor and Chi You; another Black Maiden helped Yu with hydraulic techniques and plans. While many of the stories about Hou Yi sound awfully primitive, several characters and incidents clearly relate to the Xia period, so that the shadowy presence seems to have continued at least till the time of Chang-er "ascending to the Moon with Hou Yi's eternity elixir", which probably means she escaped back to her own moon-worshipping tribe that supposedly had the secret recipe for eternal life (since the moon wanes/waxes). Was she the same character as the Luo River goddess that had an affair with Hou Yi, betraying her river god husband, and therefore, the same as the daughter of Fu Xi that drowned and became wife of the river god? and further on, was she the same as the Emperor Yan daughter who drowned and turned into the Jinwei bird, and the same as the daughter that ran away with a boy after the fertility bathing in the Yao pond? Another confusing story relates to Nukui, the goddess of drought, and Eagle Dragon, who brings rain, who were called down from "heaven" to help the Yellow Emperor in his battle, and were unable to return to heaven afterwards, which could be symbolic or concrete, but there is the additional item that later Eagle Dragon killed Kuafu, a name also featuring in a story of "man who died chasing the sun", making it likely that Eagle Dragon was actually a tribe of fighters, not a symbolic demon.

And who is this river god that keeps appearing in stories? (such as the one about Shang Dynasty's founder's great grandfather who got murdered when grazing his herds, which was similar in time to the Hou Yi period and was similarly primitive in content.) Is this the same as the Gonggong water demon tribe or not? In fact, there is also an Hou Yi wife called the "9-tail fox" which is actually related to Yu's wife, or at least, to her tribe. This tribe has something to do with water, since it got Yu as son in law to solve the flood problem. Then there is also the You Reng tribe that briefly appeared in Xia events mentioned in Zhuo Zhuan - when another usurper, after Hou Yi's death, killed the Xia puppet king, the king's wife escaped to her You Reng tribe and gave birth to a son that later revived Xia power - and also in mythology: a daughter of the You Reng tribe, called the Black Wife probably because of her beautiful dark hair, married a "one legged bull", which was probably a bull-snake combination totem with the tail being taken for its leg, and gave birth to a son that was a giant pig - probably boy from bull-dragon tribe sent to pig tribe to marry its princess - which was later destroyed by Hou Yi. It so happens the river god's name is Fengyi, while the giant pig is names Fengxi, probably the same name written in different chinese ideograms. The bull-dragon has something to do with water too. However, Black Wife was also mentioned in Qu Yuan's poem, but as Hou Yi's wife who conspired with another usurper to murder (and cook) Hou Yi, which identifies with Chang Er/ nine-tail fox in betraying her husband and, most probably, escaping to her own "moon" tribe. If she was originally the wife of "river god bull dragon" and Hou Yi took her as war trophy after killing her son the giant pig, then it is understandable that she would take revenge in that way when opportunity arose. All in all, these glimpses add up to a picture of an extended conflict between the Xias, with bull/pig/water/moon tribes on their side, and the bird tribes on their other side, full of all kinds of twists and turns, and some intriguing, "black" females appearing and disappearing, about which more below.

One might well ask: surely the ancient people could generate a variety of stories; isn't it too limiting to imagine that all these stories were actually one? Though 5000 year old archaeological sites are numerous, most had only a very small population - the settlement in Banpo, for example, probably

had 1-200 people, and the Jiangzai site not far from there had just five communal houses; even in 1000BC the Zhou tribe, with all its allies, only managed to muster 3000 soldiers for its do or die battle on the outskirts of the Shang capital, and Chi You's Nine Li tribe was said to have 81 fighters, all brothers. Most tribes probably died out over time, or were absorbed by stronger, expansionist tribes, and their stories died or got absorbed with them. The stories that do come down to us are likely to be from just a few allied tribes that became powerful and expansionist, and they, over many centuries, developed successor branches that spread out. Each then created its own version of the original legend and also mixed this with later events that the branch experienced uniquely. As what happens to the tribal chief's daughter is important to the tribe's future development, we keep seeing the same prototype in the various final forms. Over time, some of the stories got "modernized" by later authors who casted the events in line with later cultures, while others, passed from more advanced to less cultured tribes, actually went backward in time and developed more primitive versions.

There have also been repeated mentions of the heavenly, Black related tribe in various other stories: e.g., Yu received his order to work on floods in the Black Palace, and was also supposed to have received help from the Black Maiden. Since he married into some kind of important tribe, and in some versions of the story his wife is given a fertility/tribe-founding status that sounds almost like Nuwa and indeed she is occasionally called by that name, the two women might very well be just one, another "girl from heaven" taking a husband from outside and giving him opportunity to exercise leadership. The story that Yu, when he entered the country of the naked people, followed their custom, probably derives from him taking part in the fertility ritual of a tribe and finding favour with the tribal princess, with monumental consequences. His wife's tribe is called Tushan, which sounds close to the tribe Zhushan that Yellow emperor allied to, indeed Zhu originally mean "silkworm", which fits the stories of Yellow emperor's wife being the first to raise silkworms and the silkworm goddess presenting him with silk after his victory over Chi You: the mountain-dwelling, silk-weaving tribe accepting the newly arrived macho chiefs into its fold as sons in law.

In the same vein, we have Yao/Shun recommended their successors to "heaven". All these hint at some higher authority that rulers sent requests for help or permission to; whether this authority only existed in the abstract, and all the communications were merely ceremonial, or there was actually a physical presence, some venerable chief of an old ruling tribe to which all the other chiefs still owed nominal subserviance and went through the motions to show respect, is hard to tell today, though the many stories of girls running away from heaven tend to indicate a physical presence, a heavenly tribe, probably residing on a high mountain, with its mysterious expertise on calendar setting, sacred fire, and silkworm raising/silk weaving, that inspired awe and abeyance, without necessarily being strong militarily. It kept its women inside the compound weaving silk and expelled its boys upon puberty, but once a year made the girls available in a fertility ritual so that children will be born to keep the tribe going. Here we have a concrete picture of "separation of heaven and earth". Given that both Shang and Zhou claimed descent from this heavenly tribe, at least in their minds the presence was very real and quite recent too.

Note that black is the colour associated with the Shangs: their totem bird was the black swallow, and they dressed in black. The tribe founder Qi was called the black king, and they used black bulls for the highest ritual sacrifices. In view of their connection to Gaoxin, the black palace/black maiden would seem to be part of the Gaoxin-Shang legend, though much of the story could have originated with the native population of eastern china while Shangs were the nomadic latecomers, who then appropriated the legend as their own after settling there. In fact, the Gaoyang, Gaoxin and Emperor Yan stories are frequently entangled. Curiously, the Yellow Emperor story, though he is supposed to be the brother of Emperor Yan and ancestor of Gaoyang and Gaoxin, tends to be more distinct, probably because of more careful recording and retelling by his bear tribe descendents that eventually resulted in the Zhous, who also appropriated some of the early legends.

Hou Ji, for example, was conceived when his mother Jiangyuan engaged in some fertility ritual with

an unidentified father. However, his descendants actually might have a Gaoxin bloodline, because he was believed to have married into the You Tai clan (other versions say his mother was a princess of the You Tai clan); now tai means altar, and version 3 of the Shang swallowed egg story had the heavenly princesses living on a high altar, which is located away from "heaven" since the "heavenly emperor" sent birds to visit his daughters leaving behind the eggs they then swallowed. Again, this "descent of heavenly birds" might be merely representational, but a ritual involving actual worship of sacred birds brought to the altar is entirely possible too. In any case, by the time of Hou Ji, coming after the chaos in the east, the "have altar" clan might well have migrated westwards too, and could have accepted this promising boy as son in law. Note there was also a mention of Yao being from the You Tai tribe, with the surname Yi which is related to the Youxin tribe, thus adding to our suspicion that Gaoxin, Youxin and Youtai were actually a single, very historical ruling tribe that chiefs either came from or joined through marriage.

In any case, Hou Ji's descendants migrated further west from Shanxi and settled at the upstream end of Yellow and Wei rivers. The name Zhou seems related to their agricultural practice: the ideogram was originally a rectangle divided into four parts, each with a dot in the middle probably indicating seed or fertilizer, and the meaning of the word is "boundary", probably footpaths dividing fields into farming plots. The use of fertilizers to maintain productivity and retard soil exhaustion, and the use of boundaries to reduce top soil loss from water flow, were probably important agricultural inventions, which the Zhous may or may not have made. The name Hou Ji actually means Lord Grain; it is not clear whether the Ji is connected with the Ji used for the tribe surname (different ideogram). Ancient Tibetan books referred to Zhous as "dragons", so apparently they inherited the dragon totem from the Emperor Yan tribes and took it westwards. They also talk about a heavenly turtle which probably refers to the moon and its toad shaped shadow - they seemed to have lumped various semi-aquatic animals together and to acknowledge their reptile ancestry that way. (Note that, in connection with section 6, Abraham's tribe was believed to have originated from a moon worshipping group too.)

A mysterious sentence in the Classic of Mountain and Sea mentions Hou Ji with Yellow Emperor and Jian Mu, "Constructed Tree", located in Duguangziye, "Capital Wide Plain". Jian Mu is a totem pole that supposedly gets through to heaven, and was derived from the magic mulberry tree, Kongsang, on which the ten suns rested before setting out on their day's east to west journey. Presumably the tribe migrated from a location that had mulberry trees to one without, making it necessary to "construct" an equivalent. A bronze tree with ten birds was dug up in Sichuan dating from about 3500 years ago, when the Shangs, with their affinity to swallows and mulberry, were ruling in the east. Details like this by and large confirm the theory that both the dragon and the phoenix worshipping tribes originated in eastern china, and the dragons went elsewhere and then returned to join/conquer the sibling tribes left behind, but the exact connection between the Sichuan towns and the Zhou-Ji tribes located further north, just in the process of creating its own state and governing methods, is again obscure. This mention of the mulberry-derived pole in relation to the Zhou tribe does hint that it had a past connection to the Shang tribe, however dubious one might feel about the claim of the matriarch being Gaoxin's wife. As the mulberry trees grew abundantly in the east, while the constructed tree stories tended to be in the west, one sees a migration westwards in the primitive times, even though the written history only indicates movements in the opposite direction.

Because the Shangs believed there were 10 suns, each taking turns to travel from east to west on one day of every 10-day counting period, they used 10 special characters to represent each day (just as there are 12 special characters to represent the 12 animals of the chinese zodiac). Because the Shang kings were the suns' reincarnations, after their death (or more correctly speaking, their return to heaven) each is identified by his name plus one of these characters denoting his sequencing in the list of past kings. The Xias used the practice only for the later kings of their dynasty, indicating that the sun-reincarnation belief took hold some time after they recovered their kingdom from the Hou Yi usurpation, for which shooting down nine suns may have been allegorical reference. The Shangs

started putting day tags on their ancestors only after the Youyi conquest, which may have been about the same time. While on the surface the two sets of wars were unrelated, there is this intriguing common appearance of the river god in both stories: he helped the Shang chief to ferry cattle across to graze on Youyi land, and after the chief got killed (supposedly for seducing the Youyi chief's daughter, though this too could merely mean his taking part in Youyi fertility rituals) the river god then helped the Shangs to ferry troops across for their avenging battle. In any case, the Zhous did not use these tags to identify their rulers and did not attach the same importance to sun/mulberry worship, whatever ritualistic practice their ancestor Hou Ji might have followed in his earlier days: they were more interested in matters on earth and less about heaven.

The Zhous have a rather weird story about succession: the uncles of King Wen, the founder of Zhou state, were supposed to be so impressed with their nephew that they voluntarily renounced their claims to succeed their father so that their younger brother, King Wen's father, could later pass the chieftom to him. In actual history, after their father's submission to Shang as vassal, the younger brother was allowed to marry a Shang princess, thus attaining a higher status - indeed part of Shang king's objective was to ensure that a close relative would rule the vassal state. Confucian scholars, however, eagerly seized on the story as a moral tale of virtue and modesty. This younger brother was initially well trusted by the Shang King, his cousin by marriage, and given authority to conquer western barbarians lands, but soon his success started to threaten the Shangs, and he was executed using some convenient pretext. Despite this, his son Prince Wen initially served the Shangs loyally and was allowed to marry the Shang King's sister (who did not produce an heir however - Prince Wu was born of the Youxin princess), but was himself imprisoned and probably died in custody, though the official story was that he was released after his ministers organized a successful bribe. When his son King Wu set off to invade the Shang capital, he brought in a chariot the shrine tablet representing the spirit of his father, presumably to receive the blessing of King Wen in his effort to avenge all the wrongs inflicted on the Zhous by the Shangs. Zhou propaganda downplayed this issue however, preferring to see the war as heaven mandated assertion of right to rule rather than tribal vendetta.

After their military victory, the Zhous took note of the lesson of Shang's collapse, and devised a more cultured system of government. Instead of making slaves of the conquered people or letting them remain in their traditional locations governing themselves, the Zhou court divided them up as subjects of feudal lords, either members of the Zhou family or loyal supporters with a core of Zhou followers, and distributed the population to new feudal states created on the conquered territories. The mantra "heaven's mandate is not unchangeable; only virtue is the measure" was repeated in various proclamations and commissions recorded in the Ancient Book, with particular emphasis on the danger of indulgence in alcohol which the Shangs were supposedly guilty of, though probably with some exaggeration as well as misunderstanding of the alcohol use in ceremonies and of Shang fertility rites. The lords were ordered to take counsel and look after the welfare of the people, even respecting to some extent their traditional practices, e.g., the state of Lu had separate ritual shrines for its Yan people, and Jin used the Xia calendar to keep its Xia subjects satisfied. Initially only the Zhou tribe members were given military training and admission to state schools, but in Spring-Autumn times the expanded military needs caused the boundary to be blurred with the whole population put under arms. The Zhous still kept slaves too, but in smaller numbers, mainly captured barbarians and condemned criminals, and human sacrifices in rituals and funerals were relatively infrequent.

On top of local practices, the Zhous devised a set of common rules, the Zhou Conventions, prescribing various activities that reinforce community spirit and hierarchical abeyance. In particular, the court operated royal schools attended by the children of nobility from the capital as well as states, and sent them to the feudal lords to work as state officials. It thus tried to inculcate uniform ways of thinking and doing business, something like a modern political party complete with slogans and

indoctrination books.

Once this system broke down with the loss of the western territory and the court's move to the eastern capital, it could not be rebuilt, and the irreversible collapse of the Zhou national government commenced. In short, for the Zhou the mandate of heaven lay in a superior political system to control population and economic resources. The mandate was lost when the system ceased to function.

One could say that whereas the Shang kings saw the mandate of heaven primarily as the basis for their rights, the Zhou kings also understood that the mandate prescribed duties, or in Confucian terms, sovereigns need to exemplify virtue. The Chinese empire never quite solved the problem of how to monitor the Emperor's degree of virtuousness and remedy his shortfalls. While it was understood that in the long term, bad government eventually gets punished by causing chaos, rebellions and its own overthrow, what to do in the short term of individual emperors to prevent misdeeds and degeneration, remains a murky issue even today. This was shown by Mao's ability to start the cultural revolution, which came close to destroying the communist party and Chinese government, despite the dissenting majority exemplified by Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping.

In Greek mythology, the gods and humans have parallel worlds which only occasionally interact; while the gods are more powerful than men, they do not try to ordain divinely approved rulers and there was no concept of mandate of heaven. Instead, individuals pursued excellence, as Alexander did by conquering the largest known empire for his time. While the concept of divine mandate did exist with feudal kings in the middle ages, a separate system of religious observance existed, to some extent beyond secular authority, providing an element of check and balance. In contrast, in Chinese history and mythology, the tribal leaders were religious and secular rulers, and it was far more difficult to critique their conduct on the basis of higher principles that rise above human status. Because of the prevalence of ancestor worship and its integration into state power, little room was left for the development of alternative religious beliefs, and spiritual pursuits and abstract thinking never developed to the same extent they did in Europe. Whereas science developed in the medieval monasteries of Europe with monk-scholars trying to fathom rules governing God's power over nature, no similar progress arose from the Chinese scholars.

Again Confucian scholars resorted to a ridiculous legend in the hope of solving the problem of checks and balances relating to imperial power and behaviour: The successor to King Tang of Shang, his grandson, was supposed to have misbehaved, and the counsellor-regent (formerly cook slave given to King Tang as marriage dowry) exiled him for three years before reinstalling a repentant King; in actual events, the new King merely went into a 3 year mourning period during which the regent ruled in his stead. The same 3 year mourning occurred with King Wu Ding, who was supposed to have said nothing for three years, and is even today captured in the story of the magic bird that does not sing or fly for three years but then "soars to heaven and sings astoundingly". The Shang mourning practice was even reflected in a discussion between Confucius and a student, who, agreeing with the Zhou practice of a much shorter mourning period ("after one year the newly harvested grain has already fermented into wine"); Confucius, descended from the Shang, did not put up an argument, but lamented (after the student left) that a child takes three years to leave the parents' lap, a sentimental but irrelevant issue, which shows the kind of emotional attachment the old custom still aroused. His comment "not changing your father's ways (of governing) for three years is filial" reflects the same sentiment.

In the hope of inducing emperors to take their duties seriously and care for the welfare of the people, the scholars developed, over many centuries, a belief system based on the history-astrology link mentioned in section 3: popular discontent and failure to follow established processes would disturb the balance

of yin-yang and the five elements thus weakening the mandate of heaven; somewhat like the idea of man being made in the image of God, an analogy is made between individual humans with parts and elements, and the universe as a whole with its parts and elements, so that man and universe have some kind of unison and resonance, and the idea that popular feelings and wills will somehow be reflected in cosmic forces. However, while the philosophical framework might fill the scholars with awe, its effect in limiting tyranny and incompetence seems to have been unpredictable.

Another issue already present in Zhou times and still unresolved today was how to redistribute economic resources nationally: there was no mechanism for doing so when the Zhou nation consisted of individual feudal states, but even in a system of centralized empire with provinces under appointed governors, any equitable redistribution process requires some method of measuring wealth nationally and a mechanism to take from the better off people/region to give to the less well off. Strange as it might sound, such a system still does not exist, and the process of redistribution has always been based on some form of negotiation. The flow of wealth between different parts of the country was and still is determined more by the balance of power between regions as well as between each region and the centre, rather than simply by rational economics.

But curiously, this is precisely the reason for China's continuous maintenance of a common mandarin system: with people who "think alike" in the various parts, meaningful negotiation is made easier. Chinese unity, in other words, remains dependent on the existence of such a "mandarinist political party", and less on economic integration, (which can cross state boundaries as is the current situation with taiwan, which has its own government but is now increasingly linked economically to the mainland) or even on shared cultural roots. The somewhat strange "together yet not quite together" characteristics remain with us today in China, in particular across the Taiwan Straits. The difficulties of governing which the Democratic Progress Party had in Taiwan are similarly due to the loss of a single mandarinist group, rather than just obstruction by former Nationalist Party appointees.

A sage (George Santayana) once said that those who do not learn their history are condemned to repeat it. To me its implication is overoptimistic, since China shows that those who learn their history are still condemned to repeat it. On this sombre note I end my search for the mysteries of Chinese ancient history.



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